

United States, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Middle East Politics After Khashoggi's Murder

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Abstract

There is no doubt that the murder of Jamal Khashoggi has brought about dramatic changes in the politics of the Middle East, and the key players; U.S., Saudi Arabia and Turkey are all playing different roles in shaping opinion in the region in the aftermath of the murder. While Turkey continues to push for justice for the murder of the journalist, the U.S. is seen to be divided between support for Saudi Arabia and call for justice, and Saudi Arabia on its part is pushing hard to see that it overcomes all attempts to undermine its government and leadership. This article argues that the murder of the journalist has pushed Saudi Arabia into taking steps that would ensure its survival and dominance in the region. The Saudi regime appears to be stepping up its power in the region and has reached out to neighbors and renewed its ties with its Gulf partners and wider Middle East, including Syria to neutralize all attempts by Turkey to undermine its regime.

Keywords: U.S., Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Middle East, Politics

The murder of Saudi U.S. based journalist at the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul has continued to generate reactions across the world. The murder itself has remained mysterious, especially since the journalist's body is yet to be seen despite confirmation that he has actually been killed. The Saudi regime was blamed by Turkey and Crown Prince MBS was later fingered by the CIA to have ordered the killing [The Guardian, 17.11.2018]. Saudi Arabia has denied the involvement of MBS but has arrested people it considered responsible for horrendous crime. Turkey on its part has demanded the repatriation and trial of the suspects in Turkey, a request that was turned down by Saudi Arabia. And in all these, the U.S. is being looked up to by both Turkey and Saudi Arabia for justice.

Since the killing, the U.S. Secretary of State was dispatched by President Trump to Saudi Arabia to verify and look into how the murder happened. And Mike Pompeo went to Ankara and then back to the U.S. without pointing any accusing fingers. Donald Trump emerged to say that MBS was not involved even though at some point it became clear that Saudi Arabia was responsible. Trump made clear that even if Saudi Arabia is culpable in the murder, the U.S. is not willing to jeopardize its age old relation with the Saudis. It was the U.S. Senate that pursued the matter and the CIA released its findings, saying MBS ordered the killing. The U.S. Senate issued a resolution that accused MBS of the murder and threatened sanctions against Saudi Arabia not only for its role in the murder of the journalist but also for its involvement in the war in Yemen and its accompanying humanitarian crises [C. Foran, T. Barrett, M. Raju, 14.12.2018]. Saudi Arabia on its part criticized the U.S. Senate for accusing the Crown Prince of ordering the killing of the journalist. Saudi foreign ministry insisted that the claims by the U.S. Senate remain unsubstantiated

and saw such as dabbling into the affairs of the Kingdom and undermining its regional and international role [K. Smith, K. Sullivan, 17.12.2018].

Turkey has remained unhappy on the stance of the U.S. in the matter, and has continued its campaign for justice over the murder of the journalist who was engaged to a Turkish citizen Hatice before he was killed. Hatice herself had appeared in many television programs, including BBC, appealing for justice [<https://m.youtube.com>, 29.10.2018]. The murder had been condemned by almost all countries across the globe, and particularly by western nations. Many European states threatened sanctions or travel ban on Saudi officials involved in the matter. The expectations and hopes of Turkey with regards to justice, is for the perpetrators to be brought and tried in Turkish courts. This is the justice that seems most fitting to the Saudi killers. However, the fact that the culprits had found their way out of Turkey after committing the murders seems highly unlikely that Saudi Arabia will accept a trial in Ankara. And from all indications there is no force that can force Saudi Arabia to comply with such demands and even if there is, it is not forth coming and so what do we expect?

The Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu had while commenting on the matter reiterated the importance of Saudi Arabia and the special position its enjoys across the world as sacred place for Muslims. Netanyahu maintained that in the interest of peace, thought not supporting the murder, Netanyahu was quoted in the Haaretz news of 12.12.2018 saying ‘what happened in Istanbul is nothing short of horrific. But it is balanced by the importance of Saudi Arabia’. Netanyahu insisted that destabilizing Saudi Arabia could destabilize the world [Noa Landau, 12.12.2018]. There is absolutely no doubt about Netanyahu’s assertion that destabilizing Saudi Arabia would destabilize the world. And it is absolutely understood that nobody or nation will ever support such gruesome murder. However, international law itself has its flaws, and the idea of nation states, and of sovereignty, has given protection to states and as a result wisdom will have to be put to use to deal with certain issues in international politics.

Saudi Arabia in trying to survive, has found itself taking certain measures and behaving a certain different ways. While Turkey continues with its campaign for justice across the globe, the Saudi regime began to undertake a proactive foreign policy, relying on soft power as seen in the tour of Arab states by MBS shortly before the G20 meeting. MBS visited Bahrain, UAE, Egypt, Tunisia and Algeria before heading to Argentina for the G20 meeting [Seth J. F., 11.29.2018]. The tour by MBS was to gain support of Arab neighbors with regards to the international condemnation of Saudi Arabia by western nations. After MBS’s return from Argentina, King Salman summoned the GCC countries to a meeting in Riyadh. It was at the meeting that a new Chief of the region’s joint military command was announced. Lt General Eid Awwad Al Shulawi, a former Commander of the Saudi Royal Land Forces was announced as the new Chief and member states made a commitment to work together to achieve regional security and stability [Naser Al Wasmi, 9.12.2018].

The summit lasted just a day and was attended by all GCC states. Qatar, a GCC member with close ties to Turkey and Iran was invited, and the invitation was seen as a move by Saudi Arabia to normalize relations with the state after a blockade on the Gulf state by Saudi Arabia in 2017. Turkey is said to have a military base in Qatar. And during the diplomatic row between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, Turkey’s parliament approved the deployment of about 3,000 troops to Qatar [Al Jazeera, 26.12.2017]. The Riyadh meeting discussed the need for economic integration in the region and deal with other issues affecting the region, including the war in Yemen. All GCC states of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia and the UAE were represented by their rulers except Qatar, which was sent its foreign minister to represent its Amir. All the countries expressed full support to the measures taken by Saudi Arabia concerning the murder of Jamal Kahashoggi. And in response to the condemnation of Saudi Arabia, the GCC maintained that they reject ‘the exploitation of the issue to prejudice the sovereignty, security and stability of Saudi Arabia, an integral part of the security and stability of the Gulf Cooperation Council’ [Gulf News, 9.12.2018].

Saudi Arabia appeared to have reached out to its regional allies for support despite counting on U.S. support and specifically that of President Trump, which had been all too clear all along. However, by far, a step taken by Saudi Arabia diplomatically and that puts it in a position of advantage is its offer to rebuild Syria. Saudi Arabia had not

been involved in Syria. The U.S., Iran, Russia and Turkey have been the countries that have been involved in Syria, and struggled for influence and control in the country. U.S. President Donald Trump revealed on his twitter handle that Saudi Arabia has agreed to pay the necessary money needed to rebuild the war torn country [Al Jazeera, 25.12.2018]. At the moment, the U.S. is pulling out its troops from Syria but is dealing with a problem that concerns its two allies in Syria; the YPG Kurdish fighters and Turkey, its NATO ally. The United States insists that its pull out must be backed by a guarantee of safety for the YPG Kurds by Turkey. Turkey on its part considers the YPG a terrorist group that is linked to the PKK, another Kurdish group in Turkey that it also considers a terrorist group. Turkey has disagreed with the U.S. demand for protection to the YPG and there has been a deadlock on the issue between Turkey and the U.S. Turkey issued a statement on 10.01.2019 that it will go ahead with its planned offensive against the Kurds in North eastern Syria whether the U.S. pulls out or not [CNBC, 10.01.2019]. Clearly a confrontation or disagreement of some sort is developing between the two countries. And in all this, which country will have more influence in Syria in the aftermath of the Syrian war, especially between Saudi Arabia that will help rebuild the country and Turkey a military actor in the Syrian war? Is Saudi Arabia reasserting its power in the Middle East in the aftermath of the Khashoggi murder?

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