



Ankara And The Khashoggi Affair

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The strange (and almost certainly tragic) case of Jamal Khashoggi – the Saudi civic activist turned American newspaper columnist – continues to profoundly roil U.S.-Saudi relations.

The exact details of the incident remain disputed, but at least some facts are known. The 59-year-old Khashoggi disappeared on October 2nd in Istanbul, Turkey after entering the Saudi consulate there to clarify an administrative matter. He never left, and foul play is now strongly suspected. Leaks from Turkish sources have suggested that Khashoggi was murdered by a Saudi hit team specifically dispatched for that purpose – and that his killing was tied to his prior criticism of the Saudi government in general, and Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Sultan in particular.

Riyadh, for its part, has strongly denied the allegations, but it has not put forth a credible alternative explanation for Khashoggi's fate. And because it hasn't, tempers have flared in Washington, where top lawmakers (including those from President Trump's own political party) have insisted that the Kingdom needs to face real consequences for what appears to have been a brazen assassination abroad.

But what about Turkey? From the start, the outsized role played by the Turkish government in the Khashoggi affair has been curious – and significant. Anonymous Turkish sources have figured prominently in the initial allegations of foul play against Khashoggi, as well as in divulging the gory particulars that have since been picked up by media outlets like the *New York Times*.

All of which begs the question: what is Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan trying to achieve?

It stretches credulity to believe that the Turks have suddenly started caring about humanitarian values, as some liberal pundits have suggested. Turkey ranks as the world's leading jailer of journalists, and its repressive domestic policies are well known to the country's ethnic minorities – most conspicuously the Kurds. Rather, what seems to be happening here is an effort by Erdogan to seize the opportunity improve his country's strategic position vis-à-vis Washington, and to do so at Saudi Arabia's expense.

After all, it's no secret that U.S.-Turkish relations are in a tailspin. Accumulating tensions over a host of issues – including Turkey's growing coziness with Russia and its expanding Islamist tendencies – have cast a pall over the once-robust bilateral relationship, prompting the Trump administration to cancel significant military sales and even raise the possibility of sanctions.

That is a situation which Ankara, currently grappling with a looming financial crisis, can ill-afford. It's no coincidence, therefore, that Turkey's revelations about Khashoggi's untimely demise were coupled with a decision to release North Carolina pastor Andrew Brunson from captivity. Brunson, arguably the Turkish government's most prominent political prisoner, had become a poster boy of sorts for Erdogan's expanding authoritarianism since his arrest on trumped-up conspiracy charges in the aftermath of Turkey's failed 2016 coup.

His plight, in turn, was taken up personally by President Trump – making it a bellwether of sorts in ties between Ankara and Washington. With Brunson's release, Erdogan has sought to mend political fences with the U.S., and to do so in a way that increases his government's credibility with the White House.

That added credibility, in turn, is essential to Turkey's other objective: diminishing regional competitors, such as Saudi Arabia. Ankara's once-vibrant ties to Riyadh have cooled considerably over the past few years, with the two countries falling out over their respective approaches toward the "Arab Spring" (and the Islamist currents that emerged as a result.) In particular, Erdogan's embrace of the Muslim Brotherhood, both in Egypt and more broadly, has antagonized Saudi rulers. Most recently, the two countries found themselves on opposite sides of last year's crisis with Qatar, which Turkey views as an ally and the Kingdom continues to condemn as a destructive regional actor. All this has given Ankara cause to try and diminish Saudi Arabia's international standing – even if so far it has done so only indirectly, through the use of "anonymous" sources.

Ankara is also interested in constraining Riyadh's regional activism. Over the past two years, the House of Saud has pursued an increasingly assertive regional foreign policy – one that the Trump administration has actively encouraged, in no small measure because of a shared interest in containing Iran. Saudi Arabia's dominance, in turn, rubs up against Turkey's own vision for the region, reigniting what the scholar Mustafa Akyol has described as a long simmering "Ottoman-Saudi Islamic rift," and giving Ankara added motive to move against Riyadh.

Turkey, in short, has ample reason to try and complicate the current U.S.-Saudi partnership, as well as the prevailing pro-Riyadh regional *status quo*. In the Khashoggi affair, it has found a convenient vehicle by which to do just that.

None of this means that the House of Saud isn't responsible for Khashoggi's demise. Indeed, mounting evidence (even if still only circumstantial) suggests that elements of the Saudi government did play an active role in carrying out the foul play. And as those particulars become clearer, Washington will come under increasing pressure to act against the Kingdom.

Through its involvement, however, Turkey is seeking to ensure that – if and when America does act – it will do so in a way that benefits Ankara.