

The Killing of Saudi Journalist Khashoggi Could Spell the End for Mohammad bin Salman?

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The (unconfirmed) death of famous journalist Saudita Jamal Khashoggi is likely to have important repercussions, revealing the hypocrisy of the mainstream media, tensions inside the Saudi regime, and the double standards of Western countries.

On October 2nd, 2018, Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi was allegedly killed inside Saudi Arabia's embassy in Turkey. The sequence of events seems to show that the murder was premeditated. Two days before his death, Khashoggi went to the Saudi embassy in Istanbul to obtain documents pertaining to his divorce in preparation to remarry in the United States. The Saudi embassy instructed him to return on October 2nd to collect the documents, which he duly did. He entered the embassy around 1pm on October 2nd but never exited. Khashoggi's fiancée, after waiting several hours, raised the alarm as Khashoggi had instructed her to do should he not reemerge after two hours.

It is from here that we should start to reconstruct this story that resembles a science-fiction novel even by Saudi standards, a country that does not hesitate to kidnap heads of state, as was the case with the Lebanese prime minister, Saad Hariri, about a year ago.

Jamal Khashoggi is a controversial figure, a representative of the shadowy world of collaboration that sometimes exists between journalism and the intelligence agencies, in this case involving the intelligence agencies of Saudi Arabia and the United States. It has been virtually confirmed by official circles within the Al Saud family that Khashoggi was an agent in the employ of Riyadh and the CIA during the Soviet presence in Afghanistan.

From 1991 to 1999, he continued to serve in several countries like Afghanistan, Algeria, Sudan, Kuwait and other parts of the Middle East, often maintaining an [ambiguous role](#) in the service of his friend Turki Faisal Al-Saud, the future Saudi ambassador to Washington and London and later supreme head of Saudi intelligence for 24 years.

Khashoggi was named editor of the leading English-language magazine in Saudi Arabia, Arab News, from 1999 to 2003. In late 2003, he transferred to Al Watan, one of the most liberal, Western and pro-reform newspapers in the country. His job lasted only 52 days, with him being removed strongly criticizing the Wahhabi clerical extremist Ibn Taymiyyah. Khashoggi had turned into a critical voice of the Saudi regime following the internal struggles between King Abdullah and Turki Faisal Al-Saud.

One of the main criticisms of Khashoggi coming from factions loyal to Abdullah was that he had recruited and paid several journalists on behalf of the CIA during his time as an editor.

Such an accusation would conform with the widespread practice of the CIA seeking to influence the media, and therefore public opinion, and to put pressure on leaders failing to do what Washington wants.

To fully understand what has led to the disappearance of Khashoggi, it is important to dissect the career of Turki bin Faisal Al-Saud, Khashoggi's political protector.

During the reign of King Khalid (1975-1982), Turki bin Faisal Al-Saud was at the center of relations between Washington and Saudi Arabia, committed to inflicting as much damage as possible on the USSR while it was in Afghanistan, with the help of foreign fighters (those who later became known as Al Qaeda) armed by Pakistan and financed by the Saudis. Following the end of the war in Afghanistan in 1982, Fahd bin Abdulaziz Al Saud became king until 2005. During this period, Faisal became a respected man within Saudi intelligence, leading to him becoming the undisputed leader. He was removed from his post on May 24, 2001, a few months before September 11, 2001. The connections he had with Osama bin Laden, following the attacks of September 11, 2001, continued to hound the Turki bin Faisal in subsequent years, even being sued by relatives of 9/11 victims in a multimillion-dollar lawsuit directed at him and other Saudi operatives. From 2003 to 2005, Turki bin Faisal served as ambassador to the UK, emphasizing his role as a leading Saudi in the international community, and came across Khashoggi, taking him under his wing as a personal advisor.

In the ensuing years there was an explosive internal fracture within the Kingdom, accentuated by the death in 2005 of King Abdulaziz Al Saud, who was succeeded by King Abdullah until 2015.

In 2005, Turki bin Faisal was appointed Saudi ambassador to the US during the Bush administration, with Khashoggi accompanying him as a media advisor. During this period, Khashoggi became one of the strongest supporters of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, invoking diplomatic discussions between Riyadh and Tehran and travelling to over 37 American states to explain his point of view. While advancing the interests of the Saudi regime bent on Wahhabism, while at the same time being a friend to Israeli Zionism and the American neocons, Turki bin Faisal took a less extremist position, one more directed towards dialogue. For these reasons, he was not often received at the White House during his reign as ambassador, with the US administration openly preferring the extremist Bandar bin Sultan (a great friend of the Bush family) to the apparently moderate Turki bin Faisal.

The natural result was that King Abdullah excluded him more and more from the main meetings that occurred between the Saudis and the Americans. Finally, bin Faisal resigned in protest. He was succeeded by Bandar bin Sultan.

Back to Khashoggi. It is important to note that after his departure from Al Watan he moved to London and became a senior advisor in Turki bin Faisal's team. During Turki bin Faisal's ambassadorship in Washington, Khashoggi assumed the position of head of press relations, coming into direct contact with major national and international organs of US media.

In the years following Turki bin Faisal's ambassadorship in Washington, Khashoggi became a new publisher of the liberal Saudi newspaper Al Watan, publishing an article that was highly critical of the Saudi clerics and of Salafism in general. A few days later, he was again forced to resign and left the newspaper. It was after this event that Khashoggi came into direct contact with Al-Waleed bin Talal, one of the richest men in Saudi Arabia, who had been

appointed director of the Al Arab news channel based in Bahrain. The news channel sought to offer an impartial and objective view of events in the Middle East and in Saudi Arabia. As director of Al Arab, he often released statements and interviews for international organs like the BBC, ABC News, Al Jazeera and Dubai TV. In recent years, he became a recurring guest on Al Jazeera and had a weekly column in The Washington Post.

What happened to Khashoggi is the story not so much of a dissident as of a struggle within the highly complicated Zionist-Saudi-Neoconservative nexus that is intertwined with the struggle against the neoliberal component of US imperialism. It is a story that deserves to be fully explored to understand the behind-the-scenes struggles that afflict US politics, the hypocrisy of the media when it comes to the Saudi dictatorship, and the ambiguous role of Turkey.

Returning to Khashoggi, it was during the Obama presidency that the journalist played a primary role in encouraging important reforms in Saudi Arabia as being essential to the survival of the Kingdom. During this time, relations between Riyadh and Washington steadily worsened for many reasons, primarily in regard to diverging policies on Egypt and Syria as well as on human rights in Saudi Arabia.

Many in the Saudi royal family suspected that Obama was willing to use the Arab springs to get rid of the Al Saud family in Saudi Arabia. The relationship between Riyadh and Washington subsequently sunk to an all-time low. Khashoggi was the spearhead of this media and political strategy against Riyadh. An intimate friend of the royal family who ends up publicly criticizing them causes quite a stir, selling copies and drawing attention to what he writes.

Keep in mind that we are splitting the atom of the Saudi universe. But it should never be forgotten that we are talking about a regime that tortures and kills its fellow citizens as well foreigners. It is a regime that creates terrorism as a weapon used to further its own political goals. These are not people burdened by moral scruples.

Yet in spite of this, no country is monolithic in terms of those who hold the reigns of power, especially when it comes to foreign affairs. It is the competing views and internal struggles that determine the course of events, as with the case of Khashoggi's death.

During the Obama administration, the former Saudi intelligence man and intimate of the royals continued to work as a house organ linked to the US world of soft power (color revolutions, Arab Spring), the form of power that was particularly favored by the Obama administration as a new strategy to extend US imperialist domination following the disasters of Iraq and Afghanistan. The criticism of the Saudi royal family was constant, even though the journalist appreciated the role Riyadh played in the region, especially with regard to the aggression against Syria.

In the following years, with the rise to power of King Salman, and especially after the victory of Donald Trump, everything changed for the worse in the region and for the "dissident" journalist. Bin Salman became the strongman holding power in Saudi Arabia, triggering, with a nod from Trump, a near war with Qatar, especially over the role of Al Jazeera, which often hosted Khashoggi and was increasingly critical of bin Salman and his vision for the Kingdom's future (Vision 2030).

During bin Salman's campaign of repression, the King's nephew took the opportunity to

attack all his opponents, with many people close to Khashoggi being arrested, tortured and killed. His old acquaintance in particular, Al-Waleed bin Talal, was arrested and tortured, much to the displeasure of the West, given that he was one of the most famous Saudis abroad, being involved with companies like Twitter. In a climax of repression, even the Lebanese prime minister, Saad Hariri, was kidnapped and spirited to Riyadh to be re-educated over a number of days. Khashoggi sensed the looming danger, and in 2017 escaped from Saudi Arabia to settle in the United States.

Khashoggi continued with his columns criticizing the Saudi regime, attacking its campaign in Yemen on Al Jazeera, and accusing bin Salman of being anything but a positive revolutionary for the Kingdom. Khashoggi's criticism pointed to the lack of democracy as well as the sclerosis at the top in the Saudi kingdom, accusations that bin Salman chafed at, finally deciding to be rid of the journalist.

The events in Istanbul are the culmination of a grotesque situation whereby Donald Trump has granted a free hand to his two close allies in the region, Israel and Saudi Arabia. Analyzing the actions of these two countries over the last 24 months, the extent of Washington's carte blanche has become clear.

We could venture into fanciful speculation about Khashoggi's death, citing anonymous Saudi sources; or we could simply come to the most obvious conclusion. Khashoggi was arrested in the embassy before being tortured, killed and dismembered by about 15 Saudi operatives who arrived in Istanbul on a day flight from Riyadh and departed a few hours after Khashoggi's killing. It is hard to believe that the Turkish services, which have always played the double- and triple-crossing game, did not know what was happening. Khashoggi himself had probably received assurances that the Saudi embassy in Istanbul was a safe place to collect the documents. He was obviously betrayed by someone in whom he had strong trust.

Turkey is a strong ally of Qatar and plays a major role in the region. Relations between Riyadh and Ankara have not been the best in recent years, but their common interests in the region are so high that it is not surprising that Turkey's National Intelligence Organization has closed more than one eye to allow Khashoggi's assassination and the exit of the 15 operatives. Besides, Erdogan was well aware of the problems that this story would have created between the United States and Saudi Arabia, especially within the ranks of the liberal media of the US establishment.

The problems flowing from this settling of internal accounts are manifold. They range from the indignation of such mainstream media as The Washington Post, CNN and ABC News that are beginning to reveal grisly details about Khashoggi's death, even if they treat the news with detachment, not openly attributing blame to Riyadh. Saudi money from various lobbies dampens the effect of such media attention, succeeding in dissuading direct accusations of Saudi involvement in Khashoggi's disappearance. The more time that passes the more obvious it becomes how Khashoggi was killed in the Saudi consulate on the orders of bin Salman as a critic of the Kingdom. At some point, the mainstream media will no longer be able to cover up for the Saudis. It all comes down to the possibility of plausible deniability or legitimate justification. Both these elements are difficult for the US to employ in this case.

The upshot is an explosive situation that threatens to further isolate Israel, Saudi Arabia and the United States from the rest of the world. Thus the White House had to even express in an official note confusion and concern, asking the Saudis to provide real evidence of Khashoggi's exit from the Saudi consulate. We must also consider that Riyadh planned to

blame Turkey for the disappearance of the journalist, stating that, having come out from the embassy, the disappearance was the fault of Turkey.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Erdogan has insisted that “the burden of demonstrating how Khashoggi is still alive belongs to Saudi Arabia.” Even the tour of the consulate offered to foreign journalists has failed to silence what seems too obvious. Riyadh overreached following Trump’s wink and nod, eliminating an uncomfortable voice that was also very close to Riyadh’s geopolitical enemies like Qatar as well the US neoliberal faction (linked to Obama and to the faction close to the Muslim Brotherhood, outlawed in Saudi Arabia because it presents itself as a political alternative to the state religion of Wahhabism).

In an series of reckless actions, the last 12 months have seen all sorts of provocations from Israel, the US and Saudi Arabia. There was the downing of a Russian Il-20 through the intentionally reckless maneuvers of Israeli pilots, the more than 200 bombings on the sovereign state of Syria, cooperation with Riyadh in the war in Yemen, the threats to Hezbollah and Iran that Netanyahu even proclaimed in front of the United Nations General Assembly. Saudi Arabia even managed to do worse, with the abduction of the Lebanese prime minister, the continued funding of extremists like Daesh and al Qaeda, the nefarious actions against Qatar and Iran, the bombing of Yemen, and recently the killing of a journalist in a Saudi embassy. For its part, the US in recent days has made two unthinkable declarations, namely, threatening a first strike against Moscow to eliminate some military weaponry, as well as a naval blockade to prevent energy exports.

With the Khashoggi incident and the ensuing media outcry, the ideological hatred of the mainstream media against Trump and the increasingly precarious situation of Netanyahu (accused of corruption, with his wife also being investigated), it should not be surprising if this latest incident only serves as ammunition in the political war amongst the elite that shows no signs of subsiding and is instead growing in intensity by the day.

One of the last alliances that the United States has available to influence events in the Middle East risks falling apart as a result of bin Salman’s ill-advised actions. Erdogan has already challenged the Saudis by asking them to prove that the journalist is alive. There is open speculation in the Kingdom about the implications of the clash between Ankara and Riyadh and between bin Salman and Erdogan. There are those who are willing to bet that this latest reckless action could prove fatal for the ruler who, after just a year and a half, seems to have exhausted his whole store of experience as the Kingdom’s young despot.

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