

What Does Erdogan Know About Khashoggi's Execution?

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"The death of one man is a tragedy, the death of a million a statistic." And the death of one man, Khashoggi, at the hand of Saudi assassins in Turkey has reinforced that axiom, amidst tens of thousands of children slaughtered in Yemen.

One man's death has set the whole complex Middle Eastern political vortex spinning.

The first effect of his murder is the shattering of a claim that Saudi Arabia's, Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman (MBS), is piloting this most conservative regime on the path of liberal reform.

That MBS was a reformer, regarded with great skepticism even before Khashoggi was lured to the Saudi consulate on October 2, ostensibly for papers allowing him to marry his Turkish fiancé.

Months ago, the international media made great play of MBS's decision to let women drive - while also reporting his jailing of women's rights activists.

MBS's purge of the Saudi elite, by locking them in a luxury hotel until they handed over billions of dollars in cash and assets was regarded by many as shocking - was that reform or a move worthy of Al Capone?

MBS insists the assassination was done without his knowledge. Many will be watching the fate of the 18 men involved in the Khashoggi killing, not least because some are bodyguards previously identified in photographs with MBS.

How the assassins thought they could get away with it is also a mystery.

Turkey is festooned with CCTV and those images have made clear Khashoggi never left the consulate, but a body double did to deceive and attempt to establish that he had left the Consulate; how amateurish; how arrogant. Just as landing records showed the arrival to Turkey of the hit team, and their rapid departure.

Trump himself put his finger on this aspect of the killing, describing it as the "worst cover-up in history."

MBS now badly needs to recover his image. Galloping production in shale oil by the US, which will soon over take Saudi's mantle as the world's leading oil producer, promises long-term cheaper oil. The House of Saud, which gives its family name to the country it controls, rests its authority on its ability to shower oil largess on its population. But there is not

enough oil revenues to go around the whole 30 million. They need international investment.

Hence the drive to convince the world that MBS is a reformer. Few will now agree with Saudi Arabia's foreign minister Adel al-Jubeir's description of the Kingdom under MBS is a "vision of light".

Across the Gulf, Iran has won some breathing space, as it faces US sanctions barring companies, and anyone who has interests in the US, from buying Iran's oil. The European Union may feel emboldened to encourage its companies – at least those with no US interests – to trade with Iran, keeping the Iran nuclear freeze deal alive.

Erdoğan reeling from his own US sanctions, in part resulting from his jailing so many journalists, and a spiralling debt crisis, has also gained an important 'ace'.

Khashoggi was no jobbing journalist. For decades he supported the Saudi regime. The change of power at the top when MBS assumed the reigns of power, saw him switch. Khashoggi was critical in his writings of MBS, while supporting the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and further, he did not include any criticism of its (the MB) other main supporter (other than Turkey), Qatar.

Western powers, meanwhile, are on the back foot. Contrast the tardy reaction to the Khashoggi killing with the attack on the Skripals. After Sergei Skripal, the former Russian intelligence officer who was a British double-agent, was found slumped on a bench in the UK with his daughter Yulia, the UK moved quickly to expel Russian diplomats. Within days the US and most European nations followed suit.

By contrast, no Saudi officials have yet been expelled over the Khashoggi affair, with the only hard action being from Germany which has ended its miniscule arms sales to Saudi.

Trump says he is "not satisfied" with the Saudi account even following his phone conversation with MBS, while also making clear that the only real sanction available, suspension of arms sales, is not on the cards due to the consequences for jobs in the US.

Crying on Turkish TV, his fiancé Hatice Cengiz described herself as being in "darkness I cannot express". It is a darkness faced by loved ones of the slain across conflicts raging in Syria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen and Palestine; the suffering of one being a vivid reminder of the suffering of millions more.

The events surrounding Khashoggi's death and the 'game' being played out by Erdoğan was most interestingly and eloquently described by former British parliamentarian George Galloway:

"Erdoğan's definitely doing the dance of the seven veils, who knows when the final veil will be revealed and cast off but there is no doubt he (Erdoğan) has the goods! I know for certain because someone close to me has heard the goods (meaning the audio of the killing). He's negotiating I presume behind the scenes, the price will be going up because frankly if this ordeal is released, it will be the most devastating audio of the 21st Century. Shakespeare couldn't have written this, it's Macbeth on steroids, right down to the poor son of Khashoggi's who went to the Palace to shake hands with the murderers of his father."

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