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Is the Khashoggi case shifting the Ankara-Riyadh-Washington relations?

Katerina Stergiopoulou *

The Khashoggi case has put a magnifying glass on the instability of relations among Middle East countries and especially on the turbulent relationship between Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Turkey is in no position to take head on the Saudi kingdom regarding the disappearance of Jamal Khashoggi; at the same time Erdogan cannot ignore such an overpublicized incident. Khashoggi may be the opportunity Erdogan was looking for in order to re-approach Saudi Arabia and the US, and establish Turkey as a strong middle power in the region. Only time will show if the rapprochement will be considered as a prudent diplomatic move by Erdogan.

*Researcher of the Centre for Mediterranean, Middle East and Islamic Studies of the University of Peloponnese

Journalist Jamal Khashoggi's name is dominating the worldwide news since early October. The Saudi journalist, one openly critical of the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, Mohammed bin Salman, had chosen self-exile in the US due to fear for his life. His fears seem to have been justified since Khashoggi went missing after entering the Saudi Arabia Consulate in Istanbul.

After the disappearance of Khashoggi, Turkey found itself in a very delicate position in need of skilled diplomatic handling. On the one hand, Erdogan is cautious about an outright confrontation with Saudi Arabia by making public all the evidence which Turkish authorities claim to have about the journalist's murder. Turkey may not be able to go public with it as presenting evidence related to spying on other countries' protected diplomatic missions would strain the country's credibility as one respectful of international diplomatic law. The latter could raise a lot of questions regarding the rule of law in the country, as well as the safety and respect towards foreign diplomatic missions; Erdogan doesn't want to appear as an autocratic ruler of an untrustworthy state, but rather as a strong political leader of a well-functioning and strong state.

On the other hand, President Erdogan cannot stay completely silent about the matter. Khashoggi's murder took place on Turkish soil and got on the spotlight of every news agency across the world. This issue touches the 'heart of Turkish sovereignty'¹ and for Erdogan to allow Saudi Arabia to publically disregard the sovereignty of the state would be unacceptable. Turkey could be perceived as a protectorate of the Gulf Kingdom, effectively alienating the relationships it has developed with Iran and Qatar – the regional arch rivals of Saudi Arabia.

Lately, and partly due to the Turkey's rapprochement with Iran, the Turkey-Saudi Arabia relationship has been under strain. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has characterized Turkey as being part of a "triangle of evil" alongside Iran and Muslim extremists.² Syria has become the field of cooperation between Turkey and Iran; the two Middle Eastern states have worked together on the Astana process, under Russian leadership, in order to start constructing a plan for the next day in Syria. They have cooperated in order to guarantee certain 'de-escalation' zones in Syria.³

Additionally, Turkey has attempted to cooperate closer with Iran during recent years because of its interest in constraining the power of the Kurdish People Party (PKK) in the region.⁴ Turkey's quest to secure military support from Iran came as an inevitable consequence when the US chose to provide support to the People's Protection Units (YPG - a PKK affiliate) - in the battle against ISIS, and after Riyadh has openly supported the idea of an independent State of Kurdistan.⁵

Moreover, when Saudi Arabia imposed an economic and trade embargo on Qatar due to its alleged ties with Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood, Turkey, along with Iran, sided with Qatar. Turkey moved forward with pursuing closer military cooperation with Qatar, sending a clear message of defiance to Saudi Arabia, and playing an important role in Qatar's remarkable resistance to the Saudi's diplomatic and economic 'war'.⁶

Finally, it is worth mentioning that the Turkish-Saudi relationship has been tense ever since Turkey openly supported Mohammad Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood as the democratically elected president of Egypt. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia has backed his overthrowing via the military coup of current Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi and has declared the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organisation.⁷ This proved a miscalculation on Turkey's part, as it damaged its image in the Middle East, while at the same time aggravating the Ankara-Riyadh competition for leadership of the Sunni world.

However, the close ties between Turkey, Iran and its allies has moved Erdogan away from his diplomatic ambitions. The Turkish President wants his country to be considered as a "power in the middle"⁸ and to be able to cooperate with every power in the region – including the US and Russia – in order to promote Turkish national interests,⁹ which predominantly center on economic prosperity and national security against Kurdish separatism.

The Khashoggi case has given Turkey the opportunity to revive its injured relations with the Saudis as well as with the US. Firstly, Erdogan seems to have used Khashoggi's murder as a bargaining chip in order to help him get the upper hand regarding the changing relationship with the Gulf Kingdom. By

putting mild pressure on Saudi Arabia, he has allowed the Saudi Prince to come up with a damage control theory about the journalist's 'disappearance'.¹⁰ This may prove to be a difficult, yet, fruitful remedy for the damaged relationship between the two Middle Eastern powers.

Furthermore, the US, Turkey and Saudi Arabia have agreed to establish a common taskforce to investigate the disappearance of Khashoggi; this move is evidence of the closer cooperation between the three countries. At the same time, it has raised international outrage because of the obvious conflict of interest for the Saudis to cooperate effectively by providing evidence for this investigation.¹¹ However, both Turkey and the US seem to focus more on their strategic interests in the region, rather than the moral implications of the journalist's murder and the risks that this poses to freedom of speech and to rule-of-law.

The renewed alliance between the US and Turkey is also evident from the developments in the case of Protestant pastor Brunson. The latter was held for two years in a Turkish prison with charges of espionage and terrorism following the measures taken after the failed military coup of July 2016. During 2018, President Trump, in order to pressure Erdogan to free the pastor, imposed a series of economic sanctions sending the Turkish economy on a downward spiral.¹² Erdogan, though, had claimed that the Brunson case had moved to the hands of the judiciary and that he was not in a position to intervene since Turkey is a country governed by the rule-of-law.¹³ Moving forward though, pastor Brunson was freed on October 12, in the middle of the Khashoggi diplomatic chaos.¹⁴ The recent visit of US Secretary of State to Ankara, right before his visit to Riyadh, certainly left the impression that the US sanctions are going to be revoked soon and that the relations between the three countries are moving towards warmer waters.¹⁵

The balance of powers in the Middle East seems very fluid; thus, events such as the one with Khashoggi are able to redraw the diplomatic alliances between states. The Khashoggi affair presented an opportunity for Turkey to fix its relationship with its traditional NATO ally - the US - and to gain bargaining power over Saudi Arabia. Erdogan's goal is to appear as a trusting partner and a 'power in the middle' so it can draw benefits from all sides; both from the US and Russia, as well as from Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Only time can show if the moves following the Khashoggi case will help Ankara or the partnering up with crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman – whose façade as a grand Saudi reformer is breaking down - and President Trump – whose political temperament seems to be even more unstable than the Middle East – will prove to be the wisest move. As for now, the Turkish double game between the two axes of power and their international allies in Middle East seems to be standing on a tightrope. Khashoggi's case aside, the role of Turkey in Syria and the Kurdish matter seem to be the defining issues for the relationship between Riyadh and Ankara.

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