

## ***Geopolitics of a murder: the Khashoggi case***

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***How the killing of a dissident journalist can change the Middle Eastern geopolitical scenarios along the Ankara-Washington-Riyadh axis.***

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The death of the Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi – brutally murdered inside the consulate of his country in Istanbul last October 2<sup>nd</sup><sup>1</sup> – has opened a geopolitical triangle between Ankara, Washington and Riyadh with potentially enormous consequences for the future balance of the Middle Eastern theater.

To lead the game was mainly the Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, able to use the cards in his hands to obtain concessions from his US counterpart, Donald Trump, and to weaken the image of the Saudi hereditary prince, Mohammad bin Salmān (MbS), still without arriving to an open diplomatic conflict with the two countries.

In the present article, the facts and public aspects of the Khashoggi affair will be examined first. Secondly, the focus will be on relations between Turkey, the United States and Saudi Arabia, and on the intertwining of their regional interests. Finally, we will analyze the possible negotiation bases between the three leaders, presenting the first tangible outcomes of the dispute and the further possible implications.

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<sup>1</sup> “*Jamal Khashoggi: All you need to know about Saudi journalist's death*”, BBC.com, 11/12/2018.

### ***The facts and public side of the affair***

It is 1:14 pm on October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2018. Jamal Khashoggi enters the headquarters of the Saudi Arabian consulate in Istanbul, where he has an appointment to collect the necessary documents to marry his Turkish girlfriend. To welcome him, the reporter finds a full-fledged platoon of execution, which captures and drags him into the office of the Consul, Mohammad al-Otaibi. In the next 7 minutes<sup>2</sup>, the journalist is tortured to death by his tormentors, who begin to manually dissect his body, listening to music on headphones to cover the screams of their victim.

The story quickly conquers the first pages of the international press<sup>3</sup>. Khashoggi's colleagues of the Washington Post, failing to get in touch with him, launch the alarm. From Riyadh, the Saudi hereditary prince claims that the journalist disappeared after leaving the consulate unharmed. The Turkish pro-government media belie this version, accusing Saudi Arabia and circulating surveillance videos of the Istanbul airport showing the arrival and departure of the alleged murderers.

The rumors continue for several days – expertly fed by Turkish intelligence – until the partial confession on October 19<sup>th</sup>. The Saudi officials admit the killing of the journalist inside the consulate, presenting it however as the unforeseen outcome of an unsuccessful interrogation led by a group of lone wolves, who acted on their own initiative<sup>4</sup>. What is said is considered "*credible*" by Donald Trump, who threatens retaliation against any direct responsible of this "*unacceptable*" episode, while assuring full support to his precious ally.

The situation changes again on October 23<sup>rd</sup>, following a controversial speech held by Erdoğan at the Parliament in Ankara<sup>5</sup>. The Turkish President, giving the clear impression of knowing much more details than he revealed, speaks openly of overwhelming evidence on the premeditation of Khashoggi's murder – without however launching direct accusations against King Salmān and never pronouncing the name of MbS.

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2“*Recordings reveal Khashoggi tortured then dismembered while still alive*”, YeniŞafak.com, 17/10/2018.

3“*Khashoggi, le tappe della vicenda*”, LaStampa.it, 18/10/2018.

4“*Saudi Arabia admits Khashoggi killed but claims he died in 'fistfight'*”, TheGuardian.com, 20/10/2018.

5“*Khashoggi murder planned days ahead, says Turkey's Erdogan*”, BBC.com, 23/10/2018.

A few days later, Saudi Arabia confirmed the veracity of Erdoğan's words, excluding any involvement of the royal family in the matter.

## **The geopolitical triangle between Ankara, Washington and Riyadh**

Saudi Arabia is the cornerstone of Donald Trump's Middle Eastern strategy. During the entire Khashoggi affair, the President of the United States has repeatedly stressed the importance of the partnership with Riyadh. This clearly emerges from a press release<sup>6</sup> of last November 20<sup>th</sup>, in which the White House tenant points out that – although the murder of Khashoggi "*was a terrible one, and one that our country does not condone*" – Saudi Arabia has proven itself "*a great ally in our very important fight against Iran*", fundamental "*to ensure the interests of our country, Israel and all other partners in the region*".

Parallel to geopolitical reasons, considerable economic interests are also at stake for Washington. As recalled by Trump, "*the Kingdom agreed to spend and invest \$450 billion in the United States*", of which "*\$110 billion will be spent on the purchase of military equipment [...]. If we foolishly cancel these contracts, Russia and China would be the enormous beneficiaries – and very happy to acquire all of this newfound business. It would be a wonderful gift to them directly from the United States*".

It doesn't matter that the US Senate has recently approved two heavy resolutions against Riyadh, accusing MbS of being the instigator of Khashoggi's murder and calling for the withdrawal of military support to the Saudis in the war in Yemen as retaliation<sup>7</sup>: Trump has no intention to get rid of his precious ally.

What role does Turkey play in all this? Ankara is on the opposite side of Washington and Riyadh in almost all regional disputes – from the Syrian civil war to the Iranian nuclear issue, through the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the embargo against Qatar<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup>"Statement from President Donald J. Trump on Standing with Saudi Arabia", WhiteHouse.gov, 20/11/2018.

<sup>7</sup>"Senate Votes to End Aid for Yemen Fight Over Khashoggi Killing and Saudis' War Aims", NYTimes.com, 18/12/2018.

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Focusing exclusively on bilateral relations, Turkey and Saudi Arabia are the two main powers of the Sunni world and are primarily in competition for their respective ideological and political visions to emerge at the regional level. Relations between Erdoğan and MbS have always been conflicting. Ultimately, the Turkish President would like King Salmān to remove the Crown Prince from his post, but he knows that without strong (and totally unlikely) pressures from the White House this can not happen.

In addition to the already mentioned regional issues, the dossier concerning the extradition request of the Turkish Imān Fethullah Gülen – in self-exile in Pennsylvania since 1999 and considered by Erdoğan as the person responsible for the failed coup against him on 15 July 15<sup>th</sup>, 2016 – is still open between Ankara and Washington<sup>9</sup>.

### ***Conclusions – What has Turkey achieved (and what can it still obtain)?***

We don't know for sure how Erdoğan and the Turkish intelligence have come into possession of evidence<sup>10</sup> that would leave no doubt about the first-person involvement of the Saudi hereditary prince in the premeditated murder of Jamal Khashoggi.

In any case, the Turkish President was able to wisely (and cynically) exploit the information at his disposal, leaking it progressively to the press and succeeding in internationalizing the issue without it assuming the forms of a bilateral confrontation with Saudi Arabia and MbS on the one hand, nor with the United States and Trump on the other.

Aware that the American president would have done everything possible to keep his relations with the Saudi hereditary prince intact,

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<sup>8</sup>The case of Doha, although it is the least talked about, is perhaps the most emblematic of all. In June 2017, accusing the country of supporting international terrorism, MbS convinced Trump to impose an anti-Iranian embargo on Qatar. Erdoğan immediately stood in defense of Doha, close like him to the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as an important economic and military ally for Turkey. Cfr. “*Qatar crisis: What you need to know*”, BBC.com, 19/07/2017.

<sup>9</sup>F. Pucci, “*Quasi amici: Erdoğan e Fethullah Gülen*”, OpinioJuris.it, 01/10/2018.

<sup>10</sup>One of the most credible options is that Khashoggi had left his iPhone to his girlfriend, Hatice Cengiz, giving her instructions to hand it over to a counselor to the Turkish President in case he had not left the Saudi consulate. If this were the case, the audio recordings mentioned by Erdoğan could be derived directly from the Apple Watch worn by the journalist that day. See *op. cit.*, footnote #1.

Erdoğan played a double game, aiming at obtaining both economic and political-strategic advantages.

For the former, it was enough to wait for October 17<sup>th</sup>, with the official visit to Ankara by US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo. Although the occasion to announce the removal of some economic sanctions by Washington has been provided by the release of Pastor Andrew Brunson<sup>11</sup>, who had been held prisoner in Turkey for over two years, we can consider this concession as Erdoğan's first victory from the Khashoggi case<sup>12</sup>.

For the latter – excluded at least for the moment the extradition of Gülen<sup>13</sup> – we had to wait for the second half of December. Accompanying the announcement of a possible \$ 3.5 billion deal for Turkey's purchase of military equipment from the United States<sup>14</sup>, on December 19<sup>th</sup> arrived the news of the forthcoming withdrawal of US troops from Northern Syria, which should be completed by January.

This is a huge geopolitical success for Erdoğan<sup>15</sup>, who will finally have a free hand to attack the stronghold of Manbij and to avoid the creation of a Kurdish state entity on the Turkish-Syrian border – the fulcrum of his strategy in the Syrian civil war<sup>16</sup>.

We still cannot know if this was the final price requested by the Turkish President at the negotiating table. What is certain is that the potential benefits for Erdoğan remain very high, both in terms of economic aid – to try to revive the complex financial situation of his country – and in terms of political concessions.

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11“*Trump administration may ease sanctions on Turkey after release of American pastor Andrew Brunson*”, USA Today.com, 17/10/2018.

12The timing also seems to confirm this thesis. Suffice it to say that the aforementioned speech by Erdoğan to the Parliament in Ankara took place almost a week later, with the Turkish President most likely already convinced of the effective availability of his interlocutors to make further concessions.

13“*Trump did not tell Erdogan he would extradite Gulen: White House official*”, Reuters.com, 17/12/2018.

14“*U.S. Backs Patriot Missile Sale to Turkey in Breakthrough*”, Bloomberg.com, 19/12/2018.

15I. Tharoor, “*The biggest winner of Trump’s Syria withdrawal? Turkey*”, WashingtonPost.com, 21/12/2018.

16 F. Pucci, “*Erdoğan e il futuro della questione curda: da Erbil a Raqqa*”, OpinioJuris.it, 19/11/2017.

It is the triumph of political realism, in deference with common sense and the supremacy of international law.