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## **KHASHOGGI MURDER: THE DOMESTIC CONSEQUENCES FOR THE SAUDI KINGDOM**

Saudi Arabia is governed by an absolute monarchy that rules without any restraints: no respect for human rights, no possibility of exercising some form of dissent against the policies of the regime. The murder of Jamal Khashoggi is the direct consequence of this approach.

What might have been inadequately estimated is the political row the killing of the journalist would have set off. And this explains the blatant lies, the botched cover up and false attribution of responsibilities to shield the Saudi Kingdom and the man in the line of fire, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, from the PR disaster. After all, the King's son is the rising death star of the Saud and, inevitably, all fingers were pointed at him.

### **Skipping the line**

The Saudi royal family, composed of around 15 thousand individuals ranging from princes, princesses and relatives, is run like a corporation where business, money and political influence are intertwined around a common goal: the survival and prosperity of the kingdom. The dynastic system is governed by a set of rules, usually based on age: the eldest surviving brother takes over from his dead predecessor. King Salman has decided to break these rules.

He set aside the designated Crown Prince, his half-brother Muqrin – he is the son of a Yemeni concubine and was born outside one of king Abdul Aziz's 22 official marriages –, and his other brother, Ahmed bin Abdul Aziz, who decided to give up his right alongside 9 other brothers, half-brothers. This meant it was the nephews' turn to rise to the throne.

Nominated Crown Prince in April 2015, Mohamed bin Nayef – hadn't his father Nayef died prematurely he would have been king before Salman –, a man in his 60s, was abruptly demoted after only two months. Guess who replaced him? King Salman's own son, Mohammed bin Salman. This was an abuse even by the Kingdom's own standards. The King favored his family and, in a blatant show of nepotism, designated the 30 years old Crown Prince.

The violation came with consequences. Mohammed bin Salman knew he couldn't obtain the support of the Royal Court and chose to concentrate all the power in his hands. Firstly, he arrested or sidelined all those relatives who could claim a line of succession to the throne. He appointed a series of loyalists to oversee security and the National Guard. He then appointed himself as Minister of Defense, of Interior, head of the Security Services,

the Economic Commission and even Secretary General of the Royal Court (the position decides who can talk to the king and who can't).

In a crescendo of royal bullying, Salman's son has decided to rid the kingdom of any dissent, and did so brutally.

### **A stockpile of mistakes**

Mohammed bin Salman is accumulating a series of mistakes, both domestically and internationally. He dove into the conflict in Yemen against the Houthis with disastrous results: loss of troops, rare victories, soaring costs and a huge humanitarian crisis entangling Saudi Arabia's southern border that has only brought more instability. His problem now is pretty simple: how do I get out of the conflict without losing my face?

The relationship with his neighbors, namely Qatar, are also strained. The Gulf Cooperation Council has been used to decree sanctions against the emirate. But the end result was that Qatar has turned to Iran and Turkey for support.

In another show of arrogance Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri was humiliated. He was invited to Riyadh, arrested, beaten, forced to step down and to declare his hostility to Iran. Salman wanted to interfere in the domestic affairs of a foreign government and have Hariri turn against Hezbollah. The attempt failed miserably, as Hariri returned to Lebanon as a Prime Minister.

Domestically, Mohammed bin Salman has been accumulating enemies inside the royal court. He thinks he can turn Saudi Arabia into a police state. Even the Wahabi clergy, whose role is vital in allowing the Saudis to hold onto power, has been marginalized.

The young Crown Prince seems incapable of assessing the consequences of his own actions and believes he can get away from just about anything with impunity. He is ruthless about it, brutal in pursuing his goals and possibly fearful that someone might come for him in the near future.

In such a short period of time Mohammed bin Salman has accumulated so many misjudgments that one might wonder what could happen if he were to become king. The latest incident, the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, is not just a brutal homicide, but the manifesto of a man that could destabilize both Saudi Arabia and the Middle East.

He might have some skills as a communicator, after all he had gained some international praise in his early steps at the time, but definitely a terrible strategist.

### **The reformer**

Mohammed initially labelled himself, both at home and abroad, as the man of the reforms, he that would have taken his country out of the extremist Wahabi Middle Ages into the modern age. Women were allowed to drive, watch a football match in public, listen to music, go to the movies, tourist visas were finally released. Bin Salman was telling the world: we are changing.

Behind the curtains of a successful PR campaign to rebrand Saudi Arabia came the repression. Political and military leaders were replaced overnight, dissidents and opponents were jailed, mass arrests and purges followed. In order to control the economy, minister, former ministers and members of the royal family were detained (although in 5 Star Hotels) in the name of the fight against corruption. The truth is they were forced to relinquish part of their wealth to the State. Forced nationalizations and foreign investments completed the picture.

According to several foreign analysts, too many reforms too quickly were just an excuse to strengthen the power of the Crown Prince.

### **The responsibility**

Nothing happens in Saudi Arabia, especially when it comes to security, without the approval of Mohammed bin Salman. His ailing father has handed all the control over to his son. This could mean that the old king wasn't even informed about the operation against Khashoggi, but his son definitely was.

Any attempt to blame others for the murder, to convict to death those responsible for the killing, to show sympathy in public for Khashoggi's own son are a series of useless attempts to shift the blame from the Crown Prince and to save his face.

But it's too late now. Even the CIA has officially acknowledged Mohammed bin Salman's role in the murder, including recorded conversations in which the Crown Prince revealed his intention to kidnap the journalist.

### **What could happen**

It is very unlikely that King Salman will demote his son from the line of succession to the throne. It would be a crushing defeat having to admit he was wrong, especially when his own son is involved. The hope is that, as time goes by, people will forget what Mohammed bin Salman did to Jamal Khashoggi. A temporary solution would be to dilute the extreme concentration of power in the Crown Prince's hands. But this would imply an admission of guilt and could weaken Mohammed. King Salman could even decide to demote Mohammed and choose his older brother, Faisal bin Salman, to keep the succession within the family lines.

This does not mean that the other wannabe kings in Saudi Arabia will give up fighting, only that the battle is yet to come. Mohammed bin Nayef is still a candidate, as is his cousin Mutaib bin Abdullah. He was removed from the National Guard, arrested for corruption and then freed after a 1 billion dollars bail. His good relationship with the beduin tribes make his politically strong.

His uncle Muqrin bin Abdul Aziz is also another potential candidate that could shift the succession line back to the brothers of the king instead of the nephews. As his Ahmed bin Abdul Aziz, who lived in self-imposed exile in London and is an opponent of the war in Yemen. He was greeted by several members of the royal family upon his return from the UK.

The Allegiance Council in Saudi Arabia determines the new king and also assesses whether the current ruler is fit enough to continue holding his post. Created in 2007, the council includes 34 members from the royal family. To date it has played a marginal role and has basically always ratified the king's decisions. It is within the Allegiance Council that the different branches of the Saud family compete for influence. The Sudairi (the most influential wife of Abdul Aziz), that currently occupy the throne with king Salman, and other clans, as the Abdullah and the Nayef.

The Saudi political system was based on mediation and compromise. Disputes were solved through negotiations. Salman has broken with the past, leaving room for intrigues, infighting and turbulent days ahead.

### **How will the Crown Prince react?**

Saudi Arabia's near future depends on how Mohammed bin Salman intends to react to the growing dissent against him. Despite his father's unconditional support, the Crown Prince is aware of that fact that several members within the royal court don't approve of his ascension to the throne. More so now after the Khashoggi affair.

To date the Prince has reacted with authoritarianism and arrogance, instead, as would have been appropriate, through dialogue. His authoritarian ways have relied on repression and violence. What remains to be seen is whether repression will leave room to dialogue and compromise.

## **THE KHASHOGGI MURDER: THE MISTAKES OF THE CONSPIRERS**

After reading of poisonings by Russian agents, as in the recent Sergej Skripal case; continued secret operations of the Mossad to eliminate its various enemies around the world; the disappearance of the chief of Interpol in China (we'll spare you the chronology of vanishings from Bulgarian Markov on forth), it is a wonder that the public opinion still reacts with shock when faced with what happened inside the Saudi consulate in Istanbul on October 2<sup>nd</sup>.

Perhaps it is the mere brutality and cruelty of the execution that strikes the public. But capturing opposers, terrorists and trying to extradite or eliminate them is a recurrent tactic in many countries.

In this case, the countries involved or judging the event from outside all have their little secrets: the US has a long history of “extraordinary renditions”, Turkey is involved in the disappearance and elimination of dissidents and in the capture and secret deportation of opposers residing abroad (lately from Kosovo and Moldavia), Saudi Arabia – which has always been fingered for the violation of human rights – has captured and eliminated dissidents abroad in the past (Nassir al Said, who vanished in Beirut in 1979; prince Sultan al Turki, kidnapped in Geneva, drugged and deported home in 2003 where he was tried; prince Turki bin Bandar al Saud, vanished in Paris in 2015, who was probably taken home with the help of the Moroccan secret services; dissident Saud bin Saif al Nasr, who was brought home in 2015 before disappearing altogether; dissident Loujain al Hathoul, extradited from the United Arab Emirates and presently behind bars in Riyadh).

The Saudi prisons are filled with individuals that are believed to be opposers of the regime. Ethical considerations brushed aside, if the Saudi authorities really wanted to capture or kill Khashoggi, they should have done so in a more professional way.

### **Responsibility**

The General Presidency of the Saudi Intelligence services, that is the structure that oversees all covert operations involving national security, depends and operates under the specific orders of the King (see [Invisible Dog, December 2017: “SAUDI INTELLIGENCE AGENCIES”](#)). In this specific case, seen the current configuration of power in Saudi Arabia, the supervisor of activities involving national security is the son of the king and crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman.

He is not only in charge of reforming the Secret Services but also holds the office of Defense and Interior Minister. The entire security and intelligence apparatus depends from him. Nothing could be done without his authorization.

It is he who gave orders to eliminate or capture Khashoggi, entrusting the task to a man from his inner circle: Saud al Qahtani, counselor of the crown prince and director of communications in social media.

### **The urgency**

The main reason for such a badly planned operation is probably the short notice given to conspirators before the arrival of Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul: the dissident journalist had visited the structure on September 28 to request some documents and had scheduled a second appointment on October 2<sup>nd</sup>. The urgency to improvise such a faulty plan was probably caused by the lack of time and by the will of the crown prince to eliminate the dissident or the private interest of his subordinates to please the prince's whims.

### **The wrong place**

Every diplomatic structure, regardless of the country it belongs to, is under the control of local counter-espionage. Transit in and out of the structure is usually monitored, as are all other activities that could be of interest to the local intelligence services. It's standard procedure. To think that an operation like the one involving Khashoggi, carried out inside a consulate, could pass unnoticed is a strong sign of amateurism.

More often than not the local counter-espionage will not only use external cameras but other, more technological instruments. The most recurrent are bugs inserted inside the walls of the diplomatic structure or external devices that can capture conversations inside the building from a distance.

In this case, the Turkish M.I.T. possesses the recordings to confirm the killing of Khashoggi. These recordings were shared by the M.I.T. with other information Services (surely with the CIA, then with the British, the French, Germans, etc.) but cannot be publicized for two reasons: they are the product of an "illegal" activity and because the Turkish counter-espionage does not wish to disclose the origin of the recording, the location of the devices and so forth.

### **Traces that cannot be easily erased**

The day prior to the killing of Khashoggi there arrived in Istanbul, on board two separate private flights, 15 members of the Saudi security services and of the offices connected to the Royal family. Flights tend to leave permanent traces of the airplane's arrival/departure and the people on board are usually known to local authorities. That is why the names of the passengers of the two flights were immediately made public. Had they used regular airline flights to transfer the killers to Istanbul, the operation and its executors would have been harder to identify.

Another incredible mistake was the use of a telephone to communicate with Riyadh: the conversations, which were also made public, revealed the goals of the conspirators and the identity of the people piloting operations in Saudi Arabia: 4 calls were made to the office of the crown prince Mohammed bin Salman, where his aide Bader al Asaker was in charge.

Another telephone call reached the number of the Saudi ambassador in Washington, D.C., US, who happens to be the brother of the crown prince and the person who contacted Khashoggi in the first place to convince him to return home. The same ambassador,

Khaled bin Salman, was the one who told Khashoggi to contact the consulate in Istanbul to obtain the documents he needed.

Third colossal blunder: the physical elimination of a person always leaves some trace in the place where it occurs. Although some of the walls in the consulate were repainted, nothing can really hide from today's technology. Traces of blood (when dissecting a corpse there is a lot of blood involved) and of other chemical agents, probably used to melt the body, were found on the premises.

Frankly, if the man was to be eliminated, it should have happened elsewhere. The Saudis probably thought that they could use the diplomatic immunity of the consular structure to prevent Turkish police from entering the building. But the clamor raised by the vanishing of Khashoggi forced them to consent to a joint investigation with the Turkish police, giving the latter access to the diplomatic seat.

### **Kidnapping or elimination?**

The Saudi authorities initially tried to deny the killing of Khashoggi, then they attempted to publicize a version in which Khashoggi was supposed to be kidnapped and taken home but was accidentally killed in the ensuing struggle. The most credible version in our opinion is that the Saudi dissident was to be eliminated if he refused to return to Saudi Arabia.

The presence of a medical examiner among the team that flew in to Turkey from Saudi Arabia seems to confirm the idea that Khashoggi was meant to disappear and that his body was meant to be dissolved in acid; seen the danger of removing the corpse from the consulate.

The consulate's personnel (some were Turkish nationals) were told not to go to work on the day of Khashoggi's arrival. This circumstance too couldn't pass unnoticed. The killing was clearly premeditated. The fact that the cameras inside the consulate were tampered with in order to erase that day's recordings is another indirect confirmation that the killing was to remain a secret. There was even an attempt to use a Khashoggi lookalike to pretend that the man had left the building; another amateurish attempt to muddle the evidence.

### **Searching for a scapegoat**

Even the behavior of the Saudi authorities appeared inadequate. Saudis sought to remove the crown prince from the circle of culprits and to try to point their finger in other directions and towards other individuals. They tried to vent the possibility that the killers operated on their own while disregarding the prince's orders. This led to the arrest of 11 individuals and to the request by the Saudi prosecution to apply the death penalty to 5 of these, two of which are important names: the counselor of the crown prince, Saud al Qahtani, and the vice-chief of Intelligence, Ahmed al Asiri. Another sure addition to the list of people to silence will be Maher Abdulaziz al Mutreb, the member of the royal guard who was communicating directly with the office of the crown prince and with the Saudi ambassador in Washington during the operation. He is a key figure who must not speak out. And perhaps another person that will be silenced is the Saudi consul in Istanbul, Al Otaibi:

although unhappy with the operation, he lent his office and his residence to the conspirators. Another member of the team, an airforce lieutenant who participated in the operation, died a few days after the murder in a car accident at home. Another voice silenced.

The intent of the Saudi authorities is clearly to relieve Mohammed bin Salman of responsibilities in the killing by placing these on the shoulders of two members of his inner circle. This gives credit to the version where two or more of the prince's aides did not follow orders.

Saudi trials aren't public, so the so-called "culprits" will not have a chance to defend themselves. Once they are dead, perhaps after an admission of guilt is forced out of them, it will be impossible to ascertain their responsibility in the murder. Notwithstanding, it is unsure whether all this will suffice to save the king's successor (which is the main goal right now for the Royal family).

### **The qualitative leap**

Even before the murder of Jamal Khashoggi Saudi Arabia was a country where human rights were never at home and where the death penalty was a daily occurrence. But the arrest, torture and elimination of dissidents were usually kept secret.

The grim murder of Khashoggi represents a qualitative leap in this respect. This leap is probably due to the current internal situation of Saudi Arabia, which is plagued by intestine power struggles where dissidence is silenced with brute force.

But who was Khashoggi and what made him so dangerous that he had to be killed?

He was neither a terrorist, nor a supporter of social disorder or intrigue. He wasn't involved in trying to topple the Saudi throne. He was just a journalist that criticized the choices of the Saudi regime (the war in Yemen, the sanctions against Qatar, the involution of power). Khashoggi had chosen self-exile in the United States to voice his opinions. He was accused of being close to the Muslim Brothers but, even if this were confirmed, a was in a very blurry way. He was a symbol of a widespread feeling of dissent and as such, for Mohammed bin Salman, who cannot tolerate those who defy his choices, was a symbol to be destroyed or at least silenced.

In this respect it is possible that other factors played a part in the brutal killing of Khashoggi: namely a strong sense of impunity on the part of the regime, which led the conspirators to act rashly, and the idea that to publicize the elimination of a dissident will convince other detractors of the regime that they will be dealt with in the same way.

## **KHASHOGGI MURDER: THE INTERNATIONAL CONSEQUENCES**

The horrible murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi is now marginal if compared to its consequences. The elimination of a columnist who dared criticize, albeit moderately, his country has become the least important element in this murky story. Ethics, justice and human rights are useless corollaries of a bigger game in the Middle East.

Apart from Saudi Arabia, the other country most interested in finding a painless solution to the PR disaster is the United States. The Saudis are still their most relevant Arab ally. The Americans are trying to save appearances by watering down the facts. Regardless of whether this is right, or wrong, foreign policy deals with national interests, not ethics. And in this specific case, the death of Jamal Khashoggi is not worth a strategic or economic interest.

The consequences of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's involvement in the affair stretch well beyond Saudi Arabia as Mohammed was conducting a new foreign policy for the Kingdom in the region. Having a lot at stake, he also stands to affect his country's standing.

### **Iran**

Iran is the country that can most benefit from the Khashoggi affair because of them being Saudi Arabia's main competitor in the region. Iranians and Saudis compete over religion – in the Sunni vs Shia struggle – and for military and political supremacy.

The more so if we consider Saudi Arabia's role for the United States. The Kingdom was set to contrast the expansion of Iranian influence in the Middle East. The weakening of Mohammed bin Salman's leadership strikes at the heart of the privileged relationship with Washington and, in particular, with Trump's son-in-law, Jared Kushner.

The US have sold 100 billion US dollars worth of weapons to the Saudis, they gave them intelligence assistance in the disastrous conflict in Yemen and have tightened economic ties. If the Crown Prince falls, so will the special relationship between the two countries. And this will, in turn, determine turbulent days ahead domestically in Saudi Arabia.

### **United States**

Khashoggi's murder has put the US in a tight spot. On one side – as President Donald Trump has constantly repeated – Saudi Arabia is a vital partner in the Middle East. More so now that Russia has returned on the regional scene. On the other, while keeping US public opinion into consideration (after all Khashoggi lived in self-imposed exile in the United States), Trump needed to show some form of reprieve from the man responsible for ordering the killing, i.e. Prince Salman.

This is why the US President initially doubted, then asked for time to verify, but eventually capitulated after the evidence showed what the young Prince had done. At that point, Donald Trump was at a crossroads: keep the dialogue with Saudi Arabia open regardless of its responsibilities, or keep Mohammed bin Salman at a distance.

Trump chose neither, or both. The Saudi kingdom has found a new friend in Washington despite the Khashoggi affair. However, it will be difficult for Donald Trump to accuse Iran of human rights violations when its favorite ally slays journalists inside a Consulate. The US also fear that a weak and elderly king and his ambitious son may have gone too far and could destabilize the kingdom.

Mohammed bin Salman was the go-to-guy for Washington. He signed the arms deals, he accepted that Jerusalem become the capital of Israel. No one else would have in Saudi Arabia. If the Crown Prince falls, so will Saudi support for the US policy in Palestine, the war in Yemen will witness an Iranian triumph and Russia will lead the way in Syria.

## **Turkey**

Saudi Arabia's downfall is the outcome of Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan actions. Ankara has been through some trouble as of lately, both in Washington and abroad. Several international analysts wonder whether Turkey is still part of NATO after it purchased Russian anti-aircraft missiles and negotiated its presence in Syria with Moscow and Tehran. Turkey is waging its own personal war on Saudi Arabia for the leadership of Sunni muslims. If the Kingdom's influence wanes, the Turks believe theirs will rise.

Ankara and Ryad have entered a collision course over Qatar, where Turkish soldiers have been deployed to protect the emirate, and prior to that over Egypt, Syria and even Libya. Erdogan supported Mohamed Morsi before he was ousted and is opposed to Khalifa Haftar in Libya. In the background, the fight over the Muslim Brotherhood. Erdogan's AKP is one of the Brothers, while the Saudis have banned the movement. Saudi Arabia has accused Qatar of supporting the Brotherhood and, no wonder, Khashoggi of being an affiliate.

The Saudi dissident was killed in Istanbul. The circumstance has granted Turkey the access to details on the murder that they have then used to pressure Saudi Arabia. By accurately dosing rumors, speeches, releases of information, Erdogan has kept the thriller going and has stuck to his byline: where is the corpse? Knowing the slain journalist has probably been dissolved in acid, the Turkish President has been able to emphasize the most brutal details of the killing.

Erdogan seeks to profit from Jamal Khashoggi's murder and aims to gain international prestige (by taking over Saudi Arabia's as the US favorite ally), strategic goals (the so-called Neo-Ottoman dream) and make financial gains. Turkey has been through some economic hardship lately and Saudi investments could favor the Turkish decision to turn a blind eye on the Khashoggi affair.

## **Israel**

Mohamed bin Salman, although not officially, had become a great friend of Tel Aviv. Jared Kushner had managed to sway the Kingdom's stance on Jerusalem and established a direct relationship between the two countries. The first example was an Israeli delegation's visit to the UAE.

In the recent past, a relationship between Israel and Saudi Arabia would have been considered impossible. But they now face a common threat, Iran, and Mohammed bin Salman seems to want to go out of his way to fight against Tehran. The synergy between the US-Israel-Saudi Arabia has put an end to the negotiations over Palestine after Donald Trump turned the peace talks into a blackmail.

Israel has obtained that its commercial flights will be able to fly over Saudi territory on their way to India. Everyone knows that Israeli strikers have used commercial routes for military flights in the past. And this gives Benjamin Netanyahu another option in case of an attack against Iran.

If Mohammed bin Salman were to be replaced by another Crown Prince, the relationship with Israel could be in peril.

## **Russia**

Moscow has tried to improve its ties with Ryad lately, although Russia is conscious of the role Saudi Arabia plays in the Middle East for the United States. The two countries may agree on oil prices, but have diverging strategic goals. The fact that the Khashoggi affair has dented Saudi Arabia's prestige is just another piece of the puzzle of growing Russian influence in the Middle East.