



WEST ASIA AFTER KHASHOGGI'S MURDER: AMPLIFYING THE REGIONAL FISSURES?

Anu Sharma

Research Associate, CAPS

Keywords: Jamal Khashoggi, Prince Mohammed bin Salman, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, West Asia

West Asia has often been referred to as a region with systematic violations of human rights and international law resulting in an unpredictable and unstable environment at the domestic and regional levels. Further, regional politics has become complicated, with several factors such as foreign interventions, presence of oil and gas and geopolitical “great game” heightening the instability in the region. At the domestic level, all countries – from Iran to Turkey to Oman – have a few constants present such as instability, volatility and confusion based on chaos and collusion; and these have always been present in the region. In these precarious conditions, the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Turkey has triggered a new power politics within the region. At the same time, it has brought to the forefront the anxiety of Saudi Arabian rulers to not only gain control of the critics of the regime in the West Asian region, but project its power and influence as well.

Various international theorists have described that the volatile nature of this region can be defined on three parameters: (1) competition for material possessions, which leads to war fought for gains; (2) diffidence or mistrust, the source of war fought for defence and security; and (3) glory, the pursuit of which leads to wars to prevent others from undervaluing or ignoring opinions or faith of the other state.¹ This is an affirmation to the Thucydides theory where he pointed towards the similar set of variables which chiefly included— for fear, next for honour, and lastly for profit.² Furthermore, Political Realism sees international relations mainly as a struggle of self-interested, sovereign states that are involved in a game of power-politics within a permanent state of anarchy.³ The heightened security dilemma amongst the states of this region and the lack of any predominant supranational authority leads to the idea of balance of power to maintain some order in the region, eventually leading to the strong states exercising their power over the

weak states. This often leads to chaos as is visible in case of Syria and Yemen in West Asia.

In the similar context, the murder of Jamal Khashoggi can upset both the West Asian order and the security situation, which is already grim. Khashoggi, a high-profile critic of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS)—and who was a self-exiled columnist of famous American daily newspaper Washington Post—disappeared after entering the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, Turkey on October 2, 2018. In fact, many scholars are putting forward an argument that due to this event Saudi Crown Prince's image is "irreparably tarnished, if not shattered." The uproar regarding this murder poses a threat to both the leadership in Riyadh as well as to White House plans for West Asia.

At the domestic level, Khashoggi's murder can reshape the regional power balance, *relegating* the "Vision 2030"⁴ of MBS to a mirage and altering the calculations of the US and Israel in the region. Furthermore, the changing stance of the Saudi government on this murder also indicates its attempt to wriggle out of the crisis that has enveloped this major US ally in the region after Israel. Khashoggi's murder has disrupted MBS' campaign to project an ultraconservative country as a modern one on the one hand; while on the other, highlighting the brutal lengths to which the Saudi government can go to silence its critics. It is pertinent to mention here that Khashoggi was living under the self-imposed exile in the US for almost a year

before his death and has written very critically and condemned MBS' crackdown on dissent. The narrative which talks about a young 'liberal' minded crown prince of an autocratic regime with exciting ideas for opening up of the Saudi kingdom appears to have changed its course after this murder. This has, somewhat, turned the wave against Saudi Arabia.

At the regional level, the murder of journalist Khashoggi could alter the power dynamics in West Asia by strengthening Turkey's influence at the cost of Saudi Arabia as both the countries compete for leadership and influence of the Islamic world. Both Turkey and Saudi Arabia represent two different visions of political Islam. Wherein Turkey follows democracy and legitimacy owing to public support and elections, Saudi Arabia – a religiously conservative kingdom – on the other hand, owes it to bloodline. This can also be related to a debate between the two nations over stability versus populism. At the same time, this event provides Ankara with a critical advantage in the struggle which has ensued between Turkey and Saudi Arabia in the region. It should also be kept in mind that Turkey is the supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood⁵, which Saudi Arabia and its allies Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) consider a terrorist group. According to Lina Khatib of Chatham House, this event provides President Erdogan with the golden opportunity "to pressure Saudi Arabia and work towards presenting Turkey as the new leader of the

Muslim world”—a big geopolitical gamble.⁶ Also, it will be difficult without US support.⁷ There is also a chance that Turkey might get a chance to push back the triple entente (comprising of Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman of Saudi Arabia, Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan of the UAE and Abdel Fattah el-Sisi of Egypt) as these countries along with other Arab nations oppose Turkey's association with the Muslim Brotherhood.⁸ There is no doubt that Turkey is trying to maximize its profit after this huge Saudi blunder.

At the same time, Khashoggi's murder represents a struggle for Saudi Arabia's allies in the region. Currently, President Trump's decision to support Saudi Arabia is obviously enormously influencing the eventual outcome of the exploration and worldwide reactions toward Saudi Arabia.⁹ Curiously, Saudi Arabia is in agreement with the US against Iran. At the same time, Turkish support to Muslim Brotherhood has found the legitimate meaning after Saudi Arabia has come under pressure due to this event. On December 10, 2018, President Donald Trump signalled that he will not take strong action against Saudi Arabia or its Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman for the murder.¹⁰ However, on December 13, 2018, US senators have voted in favour of a non-binding resolution saying that Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman is responsible for Khashoggi's murder.¹¹ These resolutions were, however, strongly denied by Saudi Arabia. Definitely, the murder of

Jamal Khashoggi has made things difficult both for Saudi Arabia and the Saudi Crown Prince.

West Asia is a region where there has been diffusion of central authority in new democracies leading to increased chaos in the region. In these persisting situations, the murder of Jamal Khashoggi has exacerbated the anarchist culture in the region. This has also brought to the forefront the fissures that already exist in the region.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹ Hedley Bull, "Hobbes and the International Anarchy", *Politics: The Works of Hans Morgenthau*, Vol 48, no. 4, Winter 1981, pp. 717-738, https://www.jstor.org/stable/40970843?read-now=1&seq=5#page_scan_tab_contents. Accessed on November 29, 2018.

² David Boucher, *Political Theories of International Relations*, (Oxford University Press, Oxford: 1998).

³ Mareike Oldemeinen, "The Political Realism of Thucydides and Thomas Hobbes", *E-International Relations*, February 15, 2010, <https://www.e-ir.info/2010/02/15/the-political-realism-of-thucydides-and-thomas-hobbes/>. Accessed on December 04, 2018.

⁴ Vision 2030 refers to a plan to reduce Saudi dependence on oil, diversify its economy and develop public service sectors such as health, education, tourism and infrastructure including various other sectors to be achieved by the year 2030. This plan was announced by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman on April 25, 2016.

⁵ Mohammad Abdel Kader, "Turkey's Relationship with Muslim Brotherhood", *Al-Arabiya*, October 14, 2013, <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/perspective/alarabiya-studies/2013/10/14/Turkey-s-relationship-with-the-Muslim-Brotherhood.html>; Ayhan Simsel, "Support for Muslim Brotherhood Isolates Turkey", *DW*, August 21, 2013, <https://www.dw.com/en/support-for-muslim->

brotherhood-isolates-turkey/a-17037906. Accessed on November 30, 2018.

⁶ “Jamal Khashoggi crisis may tip Middle East power balance toward Turkey”, *The Japan Times*, November 03, 2018, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2018/11/03/world/jamal-khashoggi-crisis-may-tip-middle-east-power-balance-toward-turkey/#.XByvNlwzBIU>. Accessed on November 30, 2018.

⁷ “Khashoggi's Murder May Tip Middle East Power Balance towards Turkey”, *NDTV*, November 03, 2018, <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/journalist-jamal-khashoggis-killing-may-tip-middle-east-power-balance-towards-turkey-1942306>. Accessed on November 30, 2018.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Zvi Bar’el, “Truth or Trap? Saudi Explanation for Khashoggi's Murder Puts Trump to the Test”, *Haaretz*, October 21, 2018, <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/turkey/.premium-saudi-explanation-for-khashoggis-murder-puts-trump-to-the-test-1.6574823>. Accessed on November 30, 2018.

¹⁰ Nicole Gaouette and Kaitlan Collins, “Trump signals US won't punish Saudi crown prince over Khashoggi killing”, *CNN Politics*, December 10, 2018, <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/11/20/politics/trump-saudi-arabia/index.html>. Accessed on December 21, 2018.

¹¹ “Jamal Khashoggi Case: All the latest updates”, *al Jazeera*, December 17, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/10/jamal-khashoggi-case-latest-updates-181010133542286.html>. Accessed on December 21, 2018.