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Turkey and Saudi Arabia: A Dangerous Rivalry

Karol Wasilewski

The expected meeting between Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman on the margins of the G20 Buenos Aires summit did not take place. Thus, one can expect the relations between Turkey and Saudi Arabia to remain strained in the coming months. The rivalry between both countries is another challenge for U.S. policy in the Middle East, hindering the normalisation of Turkish-American relations and intensifying the destabilisation of the region.

Khashoggi's Killing and Turkey's Reaction. Turkish-Saudi relations have been exceptionally tense since October, when Jamal Khashoggi, a [Saudi journalist who had criticized changes in Saudi Arabian policy under the leadership of Mohammad bin Salman](#), was murdered in the Saudi General Consulate in Istanbul. The killing was committed by a group of men who came from Saudi Arabia. This information—even the very fact of Khashoggi's death—was revealed by Turkish investigators. Soon after, representatives of Turkish authorities, among them President Erdoğan, began publicly appealing to Saudi authorities to clarify the matter. They claimed that the murder had been ordered by the most important people in Saudi Arabia. Although they did not point directly to the successor to the Saudi throne, evidence published by the pro-government press left no doubt it was the crown prince who was on their minds. Moreover, the publication of many leaks from the investigation in Turkish media suggested that the authorities were concerned not only with an explanation of the murder but also with publicizing it.

Turkey's interest in Khashoggi's fate stems from several factors. First of all, prestige, since the murder in Turkey was perceived as a serious affront to the Turkish state. Second, the slain journalist was respected by the conservative elite in Turkey. This is not insignificant given local elections are to be held in Turkey in March 2019 and the fact that the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) needs the support of these groups. Third, by insisting on an explanation in Khashoggi's case, the Turkish authorities were counting on improving Turkey's international image, which has been tarnished by, among others, the record number of journalists it has imprisoned. Fourth, the attempt to clarify the matter became an instrument of influence not only on Saudi Arabia but also its biggest ally, the U.S. Fifth, regional issues also played an important role. Publicising the murder served to fuel fears connected with Mohammed bin Salman's policies and shared by some Arab states. Noting the Saudi crown prince's aggressive actions in the region, Kuwait on 11 October signed a military cooperation agreement with Turkey. According to the document, starting in 2019, both countries will, for example, exchange military experience. However, media, including Kuwaiti outlets, are speculating that the agreement laid the foundation for establishing a Turkish military base in the country. If true, it would be the second such installation in the Gulf region after Qatar.

Turkish-Saudi Rivalry. Sources of the problems in relations between Turkey and Saudi Arabia go much deeper than the tension caused by the murder of Khashoggi and stem mainly from different views on regional issues, especially the approach to the "Arab Spring". While the authorities in Ankara, in principle, welcomed the changes in the region, Saudi decision-makers saw them as a threat to the stability of the monarchy. Especially symptomatic was both countries' position towards the Muslim Brotherhood (MB).

The AKP is ideologically close to groups associated with the MB. Therefore, Turkish politicians perceived the MB's strengthening in regional politics as an opportunity to expand Turkey's influence. In turn, Saudi Arabia treats the MB as an existential threat. This difference in perception was revealed in Egypt in July 2013, when a military coup removed the MB-affiliated Freedom and Justice Party and President Mohammed Morsi from power. Turkey strongly condemned the takeover and decided not to recognize the new Egyptian authorities. In contrast, the government of Saudi Arabia was the first to publicly support the new Egyptian regime.

Another factor that fuelled the tension between Turkey and Saudi Arabia is the Turkish aspiration to be the leader of the Muslim world. Even rhetorical attempts by Turkish politicians worry Saudi authorities because the Kingdom also uses the title the "Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques". However, what particularly irritated the Saudis was Turkey's support for the Palestinians and its attempt to broker the end to the split between Fatah and Hamas. In the past, it was Saudi Arabia that had tried to play the role of the leading advocate of the Palestinians and mediator between the groups.

Being pragmatic, Turkey and Saudi Arabia toned down their rivalry for a long time. Yet, in the last two years, it has been difficult not to see its manifestation. When in June 2017, [a coalition of Arab states, which included Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates \(UAE\), Egypt, and Bahrain initiated a blockade of Qatar](#), the Turks unequivocally supported the Qataris. The most serious expression of their backing was the creation of a Turkish military base, which protected Qatar from possible aggression. Moreover, the Turkish authorities began to look with increasing suspicion on the consolidating Saudi-UAE-Egypt alliance, considering it a challenge to Turkey's position in the region. That suspicion was strengthened by Mohammed bin Salman's visit to Egypt when he was reported to have said that Turkey—along with Iran and "extremist religious groups"—belonged to the "triangle of evil". Additional mistrust in Turkish-Saudi relations was introduced by the Saudis' involvement in Syria, especially financial resources allocated by the Kingdom to the stabilisation of the country's northern territories. Turkish media accused the Saudis of funding the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). The accusations stemmed from the links between the PKK and the Kurdish groups that controlled parts of northern Syria.

Perspectives and Conclusions. Turkey sees benefits in maintaining pressure on Saudi Arabia in connection with the assassination of Khashoggi. This stems not only from domestic issues, such as the mobilisation of the conservative electorate ahead of March local elections but also from regional benefits and image issues. Turkey's position is also indicated by reports that the Turks rejected a Saudi investment proposal in exchange for abandoning efforts to clarify the case of the slain journalist.

Furthermore, the pressure on Saudi Arabia allows Turkey to portray itself as a more predictable and less controversial U.S. ally in the Middle East. The Turks hope that Khashoggi's killing will result in Congressional pressure on the Donald Trump administration to reduce cooperation with Saudi Arabia and, consequently, on changing U.S. policy in the region, especially in Syria. In such circumstances, it is unlikely that the Turkish-Saudi rivalry will be toned down in the coming months.

Yet, President Erdoğan's pragmatism suggests that Turkey will be ready to limit the pressure on Saudi Arabia, especially after the elections. Nonetheless, this would have to involve concessions from the Saudi authorities. Although Turkish media have speculated that these concessions must include, among others, the removal of Prince Muhammad from power, it is more likely that the real goal of the Turkish pressure is to limit Saudi financial support for the territories of northern Syria under control of the Kurds. In addition, the Turks may be counting on the pressure in the Khashoggi case will weaken the anti-Turkish dimension of the Saudi-UAE-Egypt coalition.

Still, the implementation of this scenario will depend on the position of Mohammad bin Salman. If the crown prince decides on a confrontational course with Turkey, the rivalry between the two countries will become even more intense and will negatively affect the stability of the Middle East. Turkish-Saudi tensions already complicate the U.S. plans for northern Syria and make attempts to normalize Turkey-U.S. relations, initiated in October, more difficult. The possible intensification of the dispute, however, may lead Turkey to deepen cooperation with Iran and Qatar to counterbalance the regional influence of the Saudi coalition with Egypt and the UAE. This, in turn, opens the door both to further tensions with the U.S. and to subsequent "proxy wars", which will exacerbate the humanitarian crisis in the region. Such a scenario would be unfavourable from the point of view of Poland and NATO because it would in all probability deepen the divisions within the Alliance.