

# Turkish president brands Khashoggi killing a premeditated murder

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Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan yesterday provided details of the premeditated murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi on October 2 in the Saudi Arabian consulate in Istanbul. While Erdogan had promised to expose the “naked truth” about the brutal killing, his less-than-full account indicates that his government is intent on exploiting the issue to further Turkish interests in the Middle East.

Erdogan nevertheless did confirm incriminating details that had previously been leaked to the media, which puncture Saudi claims that Khashoggi’s killing was not planned, but was the result of an operation gone wrong. The speech will compound the political crisis in Riyadh, putting pressure on King Salman to take some action against his son and de-facto Saudi ruler, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, and his clique of advisers.

The following are the key elements of Erdogan’s speech:

\* The planning for the murder began immediately after Khashoggi first visited the Saudi consulate on September 28 to finalise divorce proceedings. The first three-person team arrived from Saudi Arabia on October 1, while another team from the consulate went to examine Belgrad Forest and Yalova—areas now being searched by Turkish authorities for Khashoggi’s remains.

\* On October 2, further agents, including generals, arrived from Saudi Arabia, and the assassination team, numbering 15 people, was assembled at the Saudi consulate prior to Khashoggi’s second visit. The hard-drive was taken out of the building’s surveillance system and Turkish staff were told to stay away from the consulate. Most of the team flew out of Turkey on the same day, while a Khashoggi look-alike took a commercial flight to Riyadh to lend credence to Saudi

claims, now repudiated, that the journalist left the consulate alive.

\* Erdogan appealed for answers to a series of questions, including who ordered the killing and the location of Khashoggi’s body. “Without these questions being answered,” he said, “nobody should think the issue will be closed. Intelligence and security institutions [in Turkey] have evidence showing the murder was certainly planned... Pinning such a case on some intelligence and security members will not satisfy us and the international community.”

Erdogan, however, did not confirm key aspects of the murder that have been leaked to the Turkish media. He said nothing about how Khashoggi had been murdered, and did not release audio and video recordings which, according to Turkish sources, would contradict Saudi claims that the journalist was killed accidentally in a fist fight following an argument in the consulate. One of the Saudi hit squad was allegedly a doctor who used a bone saw to dismember the body.

Erdogan pointedly did not refer directly to Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman nor to evidence that implicates him in the murder. According to Turkish reports, the crown prince’s chief security and intelligence adviser Maher Abdulaziz Mutreb was on the spot in Turkey on October 2. Following the killing, he made four phone calls from inside the Istanbul consulate to Bader al-Asaker, who manages Prince Mohammed’s office in Riyadh. Saudi authorities insist that the crown prince knew nothing about the murder.

Erdogan’s deliberate omissions provide the Saudi regime with the leeway that it needs to concoct a new face-saving cover-up to protect top Saudi leaders, including the crown prince, who it has claimed knew nothing of the murder. Erdogan has had several phone calls with King Salman who agreed to establish a joint

working group and to allow Turkish investigators into the Istanbul consulate.

Turkey may well be seeking to remove, or at least clip the wings of, Prince Mohammed whose aggressive foreign policy has conflicted with Turkish interests. The crown prince, who has close ties with US President Trump, effectively seized power in June 2017 by ousting his cousin Mohammed bin Nayef. He then consolidated his grip over the state apparatus, including the military and intelligence agencies, through an “anti-corruption” purge of hundreds of journalists, businessmen, Islamic scholars and fellow royals.

Khashoggi was aligned with sections of the Saudi monarchy opposed to Prince Mohammed and fled abroad after he came to power. Far from being a champion of democracy, the journalist had longstanding ties with the Saudi intelligence agencies, which are notorious for their criminal activities in the region.

Erdogan came into conflict with Prince Mohammed when he instigated a Saudi-led economic and diplomatic blockade of Qatar in June 2017 after it refused to cut ties with Tehran and halt the construction of a Turkish military base in the Gulf state. In March 2018, the Saudi crown prince said that Turkey was part of a “triangle of evil,” along with Iran and “terrorist organisations,” and accused Erdogan directly of seeking to re-establish the Ottoman Caliphate—that is, Turkish domination over the Middle East.

At the same time, Erdogan does not want an open breach with Saudi Arabia. Turkey has heavily relied on Saudi investment to stave off a deepening of its financial crisis. Erdogan is also looking for concessions from the Trump administration, which is wanting to protect Saudi arms sales and investment.

Trump, who is under fire for not taking a tougher stance against Saudi Arabia, yesterday declared that the Khashoggi case was “the worst cover-up ever” and stated that there would have to be “some kind of retribution.” He told reporters that whoever was responsible was “in big trouble,” and said: “They had a very bad original concept, it was carried out poorly and the cover-up was one of the worst in the history of cover-ups.”

This utterly cynical statement is an indication of what is underway. It is significant that Trump is not critical of the brutal murder itself, but rather of the botched

operation and subsequent cover-up. He has despatched CIA director Gina Haspel, who is herself directly implicated in the crimes of torture and forced disappearance, to “review” the evidence in the Khashoggi killing. He also spoke at length to Erdogan last weekend prior to the Turkish president’s speech yesterday. All this suggests that the US, Turkey and Saudi Arabia are engaged in elaborate behind-the-scenes negotiations to invent an improved cover-up that protects the interests of all three countries.

Neither Trump nor his critics in the US has any intention of damaging relations with the autocratic Saudi regime which has been a key cornerstone of US strategy in the Middle East. While Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin pulled out of Prince Mohammed’s showpiece Future Investment Initiative conference, dubbed “Davos in the desert,” he nevertheless flew to Riyadh to meet with the crown prince on Monday behind closed doors.

Trump has declared that he will leave the imposition of any penalties on Saudi Arabia up to congress and appealed for bipartisan support. At the same time, in an interview with *USA Today*, he made clear he would oppose efforts to end billions of dollars’ worth of arms sales to Saudi Arabia, which he described as an economic boon to Americans. “We have a very big picture we have to keep in mind,” he declared, noting Saudi Arabia’s role in countering Iran.

Trump’s comments reflect not only the attitude of his administration, but of the entire political establishment in Washington, which has turned a blind eye to the Saudi regime’s crimes and repressive methods for decades.



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