Will the US Reassess Its Entire Middle East Strategy After Khashoggi's Death?

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The October 2 kidnapping and execution of Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul will have long-term effects not only on the future of Saudi-American and Saudi-European relations but also on the general geostrategic shaping of the Middle East. This incident promises to be more than a simple diplomatic crisis between Turkey and Saudi Arabia, since it raises questions on the latter’s role and place in the Middle Eastern politics in particular, and in the world in general.

Since the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the continuing tensions between the Islamic regime and its neighbours, much of the US foreign policy in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf has been concentrated on the role of Saudi Arabia as the sworn enemy of Iran. As such, the Khashoggi incident could have happened at a better time for the Iranian authorities who have been pressured financially and economically by the Trump administration in the past few months. Crushing US oil sanctions on Iran started on November 4 and already, many Asian countries, like Japan or India, are cutting back on their purchases of Iranian crude. In this geopolitical equation, Saudi Arabia has always been one of Washington’s key pivots in the Middle East in regard to oil security and anti-Iranian policymaking.

But Khashoggi’s death has not only created a huge embarrassment for the Trump administration and the Saudi authorities, but it might also change Trump’s rhetoric and create the diplomatic urge in Washington to rethink carefully the US’s future strategy in the Middle East before continuing to issue a blank check to Saudis in their anti-Iranian crusade. In all and for all, a thorough review of US interests in the Middle East and its policies toward Iran will also be based on the future of the civil war in Yemen and the level of financial engagement of Iran in the region.

As a matter of fact, since the besiege of the port of Hodeida by the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen, the Houthis, an ally of the Iranian government, Iranian financial aid has
decreased and the Houthi rebels are increasing taxes on businesses. Moreover, Iran has also brought down the number of the Iranian revolutionary guards in Syria. Let us not forget that since 2012, the Iranian regime has spent over $16 billion supporting Assad plus $4 billion in lines of credit to the Syrian regime.

Last but not least, with the resume of the American sanctions against Iran, the Iranian authorities have also reportedly cut back on funding the Lebanese Hezbollah. According to Lebanon’s An-Naharn newspaper, this strain was recently acknowledged by the Hezbollah leader Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah. This is certainly good news for Benjamin Netanyahu and the Israeli government who just a month ago affirmed that Israel would contain “Iran’s attempt to use Syrian territory for attacks against Israel and to arm enemies like Hezbollah.” Actually, Israel’s recent success in developing ties with Gulf states should be seen as a continuous effort to isolate Iran and its proxies in the region.

Thus, the recent trip of the Israeli prime minister to Oman can be seen as an effort to help divert Sultan Qaboos’s relations with Tehran and to persuade him to end the transhipment of Iranian weapons to Houthi rebels in Yemen. But since Netanyahu’s visit comes at a moment of difficulty for Saudi Crown Prince, it also implies that Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are not the only regional routes for Israeli diplomacy against Iran. In any case, the Sultanate of Oman is not part of regional conflicts and that is why Israel takes up an anti-Iran vanguard role, as a major player, that Saudi Arabia cannot assume. Unsurprisingly, Israel has played an important role in hitting Iran’s growing influence in the region.

It goes without saying that after the Khashoggi affair, which created a verbal and diplomatic clash between the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Saudi Arabia’s Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, Muscat believes, more than before, that Israel can play the role of a stabilising force in the Middle East. This shows clearly that there are enough elements for major geopolitical changes in the region.

The Khashoggi murder has only intensified the clash of Titans which was already playing around the Middle East. With Iran under domestic and foreign pressures, Erdogan, Netanyahu and Mohammad bin Salman are watching from the sidelines in order to carry out a calculated strategy and to further promote their own leadership.

Undoubtedly, this new situation will create an opportunity for Trump and his administration to reassess the entire US strategy in the Persian Gulf region. At least for the next one year, the US pressure on Iran will prevail when the November 4 sanctions will start having their effects on ordinary Iranians and the Shiite proxies of Iran around the Middle East. But at a minimum, the escalating pressure campaign against Iran should include a few serious sanctions against the new Saudi outrageous behaviour and disregard for international norms.

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