

# The Prospect of the United States and Saudi Arabia's Relations In Light of the Khashoggi Murder

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## Abstract

A decade after the establishment of the Saudi regime Riyadh and Washington constructed a strategic alliance between themselves in 1945. On the other hand, given the "Pivot to Asia" doctrine adopted by the Obama and Trump Administrations, the decline of Washington's dependence on Saudi oil, as well as some important events such as the murdering of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi by Riyadh officials, the prospect of relations between the two countries has been highlighted in political circles. Based on a scenario-planning study, the current paper tries to answer the question: "what will happen to the future of US-Saudi relations considering the aftermath of the Khashoggi murder?" Concerning the impact of this fiasco on the future of US-Saudi relations, we can logically consider five scenarios: the continuation of the status quo, the deepening of strategic relations, the decline of strategic relations, a strategic shift, and, finally, the elimination of strategic relations. But given ongoing circumstances, the deepening or end of strategic relations is unlikely to happen, the present article only focuses on the three other scenarios; the continuation of the status quo, the power shift and the decline of strategic relations amidst the two countries. However, the removal of Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) from the position of crown prince (should it be low-cost) could also be in Washington's agenda for maintaining strategic ties between the two countries. The paper's hypothesis is inclined to the status quo scenario and argues that with the official stances of the Trump Administration, in particular that of November 20, 2018, the strategic alliance of Riyadh-Washington will continue, with more expenses shouldered from the Riyadh side.

**Keywords:** Futures Studies, United States, Saudi Arabia, Alliance, Khashoggi Murder

## Introduction

During the Obama presidency, relations between Saudi Arabia and the United States were in fluctuation. At the same time, regional and global factors, including the differences between the two countries on issues such as human rights, the Palestinian-Israeli peace process, the Arab Spring, the Iranian nuclear deal and cooperation on counter-terrorism measures, led to a relative divergence between the two sides. Hence, it was expected that the Middle East would largely lose its importance in US global politics in the 21st century, because of the 2010 US National Security Strategy based on Obama's Asia Pivot strategy as a response to a changing global strategic environment (Lieberthal, 2011, p. 7). Therefore, it is believed that the importance of Saudi Arabia has declined from the point of view of the United States. According to Charles Glaser and Rosemary Kelanic (2016), the motivation to maintain a massive US presence in this area was creating prosperity and security, but the time has come to reevaluate and validate this hypothesis; increasing Washington's military-political intervention in the Middle East has led the United States to ignore other areas more important than the Middle East (Glaser and Kelanic, 2017, p. 2).

But after Trump's rise to power as the new president of the United States in 2017, the two countries have sought to deepen their ties once again; during Trump's visit to Riyadh an arms deal worth almost \$110 billion was signed between parties. But following the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi (October 2, 2018), which is considered a turning point in relations between the two countries, the sustainability of strategic cooperation between the two countries, not to mention their alliance has become a controversial issue. The crisis of Khashoggi's murder has largely impacted the relationship between the two countries, and this is perhaps the first time since 9/11 where the future course of

the two countries' relations was threatened. The developments in the aftermath of the killing of Khashoggi showed that the attitude of American support and accommodation (at least as far as civil society some of the elites are concerned) for Riyadh is not feasible under all circumstances, because neither did Trump's stances regarding this murder show him to be the undisputed enabler of Saudi politics, nor did Mohammed Bin Salman turn out to be a blind follower of White House orders. The two countries are clearly in disagreement on Yemen and Qatar: the United States advocates a compromise in the Yemen war, while the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia is merely trying to make Yemen surrender through the complete disarmament of the Houthis. Meanwhile, Trump wants to resolve the rivalry between Riyadh and Doha and readmit of Qatar as a member of the Arab coalition in the region, while bin Selman firmly believes that until Qatar does not completely change its attitudes and behavior, he is not willing to reconcile with it.

The Crown Prince's position has been seriously undermined by the unprecedented international response to the Khashoggi story. Apparently, to maintain his political position, he must show more prudence and flexibility or be accused of interfering with the murder of Khashoggi, so his political future will be at risk. Thus, the tragic fate of Khashoggi, which has overshadowed the multifaceted Saudi-American relationships has prompted a rethinking in the prospect of the two states' relationship (Harrison, 2017, p. 7). Hence, the purpose of this article is to give a short history of U.S-Saudi relations and to answer the question of how the future relations of Saudi Arabia and the United States can be appraised after the Khashoggi killing. The methodology of this paper is based on Futures Studies and scenario planning. Accordingly, this article, after reviewing the history of both countries' political and economic relations, analyzes the most

promising scenarios for US-Saudi relations in the face of events such as the murder of the Saudi journalist and will assess its relative importance and probable consequences.

### **Futures Studies in the framework of Scenario Planning: a methodological approach to the research**

Futures Studies promotes philosophical thinking and scientific methods by offering various models for examining and studying the future. It does so by outlining the alternative and probable futures; therefore, Futures Studies is a tool for future smart engineering (Inayatullah, 2013, p. 34). The first series of Future Studies was conducted in the form of a scientific review from 1930 to 1933 by a group of researchers led by William F. Ogburn in the field of sociology in the United States, which was back then known as a nascent science. (Dubois, 2014, p. 22). Futures Studies began as a public activity from the 1960s. Bertrand de Jouvenel wrote the first theory of the future under the name of *The Art of Conjecture*. Referring to the fact that there is no reality to the future, he concludes that finding documents and conclusions for the future requires unconventional methods (Anderson, 2012, p. 1414).

Various definitions of the concept of Futures Studies are presented. In a general definition, it can be said that Futures Studies is an attempt to understand what may or may occur in the future; or in another definition, Futures Studies is a process that predicts several possible events (Groff and Smoker: 1997, p. 3). As a matter of fact, Futures Studies is a process that requires an organized approach to develop effective strategies and policies for the medium- and long-term future. Perspectives are a process whose most important result is setting priorities for a country's future strategies; therefore, in order to achieve such results, different methods have to be used for these perspectives (Rialland & Wold, 2009, p. 13).

Scenario Planning is one of the Futures Studies methodologies, and it is a description of future events that may occur under certain circumstances (Godet, 2001, p. 3). The scenario includes images of a possible and probable future, whose purpose is to test the performance of policies and strategies adopted against future challenges thorough the creation and spatial planning of possibilities (Moen, 2009, p. 4). To this end, scenarios, with the systematic discovery of challenges and opportunities ahead, serve to formulate strategies. The scenarios not only help in guessing the future, but also help us think about the future in different environmental conditions, and decide on future management (Rhydderch, 2009, p. 5). The future of the relations of allied states can be imagined, from a logical point of view, into five possible and probable ways. First, the alliance could have a “continuation of the status quo”. In this regard, the most prominent example is that of the strategic relationship between the United States and Israel. (Ramirez & Selin, 2013, p. 12). Second, when two states’ alliance deepens, it is called a "deepening of strategic relations” in this article. A good example of this would be the deepening of the strategic relationship between China and Pakistan in recent years. Third, the relationship between the two countries may become shaky and fragile, but the links between them deep. In other words, the relationship between the two countries may not be what it once was, and thus we would observe an "undermining of strategic relations". In this case, we can mention the shaky relations between Europe and the United States during the Trump era as an example. Fourth, their strategic relationships may witness a reversal and may even turn into hostility, which is referred to in this article as a “shifting of strategic relations”, the most striking example of which is the strategic shift of Egypt from the East to the West block after 1973, or Iran's strategic shift in 1979 in the aftermath of the revolution. Finally, relations between the two countries may turn

out to be neutral; meaning that they neither have neither the strength it once had, nor did it turn increasingly hostile; the obvious example is Russia's relations with Eastern Europe after the collapse of the Soviet Union, which in this article we will refer to as "strategic relationship elimination". In the scenario planning of the future of US-Saudi relations, especially after the murder of Khashoggi, there are five scenarios: continuation of the status quo, deepening of strategic relations, decline of strategic relations, strategic shift, and finally the elimination of strategic relations. But given the fact that the deepening or elimination of strategic relations between the two countries is very unlikely, thus this article will not address these two unlikely scenarios.

**Figure 1: The future scenarios of US-Saudi relations**

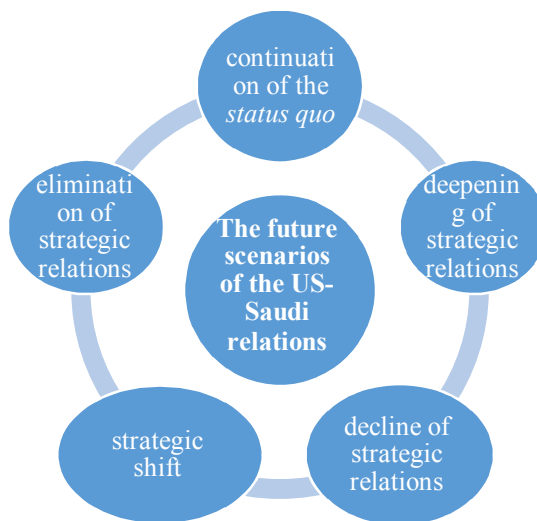


figure 1: the future scenarios of the US-Saudi relations

Source: Authors

### **A Short History of Riyadh-Washington Relations**

The United States and Saudi Arabia have established strategic relations since 1945. Saudi Arabia's unique role in the Arab and

Islamic worlds, its position in having the world's largest oil reserves and its geostrategic position, play a major role in the long-term bilateral relationship between it and the United States (USA International Business, 2007, p. 53). The alliance between the two countries dates back to 1943 to the visit of Princes Faisal and Khalid to Washington during the Roosevelt administration. The two princes agreed to protect the interests of American oil companies in Saudi Arabia's oil and gas industry in exchange for US security assistance. This agreement, with all the controversies concerning the future of Palestine in 1945, was signed by the King of Saudi Arabia and the President of the United States (Lippman, 2005, p. 3).

It is true that after six decades, relations between the United States and Saudi Arabia have gone a long way, but over time, the two countries have become closer to one another. In 1973, King Faisal imposed oil sanctions against the United States because of its support for Israel (Alkhorayef, 2008), yet the same support was the case for US-Saudi cooperation on the Israeli-Arab peace agreement. King Khalid, along with Jimmy Carter, took part in the war in Afghanistan, and King Fahd became the patron of George Bush Sr.'s war against Saddam and the liberation of Kuwait. Thus, the 1980s and 1990s saw unprecedented cooperation between the two countries (Rosenthal, 1990, p. 5).

In the early 2000s, this bilateral relationship was accompanied by the failure of Bill Clinton to advance peace negotiations between Israel and Syria or between Israel and Palestine. (Youngs, 2005, p. 18). Subsequently, King Abdullah believed that Bill Clinton had failed in pushing Israel and forcing it to give over advantages. Saudi Arabia also believed that its agreement with Syria had reached its maturity in 2000, and could have cut Iran's ties with this country, thereby isolating Hezbollah, and providing a

path for a peace agreement with Palestine (Katulis et al. 2016, p. 17). Then-Prince Abdullah at that time, and considering Fahd's deteriorating health practically held the kingdom together. He was deeply saddened by the United States and George W. Bush for supporting Sharon during the second intifada in 2001. (Kulish & Mazzetti, 2016, p. 10). Prince Abdullah considered the United States to be a partner in Israel's war crimes during a meeting with the then US Secretary of State, Colin Powell. Despite him being invited by both Bush Sr. and Jr., he did not go to Washington to meet with the President in either of these two periods. Perhaps one of the reasons for this lack of travel was his health status (Riedel, 2016, p. 4).

In the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, relations between the two countries ran into some difficulties, in particular following the events of September 11, 2001, and the involvement of Saudi citizens in these events, in addition to the US invasion of Iraq, which led to an increase of the power held by Shias and an increase in Iran's influence. (Staff, 2017, p. 5). The Obama presidency also increased pressure in terms of democracy in the kingdom's rule and its hegemony in the Middle East (Katulis and others, 2016, p. 8), as well as its lack of support for Hosni Mubarak following the Egyptian revolution, which frightened the Saudi family of the transition of these types of revolutions to Saudi Arabia, etc., and created uncertainty in the strategic alliance between the United States and Saudi Arabia (Wood, 2015, p. 13). But after the arrival of Trump as the new president of the United States in 2017, the two countries again decided to strengthen their relations. Hence, during the first few months of the Trump presidency, the heads of the two countries visited each other and emphasized the importance of the strategic relationship between them (Lucas, 2017, p. 5).

Mohammad Bin Salman visited the United States in March 2017 as a warrior prince. The Saudi prince, who seems to handle all the



affairs of his country and proved so with the attack on Yemen, was warmly welcomed by Trump and the United States (Davis, 2017, p. 3). This ambitious and militant prince recognized the importance of relations with Trump, and during his visit to Trump, managed to change some of the latter's stances against his country, such as being on the United Nations blacklist for crimes against children in Yemen, and managing to increase emphasis on Iranophobia (which coincided with Trump's policies positions), also emphasizing joint ventures against Iran; he was well suited to the president of the United States, as he ordered massive American arms shipments to Saudi Arabia (Wald, 2017, p. 3). Trump described this well after his visit to Saudi Arabia, when he likened the relationship with it to that of milking a cow by signing this arms agreement, and believes in the return of US capitals by Saudi dollars (Saunders, 2017, p. 3).

The chart below shows US arms exports to 10 countries in increasing order, and as we see Saudi Arabia has the largest share of arms imports from the United States with more than \$190 billion. It should be noted that the statistics in the chart below are based on millions of US dollars.

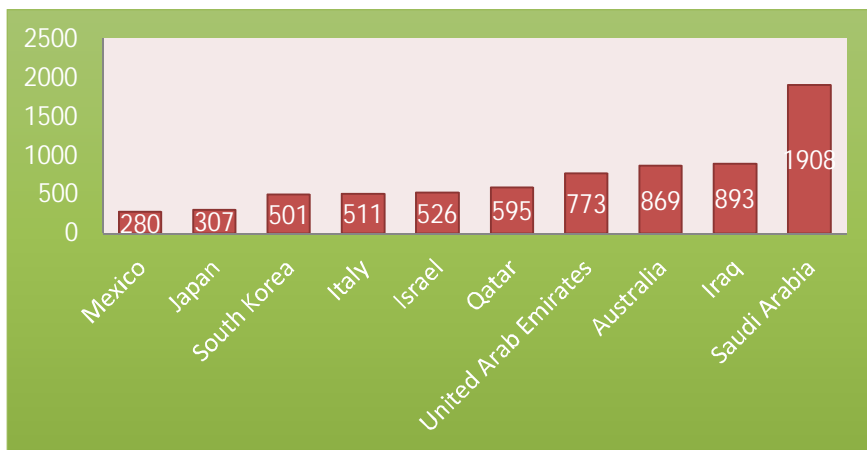


chart 1: US arms exports to 10 countries  
source: Armstrong, 2017, p. 1

One of the issues that has recently flared relations between the US and Saudi Arabia was the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, which US government has been pressured to respond to both domestically and internationally (Gilsinan, 2108, p. 4). American writers and analysts, and many members of the US Congress, especially some influential senators, have already responded negatively to the killing of Jamal Khashoggi. According to some analysts, the killing of Jamal Khashoggi following a visit to the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul is an event that could have an impact on Riyadh - Washington relations. (Ydstie, 2018, p. 2). In the US Congress, Democrats and Republicans alike promised to end weapons sales to Saudi Arabia and impose sanctions if its government is shown to have murdered Khashoggi.(Barfi, 2018, p.3).

Throughout the history of US-Saudi relations, there have always been many disputes and crises. Their relationship is a longstanding one, and has been built on mutual interdependence and continued geopolitical interests under successive presidents and kings. Despite being typically different in their cultural mores, the United States and Saudi Arabia have, since the early 1970s, strengthened their symbiotic relationship built on petrodollars and security guarantees. We need not be surprised that Trump's anti-Muslim attitude and his offensive Islamophobic comments have failed to shake U.S-Saudi relations (Momani, 2017, p. 4); The main reason is that they are built upon decades of security cooperation and strong political and business ties dominated by U.S interests in Saudi geography. The relationship has survived severe challenges, including the 1973 oil embargo and the 9/11 attacks, in which fifteen of the nineteen hijackers were Saudi. Successive US administrations have held that Saudi Arabia is a critical strategic partner in the region. (Mughef, 2017, p. 5).

Thus, the 84-year long (1933-2018) relationship between Saudi Arabia and the United States has milestones, some of the most important of which are:

|   |   |
|---|---|
| 1933                                    | Saudi Arabian oil concession  |
| 1944                                    | The opening of the US Embassy in Saudi Arabia and the start of official relations   |
| 1951                                    | The signing of an agreement between two parties and creating a US military base in Saudi Arabia   |
| 1991                                    | Operation Desert Storm against Iraq and the presence of 500,000 US military personnel on Saudi Arabian soil   |
| 2001                                    | The September 11 incident and the participation of 15 Saudi citizens out of 19 terrorist elements   |
| Obama's presidential period (2009-2017) | Saudi Arabia's dissatisfaction from the United States due to a nuclear agreement with the Islamic Republic of Iran and US policy in the Arab Spring |
| 2016                                    | JASTA law passed in US Congress, which targets Saudi Arabia more than other countries   |
| 2017                                    | The trip of Mohammad bin Salman to the United States, meeting with Trump and the change of latter's approach to Saudi Arabia                        |
|   | The trip of Donald Trump to Saudi Arabia and signing of a \$310 billion deal  |
| 2018                                    | The murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul   |

**Table 1: Timeline of United States - Saudi Relations**

**Source: Authors**

Then, during the Trump era, the Washington-Riyadh relationship was back in a good place, but the killing of Khashoggi impacted the nature of the strategic alliance between the two countries.

## **Scenarios for the US-Saudi future relationship**

As elaborated before, on the one hand, the Riyadh-Washington relations have been critical for the U.S.'s regional policy in the Middle East; on the other hand, the Saudi regime has been reliant on Washington for its survival. On the future of the Saudi alliance with the United States in the light of the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, though the five conceivable scenarios were scrutinized in the theoretical section (continuation of the status quo, deepening, fragmentation, shifting and removal of strategic relationships); but the most likely scenario is the continuation of the status quo and the most possible of them is the decline and shifting of strategic relationships. Hence, the deepening of strategic relationships given the pressure of public opinion, as well as the removal of strategic relations given the massive benefits Saudi Arabia offers to the Trump Administration, are unlikely to happen, although they are logically possible. Therefore, in the current paper, three scenarios of decline, shifting, and continuation of the status quo in their mutual strategic relations are discussed.

### **i. The Decline of US-Saudi Strategic Relations**

In response to the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, the U.S has been pressured both inside and outside the country. According to the US official report, it was confirmed that the murder of Khashoggi was committed on the orders of Saudi officials and that Bin Salman was aware of it. However, having warm relations and opting for quiet diplomacy toward the issue is seen as a flagrant insult to American principles and values. In US political culture, there are a number of core ideals and values. Although not all Americans share the same views, but the vast majority subscribe to these general ideals of liberty, equality, democracy, individualism, unity, and diversity. Political wrangling tends to be over how best to achieve these

ideals, not over whether these ideals are worth having to begin with. Therefore, condemning the murder of government opponents anywhere in the world and the protection of the freedom of expression are among the fundamental principles of the US. Respect for human rights is a fundamental principle of American values and many Americans believe that it should be a red line for US relations with any country; in other words, the US should never use the important issue of human rights as a convenience tool. It is believed that Trump's Administration had previously lost a few levers over Riyadh due to its unconditional support, including its green light for the Yemen war and many of the Saudis' human rights and humanitarian violations. Options such as pressuring Saudi Arabia to end the Yemen war, or implementing a Visa ban for senior Saudi officials involved in the Khashoggi case, or even the suspension or reduction of arms deals and other forms of security cooperation with the Saudis could be among the measures that would cause distance in the relations between two countries, were they to be applied by Washington.

Anyway, the story of the Khashoggi murder has also overshadowed the American domestic policy scene; its immediate impact was the US decision to suspend refueling Saudi military aircrafts in the Yemen War. The US Department of Treasury has included the 17 Saudi nationals involved in the crime on the list of sanctions for their human rights violation, and some of them are close to Prince Bin Salman. The list includes names such as Saud Al-Qahtani, senior advisor to MBS, but there is no trace of the name of Ahmed al-Asiri, the former successor to the Saudi intelligence agency, whom according to Saudi authorities, was the mastermind behind this murder plot. "Our relationship is with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. They have been a great ally in our very important fight against Iran. The United States intends to remain a steadfast partner of Saudi Arabia to ensure the interests of our

country, Israel and all other partners in the region". Trump opined in his statement on November 20<sup>th</sup> 2018.

The Khashoggi case led the US Congress to become more sensitive to the Yemen war and put MBS under pressure to terminate it as soon as possible. This war is a meaningless catastrophe: 10,000 people killed and millions displaced and may lead to the worst humanitarian crisis and famine in the last century. Under the Trump and Obama presidencies, the United States has clearly supported Saudi Arabia in logistics and communications. The Khashoggi murder has made Washington realize that the blank check must not be left to the crown prince. Hence, the honeymoon between the two countries may have had a period of relative turmoil, but their strategic ties and needs have so tied the two countries to each other that we should not expect any divorce; just as there were gaps in European and American relations during the Trump era, the commonalities are so vast that they do not override the bases.

## **ii. U.S-Saudi Strategic Relations Shift**

If the United States boycotts Saudi Arabia or moves to change MBS, the likelihood of Bin-Salman's tendency to turn away from the United States and seek rapprochement with other actors will be the main subject of this scenario. Therefore, the Saudi regime should choose another option for its political survival, one of which is to find a new partner to ally itself with, which will cooperate with it to ensure its survival, such as Israel, Europe, Russia, and China. In some cases over the past few years, the overlapping of interests between Saudi Arabia and Israel has caused the leaders of these countries to move in a direction that serves mutual interests without establishing formal diplomatic relations. (Alamer & Allaraki, 2017, p. 4). Evidence indicates that Israel's lobby in the

United States is strongly mediating to distance the attributing of the Khashoggi murder to MBS. But does Israel have the capacity to arbitrarily take the place of the United States for Saudi Arabia without the former's permission? The sound mind rejects such an idea.

But besides Israel, there are other potential trans-regional allies for Saudi Arabia. First and foremost, Britain and the European Union are considered the main political and economic partners of Saudi Arabia, and the links between the two sides have always been firmly strong. In this regard, Britain has increased its presence in the Persian Gulf and the first foreign naval presence in Manama took place in 2016 after years of the British navy's absence in the Persian Gulf (Vimont, 2016, p. 101). The answer to whether in the Middle East today, London can play the role of Saudi Arabia's main ally is negative. Because in terms of the criteria of power and political will, the United Kingdom lacks the necessary conditions to play a role as extensive as the United States' for Riyadh. Apart from the power criteria, is Britain inclined to denigrate itself for a truculent crown prince? The answer is no. Most importantly, would the US vacate the ground for Britain? The answer is definitely negative.

In general, non-European powers are not reliable allies for Saudi Arabia. For example, although Russia has expressed its interest in expanding relations with Saudi Arabia in various situations, but there is a huge difference between Saudi Arabia and Russia in terms of political identity and ideology. On the one hand, Saudi Arabia does not trust Russia, and on the other, Washington would not vacate the grounds for its rival, Moscow. Although Russia's activities in Syria and its support from Iran are at the expense of Saudi Arabia's interests, but Russia can only remain an important economic and weapons partner for Saudi Arabia, as in the first visit

of the Saudi King to Russia (2017), when both countries signed arms and energy deals worth billions of dollars. Riyadh wants to buy the S-400 air defense system, anti-tank systems, and rocket launchers. But it seems that these relations will be limited to the tactical sphere, and will not rise to the level of a strategic partnership (Hannah, 2016, p. 2).

China and India have an extensive relationship with Saudi Arabia, especially in the field of energy and labor markets; but neither of them has a specific security-political strategy or a stable presence in the area and therefore, the kingdom cannot rely on them to secure its security in the future. (Monvoisin, 2010, p. 5). The arguments made about Russia also apply to China and India. As a result, it seems that these countries lack the criteria for strategic relations with Saudi Arabia, and therefore, it cannot count on them as it does on the United States to achieve its goals.

### **iii. Continued Strategic Relationship or the Status Quo**

The continuation of strategic relations between the United States and Saudi Arabia after the killing of Khashoggi is possible in two ways:

#### **a. The Deal and Neglect**

Based on the probable future, despite MBS's involvement in the murder of Khashoggi, it is far less likely that Washington will severely punish Riyadh. The United States will not only determine the limits of the Saudi crown prince and his domestic and foreign policy changes, but either Washington, Riyadh, and Ankara will close the Khashoggi dossier through a three-way deal, or Washington and Saudi Arabia will do so in a bilateral deal. Trump's apparent negligence, which manifests itself in this terrible incident, only confirms one fact; namely how much Trump has



invested in the 33-year-old Saudi crown prince. Mohammed bin Salman is part of the main axis of the Trump government's strategy for the Middle East, the components of which include: the containment of Iran's expansionism, cooperation in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and the preservation of a rich buyer of American weapons; although many of these alleged arms deals have not yet fully materialized, Trump stubbornly stands by his position and is so close to this ally that he is not even willing to listen to the recording of Khashoggi's murder, because he fears that he, and consequently his views, will be affected, thus damaging his trust in the prince of Saudi Arabia. For Trump, milking the cow is more important than opposing US intelligence authorities.

Moreover, Saudi Arabia is the cornerstone and strategic axis of the United States to "curb the expansionist policy of Iran and contain it". Riyadh announced its readiness to increase its oil production in the absence of Iran's oil market after the return of US sanctions against Iran in 2018. Saudi Arabia is a vital element in the process of creating peace between Israel and the Palestinians as well. In accordance with this attitude, Jared Kushner, Trump's 36-year-old son-in-law who is responsible for the current Middle East peace process, has taken MBS under his wing. The Saudi prince also responded by counter-favor; and in 2017, when the US embassy in Israel moved from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, MBS did not allow his father to react sharply to the issue.

Trump has built an important part of his domestic economic program on milking Riyadh pocket under the slogan "payment to support". On various occasions, Trump boasted about this as being one of the positive actions of his foreign policy. He has repeatedly said that arms sales to Saudi Arabia have created 500,000 jobs in the United States. This scenario anticipates that Trump will certainly not sacrifice the billions of dollars he would get from

Saudi Arabia, because he knows nothing else than the language of interest. In addition, the fact that Trump would lose one of his most important allies in the region for a person like Khashoggi seems to be farfetched and unreal.

After Trump's rise to power, Riyadh decided to buy 60% of its weapons requirements from the United States and another 40% is to be produced in Saudi Arabia using American technology, a project for which it has allocated \$400 billion. Saudi Arabia has agreed to contribute \$100 million in aid to the U.S-backed coalition's efforts in Syria. Coincidentally, that money was wired to the US State Department on October 16th, just as US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo landed in Riyadh for discussions regarding the missing journalist with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. The Kingdom had pledged to deposit the money in the US account in the Fall of 2018, but the payment's timing, and it coinciding with Pompeo's trip to investigate the Khashoggi murder cannot be a coincidence, and seems to be hush money (Hudson, 2018, p. 3).

The formation of what it is called the Arab NATO, which includes Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, and possibly several other countries, is a new policy adopted under the new US administration. Accordingly, Trump, in order to please Al-Saud and other Arab states of the region, has scapegoated Iran. To this end, on the one hand, he wants to grasp Saudi petro-dollars to ensure the recovery of the US economy, and, on the other hand, create a division of labor in its new security plan in the Middle East without having Washington further the financial burdens. Hence, Riyadh's punishment for the killing of Khashoggi would change the framework of the coalitions to the detriment of the two countries. In light of the warm relations that exist between America and Saudi Arabia, it is difficult for Washington to leave Riyadh alone. Thus, it is expected that Washington in addition to

Israel, will play a major role in reducing the volume of damage to American-Saudi relations.

Israel continues to use its ties with the Trump Administration to deal with pressures from the US public opinion and Congress to punish the Saudis. On the other hand, lobbying in Washington, which works in the favor of Saudi Arabia and Abu Dhabi does not relieve members of Congress from pressure to seek punishment against the Saudis, namely since the United States has elections ahead of it (late 2018), and these people need to keep their seats in Congress: "It is very likely that Crown Prince Bin Salman was aware of this incredible event. Maybe he knew and maybe did not know...Anyway, our relationship with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is stable. They are a major ally for the United States in our very important fight against Iran...The king agreed with the \$450 billion investment in the United States. It's a record and will create thousands of jobs in the United States", said Trump in his statement on November 20, 2018 (CNN, 2018). The statement shows that although part of the US Congress and civil society may levy a strong critique to Saudi Arabia, but the deep state in the United States supports the continued strategic relationship with Riyadh.

Therefore, according to this scenario, the only way out of the current crisis is to set up negotiations or a deal among Ankara, Riyadh, and Washington, or the latter two alone, so that the responsibility for the assassination of the Khashoggi killing would not directly damage Bin Salman; thus, those who committed the murder would be branded as rogue elements and would be made to accept responsibility for it. This way, everyone will profit except for Khashoggi, whose blood would be laid to waste. By delaying in disclosing the ambiguous points of the case, Riyadh would raise the chances for a continuation of the status quo scenario in the US-Saudi strategic relations. Moreover, this solution is compatible with the interests of the three parties, Turkey, Saudi and the US.

## **b. Removing MBS from Power**

Based on this scenario, since Mohammed bin Salman is known as an authoritarian leader who suppresses opposition, it seems that the assassination of Jamal Khashoggi had to be led by him. In order to dispel domestic criticism, the US would need to punish MbS for this crime, and contemplate his removal from the Saudi monarchy. This will be a good and positive step for the future of the United States, because the crown prince did not show any indication of rationality or foresight in his decisions, thereby disproving his suitability for the future of Saudi Arabia. Bin Salman is now in a difficult situation because he needs to give the whole world answers.

Although questions arise as to whether MBS merely ordered the kidnapping of Khashoggi, or his murder as well, but to be sure, this murder could not have been committed without his consent, because the perpetrators are part of Bin Salman's inner circle. He must be held legally responsible for this crime, if he issued the order.

Ben Salman has shown time after time that he has adopted irrational policies since his coming to power. The costly war against Yemen, Qatar's economic embargo, taking the Lebanese Prime Minister hostage, and the crisis with Canada are examples of his performance. Now, dozens of Saudi princes have grown resentful of his policies. Many members of the royal family are unhappy with the chaos that he has created for them. Despite the complexity of the situation in Saudi Arabia, the United States has the leverage to put pressure on it. The long-term history of U.S.-Saudi relations is based on the simple rule that the Saudis will serve American interests and the United States will provide them with the necessary security and protection.

Despite the rise of anger and pressure because of Khashoggi's

murder and the doubts being cast by the Trump Administration that MbS may have ordered the Khashoggi murder, talking of removing bin Salman is a matter easier said than done. The worst-case scenario is one where the Americans or the British would see the stability of Saudi Arabia threatened. In this respect, four scenarios can be developed vis-à-vis the dismissal of bin Salman:

The First is that he would stay in power until the international furor eventually settles down; he would thus manage to stay on the throne. He is the de facto leader in Saudi Arabia because his father is aging and ailing. The second scenario is that he would be replaced as crown prince, a matter for which a precedent exists. Over the last three years, two other crown princes have been pushed aside in his bid to ascend to power. There is a third option – one where his powers are weakened: the King could appoint others in the royal family to assume some of the roles that MbS has managed to accumulate in his office over the last two years. Finally, the fourth is a premeditated assassination, as with King Faisal back in 1975.

According to this scenario, the removal of Mohammad bin Salman from the Saudi political establishment and his accountability for the killing of the Khashoggi is a good and appropriate action, not to mention the best option for the United States if it would be without cost. If the United States' support had not been there, Saudi Arabia would have been overthrown within two weeks, as Trump said. Although there is a measure of exaggeration in this declaration, it does have some truth to it, because the Saudi regime is completely dependent on the United States for its survival, and if the United States just cut off its support for the Saudi Air Force alone, this regime would no longer be able to take any action against the United States.

Would Salman easily surrender to these pressures? The current

condition and personal morale of bin Salman would answer this question with a resounding no. Meanwhile, the Crown Prince's changes in Saudi Arabia is the privileged rights of the king and the current circumstances show King Salman is highly enthralled by Muhammad among his six sons.

### **Conclusion**

In the scenario of the future of US-Saudi relations, especially after the murder of Khashoggi, there are five categories of scenarios: continuation of the status quo, deepening of strategic relations, decline of strategic relations, strategic shift, and finally the elimination of strategic relations. If U.S-Saudi relations become obscured by the involvement of Riyadh in the Khashoggi assassination, the Trump strategy on Iran will fail and finally, developments would be in favor of Iran's economic and political interests. Despite the thorny issue of the Khoshoggi case, it is unlikely that US-Saudi bilateral relations will be shaken, because the American ruling class needs Al-Saudi as much as they need American support. This relationship is a strategic axis that cannot be obviated. Hypothetically, it is probable that the United States and other Western countries would ask bin Salman to reduce his power or even remove him from the crown prince's position. But it must be noted that Mohammed bin Salman will never surrender. Additionally, bin Salman's removal from power for a matter like the Khashoggi case seems somewhat farfetched and unreal, and the United States will use this crime as a new opportunity to pressure Saudi Arabia and blackmail it. Despite confirmation by the CIA of the culpability of bin Salman in the assassination of Khashoggi, the Trump's November 20<sup>th</sup> statement also confirms this hypothesis.

The probable future is that the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey will bargain on the Khashoggi case through a three-way

deal; this scenario is the most likely among the five. According to this scenario, the only way out of the current crisis is to conclude or negotiate a three-way deal among Ankara, Riyadh, and Washington, so that responsibility for the assassination of Khashoggi or its costs would not be shouldered by bin Salman, but rather by rogue elements in exchange for receiving payment. This way, everyone will profit, except for Khashoggi. Moreover, this solution is compatible with the interests of these three parties; Saudi investment and money would alleviate the economic crisis in Turkey and Washington would benefit by milking their cow, just as before, and MbS would be able to save face.

In recent years, the United States has worked closely with Saudi Arabia on common issues: maintaining stability in the global oil market, combating terrorism, and confronting Iran, which can be seen as only three of the most important areas of this partnership. The United States also needs Saudi Arabia in many other areas. It is not at all necessary for the two countries' policies to be in complete agreement, such as in the Yemen War and the Qatar dilemma. It is now true that the US has been at the cross road of the assassination of Jamal Khashoggi, but as always, Washington will try to establish a balance among principles and values and its national interests.

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