



Khashoggi case: Is Saudi-Turkish investigation a mere formality?

Linah Alsaafin

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Istanbul, Turkey - A joint probe team formed by Saudi Arabia and Turkey to investigate the disappearance of prominent journalist Jamal Khashoggi is nothing more than a cosmetic cover, analysts say.

The case of Khashoggi, who disappeared on October 2 when he entered the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, has caused an international uproar, with European and US officials demanding an answer as to his whereabouts.

Over the past two weeks, Turkish intelligence has disclosed a steady stream of uncorroborated leaks to the media, saying it has audio recordings that prove Khashoggi was murdered inside the consulate building.

The killing, according to these leaks, was carried out by a 15-man Saudi hit squad, with some members having close ties to Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

The Saudis, however, have rejected these claims and maintained that they had committed no wrongdoing, saying Khashoggi left the building. Yet they haven't provided anything to substantiate that.

Forensic evidence found

As pressure mounts on the Gulf kingdom to disclose the truth of what happened, Saudi authorities suggested last week the formation of a joint investigation team with their Turkish counterparts, which the latter agreed to.

The leaders of the two states, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Saudi King Salman, also talked on the phone last Sunday, with both stressing the importance of having a joint working group as part of the probe.

The king thanked Erdogan for welcoming the Saudi proposal and said no one could undermine their relationship.

A forensics team searched the Saudi consulate for nine hours on Monday, ending their work in the early hours of Tuesday, examining the interior as well as the grounds. On Wednesday, the residence of Saudi Consul General Mohammed al-Otaibi, which is located a few hundred metres away, was also searched after al-Otaibi left Turkey for Riyadh.

At the residence, Turkish forensic experts found "samples identical to those uncovered" at the Saudi consulate, providing, according to the attorney general's office "further evidence of the conclusion that Jamal Khashoggi was killed inside the consulate building".

It has not yet been announced when the results of the probe will be ready, but some reports suggest it could be this week.

'Bargaining chip'

Fulya Atacan, a Turkish expert on the Middle East, told Al Jazeera the joint investigation committee is a "curtain to discuss political dealings behind the scenes".

"It seems like both sides know what has happened, so they are trying to negotiate [better positions] for themselves before they solve the case," Atacan said. "They need some room to manoeuvre, to negotiate."

Mustafa Akyol, a senior fellow on Islam and modernity at the Cato Institute, said the joint investigation represents a "formality" that Turks are observing in order to demonstrate goodwill.

"But they also seem pretty certain that Jamal Khashoggi was first seized and then killed by a special Saudi team sent for this mission," he said.

Atacan described the joint committee as a "bargaining chip", adding that it is the best solution to confer behind the scenes and decide on what to convey to the public.

"Both sides have a problem with this case as they don't know how to solve it," she said.

"The joint committee might be a tool to overcome these problems, so that they will have enough room to discuss before they accuse each other, or before they issue an official statement about the case."

Joint probe and entente

While it is clear that Turkey - by claiming it is in possession of evidence that proves Khashoggi was killed - has the upper hand over Saudi Arabia, Ankara is not interested in cutting ties with Riyadh over the journalist's disappearance.

In this way, the joint committee represents an attempt to prevent a schism with Saudi, Atacan said.

Akyol agreed and said rather than isolate the Saudi government in its entirety, Turkey is prepared to lay the blame on a transgressor within the ruling royal family.

"My sense is that the Turks are guessing that the crime has been ordered by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, but his father, Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, was unaware," he told Al Jazeera.

"So, instead of taking a position against the whole Saudi establishment, they may ultimately blame the 'rogue' element in it, which may go up, all the way up to MBS."

Ultimately, he explained, it is a matter of balance.

"Turkey seems not willing to escalate tension with Saudi Arabia, [but] on the other hand it is steadily releasing evidence proving the horrible crime committed by Saudi officials on Turkish soil," Akyol said.

While the alliance between the two states is far from strong, Turkey is counting on Saudi to relax its stance on regional issues that have traditionally seen Ankara and Riyadh on opposite sides of the spectrum.

"Turkey has important disputes with Saudi Arabia, disagreeing with their hawkish stances on Iran, Muslim Brotherhood, and Qatar," Akyol said.

"But in all of them, there are Saudis who are closer to the Turkish position - and Jamal Khashoggi was one of them. Turkey, in my view, would ultimately hope to see Riyadh softening its stance on these three issues."

Khashoggi's fate will be revealed

Ahmad Rashed Ibn Said, a Saudi academic based in London, said the results of the joint team will most likely see Saudi Arabia admitting to the death of Khashoggi, but will not go so far as to call it a "premeditated murder" - unlike what Turkish authorities have initially claimed.

"There will be some kind of admission of the case with the Saudi authorities acknowledging the death of Jamal Khashoggi was the result of an interrogation that went wrong," he told Al Jazeera.

By feeding the media claims of what happened to Khashoggi, Ibn Said continued, Turkey has succeeded in effectively raising awareness of the issue globally, and embarrassed the Saudi government.

"I don't think they can get away with it in the face of international concern and condemnation," he said, adding that at the very least, MBS' image has been "badly hurt" and "beyond repair".

Ibn Said said the joint committee will have no option but to come up with a "coherent and solid story" about what happened in the Saudi consulate.

"The truth of the fate of Jamal Khashoggi will come out of this investigation," he said.