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Turkey After Khashoggi: Finding New Leverage in International Relations

Turkey has been capitalizing on the implications of the “Khashoggi case”: the killing of the Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi (occurred at the Saudi consulate of Istanbul on the 2nd of October, 2018) has created a volatility in regional political balances enabling for the time being Ankara to gain a new arbiter role in the Middle East, especially if compared with the post-failed coup context.

This juncture also allows Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s presidency to recalibrate the strategic alliances with Saudi Arabia and the United States, which were characterised respectively during these years by rivalry and ambiguity.

In the days following the disappearance of Khashoggi, Turkey was able to combine a firm stance on the assessment of responsibilities in the Saudi journalist’s murder, with an incessant dialogue with Riyadh, at a judicial as well as at a political level.

As a matter of fact, Turkey did not prevent disturbing Saudi-related news to appear on Turkish and international media, feeding uncertainty and suspicion on Riyadh’s leaders intentions in the management of the incident, while always keeping an open channel of communication with the kingdom, as testified by the Mecca governor Khaled Al-Faysal’s visit to Ankara [Martin Chulov, “Jamal Khashoggi: Murder in the Consulate”, *The Guardian*, 21 October 2018] and Erdogan’s phone call with King Salman [Elad Benari, “Saudi King, Erdogan speak in wake of journalist’s disappearance”, *Israel National News*, 15 October 2018].

As Riyadh experienced growing international pressure and scrutiny, Ankara was skilful enough to improve at the same time its relationship with the United States, under strain since 2016: in such a context, the

release of the American Christian pastor Andrew Brunson, detained in Turkey under charges of terrorism since the failed coup, acted like a sort of confidence (re)building measure between Erdogan and the US president Donald Trump. On November 2018, Washington approved a 180-days waiver for Turkey as Iranian oil buyer, together with India, China, South Korea, Taiwan Japan, Italy and Greece [Reuters, “US grants temporary Iran oil waivers to eight countries including China: Pompeo, 2 October 2018]. This occurred after the United States’ reintroduction of full sanctions on Iran and its oil export, confirming that something has improved in Turkish-American relations.

Since the 2010-11 Arab uprisings onwards, Ankara and Riyadh continue to play a competitive game in the same Sunni field. The support/opposition with regards to the Muslim Brotherhood remains the first issue of dissension and rivalry among them; since 2017 on, Turkey’s strong diplomatic, economic and military partnership with Qatar has added another point of contention with Saudi Arabia.

But both need to be mutual allies: for the Saudis, Ankara is an obliged partner in trying to exert a minimum of influence in Syria (geopolitically under Iranian and Russian influence), while the Turks cannot renounce to Saudi Arabia and Gulf monarchies’ lucrative investments and markets, especially with a volatile Turkish lira.

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