Jamal Khashoggi and US–Saudi Relations

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Introduction

The murder of Jamal Khashoggi on 2nd October 2018 was the turning point for the United States' relations with Saudi Arabia. Although it has triggered international condemnation and temporary diplomatic recalibration, it has yet to ultimately disrupt the U.S.-Saudi strategic cooperation.

Khashoggi, a Washington Post columnist and Saudi citizen who had been a prominent critic of Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman, was dismembered inside the Saudi Arabian Consulate in Istanbul, according to

the U.S. intelligence findings and Turkish authorities' evidence, including a captured audio recording from the premises (Office of the Director of National Intelligence [ODNI], 2021). Although initially Saudi officials denied the incident, later Saudi Arabia admitted that the Saudi agents were responsible for the action and were tried in the closed domestic trials back in the Kingdom. The nature of this incident has caused tension and setbacks between Saudi Arabia and the United States. This raises the central research question of how the Khashoggi murder altered U.S.-Saudi relations.

Intelligence Findings

The U.S. Intelligence Community launched a comprehensive investigation into the Saudi government's role in the killing of Jamal Khashoggi, pointing at Muhammad bin Salman, as the findings indicated an involvement of the Crown Prince's close circles. The direct involvement of a key adviser, Saud al-Qahtani, and members of Muhammad bin Salman's protective detail, namely Rapid Intervention Forces, in the operation was recommended by the Crown Prince's strong links to the killing of Khashoggi by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence Report, which was declassified in 2021 (Office of the Director of National Intelligence [ODNI], 2021). The CIA also concluded that Muhammad bin Salman ordered the execution of Khashoggi inside the Saudi Consulate, where Khashoggi went to collect documents for his planned marriage to a Turkish woman. Furthermore, in this report, the CIA included Crown Prince's brother Khalid bin Salman's phone call to Khashoggi to inform him to collect his marriage documents from the consulate in Istanbul. Further intelligence was obtained from Turkish officials who shared audio recordings from a listening device placed inside the consulate, which has been shared with the US, Germany, France, Britain, and Saudi Arabia (Entous et al., 2018).

The First Trump Administration's Response

This incident took place under the first Trump administration, which suggested a cautious response from US political circles, as Saudi Arabia was seen as a key ally in the Middle East in terms of security, energy, and trade ties (Al Jazeera, 2023). Although Trump expressed the severity of the situation, after claiming uncertainty of the incident and urging relevant authorities in Riyadh and Istanbul to reveal the background of the mystery, later, President Trump was convinced that Riyadh didn't execute Khashoggi deliberately, avoiding holding the Crown Prince accountable. However, rising bipartisan disturbance from the Senate impacted the foundations of US-Saudi Arabia relations, especially after the ban on arms exports and the cessation of support to Saudi Arabia's efforts in Yemen, as Saudi Arabia led a military coalition in Yemen conducting airstrikes and supporting the Yemeni government against the Iran-backed Houthis (Pamuk & Mohammed, 2018). Turmoil in the Congress put the Trump administration

under pressure when Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Senator Bob Corker sent a letter signed by the entire committee demanding a response within 120 days with a determination of sanctions against individuals responsible under the Global Magnitsky Act, as the act requires the government to act in such correspondence (Zengerle & Chiacu, 2018). Against all Congressional efforts to hold Saudi Arabia accountable, President Trump upheld strategic depth by emphasizing the importance of Saudi Arabia as a U.S. ally by countering Iranian nuclear ambition by exchanging sensitive nuclear technology with the Kingdom, granting US companies to share nuclear power information just after 19 days of the assassination, reflecting President Trump's viewpoint of reinforced U.S. strategic primacy in the Middle East by anchoring Saudi Arabia firmly within the American security and nuclear governance orbit thereby to counter Iran's nuclear ambitions (Pamuk & Landay, 2019).

Even after Saudi state TV first claimed Jamal Khashoggi had died in a fistfight at the Istanbul consulate, President Trump favoured staying cautious until the closure of the murder investigation, leading to uproar arising from the Senate (CNN, 2018). CIA findings presented in the Senate faced dismissal from the Trump Cabinet when Secretary of State Mike Pompeo declared that there was no direct proof linking Crown Prince Muhammad Salman to the killing. Shortly after, the White House announced economic sanctions and a visa ban on individuals, including senior Saudi officials who are reported to be involved in the killing (Grim, 2018).

The Biden Administration

In the Biden Administration, public unrest remained unchanged, as pre-election promises on reevaluating US-Saudi relations over the Khashoggi incident were not fulfilled. In February 2021, President Biden declassified the U.S. intelligence report, which concluded high confidence in Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's approval for the operation to capture or kill Khashoggi (ODNI, 2021; U.S. Department of State, 2021). Also, the administration imposed sanctions and visa restrictions on Saudi officials involved in the operation and introduced the so-called "Khashoggi Ban", which is broader than the Trump administration's sanctions. The Khashoggi Ban was a U.S. visa-restriction policy introduced by the Biden administration in 2021 that specifically targeted Saudi Arabian officials involved in the planning or execution of Jamal Khashoggi's killing (Al Jazeera, 2021). However, despite initial rhetoric pressuring Saudi Arabia, the Biden administration did not directly sanction the Crown Prince. Furthermore, President Biden expressed his faith in the Crown Prince's claims that he was not involved in the assassination.

The Biden administration's reluctance to pursue a consistent policy against Saudi Arabia stemmed from similar reasons as the Trump administration's preference: regional security, countering Iranian influence

in the region, and arms sales. Although the normative importance of human rights and freedom remains key for US foreign policy, US security strategy in the region played a greater role in matters of national security. The Biden administration faced challenges to sustain a tougher stance against Riyadh because of rising global energy prices, Iran's regional policy, the war in Ukraine, and growing Chinese and Russian influence on Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, President Biden's meeting with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in July 2022 during a visit to Saudi Arabia symbolised pragmatic change in US policy, as Khashoggi did not dismantle US-Saudi relations but only altered its attitude. Initially, bilateral engagement was downgraded with the "Khashoggi Ban", and sanctions that were limiting arms exports were introduced, especially by President Biden. The aforementioned Biden-Mohammad bin Salman meeting in 2022 signalled a strategic change in US rhetoric, as human rights-concentrated policy left its place for a rather security-oriented policy (Barnes, J. E., & Wong, E., 2022).

Trump's Return

President Trump's return to the White House for the second time has marked a clear shift back to transactional pragmatist policy in the US-Saudi relations, despite Biden's late efforts to restore relations with Riyadh. Particularly, the Jamal Khashoggi case has been effectively removed from the centre of bilateral ties, signalling full normalisation. After the end of symbolic distancing, Biden's pragmatic recalibration and Trump's long-standing approach both reflect a realist understanding of alliances, in which partnerships are evaluated primarily on strategic utility and material interests, rather than a liberal emphasis on political norms, human rights, or values-based conditionality. Besides the restoration of direct relations with Mohammad bin Salman, in the 2025 Trump administration, expanded arms sales, such as the $142 billion large arms package agreed by the US to Saudi Arabia (Mohammed & Pamuk, 2025). Furthermore, the F-35 sales approval has been granted, notwithstanding that Riyadh is often perceived as a "major non-NATO ally". The expanded defence cooperation also reaffirms long-term bilateral security commitment. President Trump's Riyadh meeting in May showed that US foreign policy has emphasized regional security cooperation, strong economic reconciliation, and tightened cooperation in the energy domain (Mohammed & Pamuk, 2025).

From Riyadh's viewpoint, rapprochement under Trump's current administration removed constraints in downgraded bilateral cooperation, especially efforts against the Kingdom during President Biden's push for sanctions. Reaffirmation of relations in 2025 signals potential leverage as the Chinese offer to mediate between Iran and Saudi Arabia, expand cooperation with Russia through OPEC+, and give a subdued sign for weaponising oil (Al Jazeera, 2023; International Energy Agency, 2023). On the contrary, Saudi Arabia viewed the meeting in May as a path to restore

trust and strategic pragmatism needed for energy and economic goals such as Vision 2030, aimed at reducing Saudi Arabia's economic dependency on oil. The post-May 2025 Riyadh meeting showed that regional security outweighed internal power balances, including congressional scrutiny and sophisticated encounters, equipped with a strengthened bilateral commitment. Especially Mohammad bin Salman's return to the Oval Office set the trajectory to higher levels between Saudi Arabia, underlining core ties in terms of mutual security and economic interests, such as signing the Strategic Defense Agreement and the Joint Declaration on the Completion of Negotiations on Civil Nuclear Energy Cooperation (White House, 2025).

Conclusion

The Khashoggi case did not profoundly dismantle the US-Saudi relations, yet it transformed their tone, ultimately reaffirming alliance resilience through security, energy, and geopolitical pragmatism. Saudi Arabia's image in US political and public discourse suffered, and human rights concerns became a persistent source of tension, particularly in Congress. Under both Trump's and Biden's administrations, there were symbolic policies that applied against Riyadh because of the commitment to the international liberal norms, leading to a temporary recalibration of U.S.-Saudi relations. Nevertheless, security cooperation, energy interdependence, and geopolitical alignment continued under mutual pragmatism. Mohammed bin Salman's return to the White House showed a decisive rapprochement between U.S.-Saudi relations, signalling a shift toward deeper strategic normalization after years of tension following the Khashoggi incident, as the meeting reflected the resilience of vital bilateral ties embedded in mutual security and economic interests.

Notably, the US foreign policy remained similar during 3 consecutive terms, including policy framework, symbolic sanctions, and diplomatic pressures through various channels. However, as time passed, the Khashoggi case went colder, and US-Saudi Arabia relations grew back rapidly. Conclusively, since strategic necessity prevailed, no matter whether political figures and government policies have been modified, Riyadh still remains a key ally for Washington.

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