

Saudi Arabia's 'Strategic Plan' to Take Turkey Down

In a confidential Emirati document seen by MEE, Mohammed bin Salman's scheme to confront Erdogan's government is outlined in full

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Saudi Arabia has begun implementing a "strategic plan" to confront the Turkish government, after Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman decided he was being "too patient" with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in the wake of journalist Jamal Khashoggi's murder.

The plan is detailed in a confidential report based on open- and closed-source intelligence prepared by the kingdom's ally, the United Arab Emirates.

The intelligence report is one of a monthly series written by the [Emirates Policy Centre](#), a think tank with close links to the Emirati government and security services.

Entitled "Monthly Report on Saudi Arabia, Issue 24, May 2019", the report is of limited circulation and intended for the top Emirati leadership. It does not appear on the think tank's website. A copy has been obtained by Middle East Eye.

It reveals that in Riyadh in May, orders were given to implement the strategic plan to confront the Turkish government.

The aim of the plan was to use "all possible tools to pressure Erdogan's government, weaken him, and keep him busy with domestic issues in the hope that he will be brought down by the opposition, or occupy him with confronting crisis after crisis, and push him to slip up and make mistakes which the media would surely pick up on".

Middle East Eye contacted the Emirates Policy Centre for comment, with no reply by the time of publication.

Restricting influence

Riyadh's aim is to restrict Erdogan and Turkey's regional influence.

"The kingdom would start to target the Turkish economy and press towards the gradual termination of Saudi investment in Turkey, the gradual decrease of Saudi tourists visiting Turkey while creating alternative destinations for them, decreasing Saudi import of Turkish goods, and most importantly minimising Turkish regional role in Islamic matters," the report says.

According to the report, Mohammed bin Salman, the kingdom's de facto ruler, took the decision to confront Turkey following the assassination of Khashoggi by a team of Saudi agents in their country's Istanbul consulate.

The murder of the Saudi journalist, a Middle East Eye and Washington Post columnist, created international outrage, in large part due to Turkey's insistence on Riyadh providing accountability and transparency over the affair.

"President Erdogan ... went too far in his campaign smearing the kingdom, especially the person of the crown prince, using in the most reprehensible manner the case of Khashoggi," the reports says

In the document, the Emirates Policy Centre claims Turkey did not provide "specific and honest" information to assist the Saudi investigation into the killing, but instead leaked "disinformation" to the media "all aimed at distorting the image of the kingdom and attempting to destroy the reputation of the crown prince".

Riyadh had concluded that Erdogan failed in his attempt to politicise and internationalise the case and now was the time to mount the fightback, the report says.

Both the CIA and leading members of the US Congress have accepted the Turkish intelligence assessment of Khashoggi's murder.

The CIA also concluded that Mohammed bin Salman almost certainly signed off on the operation, an assessment based on its own intelligence as well.

"The accepted position is that there is no way this happened without him being aware or involved," said a US official familiar with the CIA's conclusions, the Washington Post [reported](#).

Since then, [a report](#) by United Nations human rights investigator Agnes Callamard detailed the difficulties the Turkish authorities had in investigating the murder and gaining access to the consulate building and the home of the consul-general.

Callamard concluded independently that the crown prince ordered Khashoggi's murder.

The pressure begins

Last week came the first public sign of the campaign detailed in the Emirati document coming to life.

Saudi authorities [blocked 80 Turkish trucks](#) transporting textile products and chemicals from entering the kingdom through its Duba port.

Three hundred containers carrying fruit and vegetables from Turkey had also been held in Jeddah's port, according to a Turkish official who spoke to MEE on condition of anonymity.

The number of Saudi tourists visiting Turkey decreased 15 percent (from 276,000 to 234,000) in the first six months of 2019, according to official data released by the Turkish tourism ministry.

Saudi Arabia has approximately \$2bn worth of direct investment in Turkey, according to the [Turkish foreign ministry data](#) from 2018.

That year, Turkish exports to Saudi Arabia were valued at around \$2.64bn, while imports from the kingdom stood at \$2.32bn.

Behind the scenes, other signals have been sent to Ankara.

The Emirati report says “in a sign that the Saudi leadership has severed its relationship with ... Erdogan and started treating him as an enemy”, King Salman approved “without hesitation” a recommendation from an advisory committee not to send an official invitation to attend a high-profile [Organisation of Islamic Cooperation](#) summit in Mecca.

The Turkish president’s name was added to the list of those excluded from the summit, alongside Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and the Emir of Qatar Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani.

Eventually, King Salman decided to allow the Qatari emir to attend the event in Mecca, though Erdogan’s invitation was not forthcoming.

The Turkish government is aware of the Saudi crown prince’s attempts to sever relations and is trying to combat them through keeping direct communications with his father, King Salman.

A senior Turkish official, speaking anonymously, said the existence of a Saudi strategy to punish Turkey over its stance on the Khashoggi case wasn’t surprising.

“We are aware of what they are doing. It is almost public, to the extent that you could see their activities on Saudi-backed social media and Saudi state media,” the official told MEE, noting that they had openly called for a boycott.

“Tourist arrivals are decreasing, while we are having problems related to Turkish exports. We are closely following the situation.”

The Turkish official said, however, that Ankara does not believe that Saudi citizens are altering their stance on Turkey, despite the government in Riyadh’s efforts.

“Istanbul, for example, is still full of Saudi tourists. Saudi officials should check the [BBC’s poll on Erdogan’s popularity](#) in the Middle East. Then they will realise that they are failing,” the official said.

Erdogan phoned the king on Thursday, raising the problem of Turkish exports being held at Saudi ports.

Another Turkish official, also speaking anonymously, said Erdogan’s phone call with the Saudi king was cordial and focused on regional developments, such as Syria and the Palestine question.

The official, who was informed about the call, said the king was lucid and supportive of Turkish concerns with regard to Syria.

In the same call, Erdogan invited King Salman and his family, including the crown prince, to Turkey.

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