

GLOBAL

Turkey Is Treating the Khashoggi Affair Like It's Must-See TV

Erdoğan's government is releasing information about the case bit by bit, seemingly in an effort to control the narrative about the journalist's fate.

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Journalists stand outside the blocked road to the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. (EMRAH GUREL / AP)

Most Americans don't know it, but Turks are masters of serialized television. Long before Netflix, Hulu, and the addictive golden-age TV shows that dominate the small screen now, Turks were pumping out popular programs dubbed or subtitled in Arabic, Persian, Spanish, Russian, and English.

Set the story at exotic locales, like posh Istanbul villas with stunning views. Throw in an ill-fated romance, a do-gooder who meets a tragic end, a bullying villain, a shocking crime, some violence, a dash of political, international, or corporate intrigue, a few twists, and you've got a hit on your hands. Turkish producers have become experts at devising captivating tales that keep audiences tuning in week after week.

Consider this pitch. A charming writer, keen to marry his young love, vanishes from a European consulate of his own country. The alleged culprits: a group of 15 goons, flown in on private jets, who are later revealed to have drug

[Privacy settings](#)

killed, and dismembered him. In the shadows lurks a brash young monarch eager to make his mark and silence those who might rally opposition. The details are like something out of *CSI: Istanbul*.

On October 2, the Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi entered the kingdom's consulate in Istanbul to complete paperwork needed to marry Hatice Cengiz, his fiancée. He never walked out. From the start, Turkish authorities have been teasing out information about the case with a flair that would impress any showrunner. Their aim is to create a narrative so compelling that it reshapes relations with the United States and Saudi Arabia, countries that have experienced their fair share of drama with Turkey.

[*Read: The irony of Turkey's crusade for a missing journalist*]

Those who are surprised by the way the Khashoggi story has dominated international and local media for nearly two weeks, almost entirely through a series of sensational leaks from Turkey, just haven't been paying attention, Aaron Stein, a Turkey expert at the Atlantic Council, told me.

“In Turkey, big meta-narratives like this are controlled,” he told me. “Whether it's about the framing of a military operation, or displeasure with the U.S., or the way big trials are reported on, it all comes out of one office,” he said. “And that office is in the presidency.”

The day after Khashoggi's disappearance, Ibrahim Kalin, the top adviser to president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, guaranteed the story line would stay in the news by confirming rumors that Turks believed Khashoggi remained inside the consulate, rumors that turned out to be untrue.

The consulate—where, for days, many believed Khashoggi was being held—became the main set for the drama. While Turkish officials already suspected the 60-year-old *Washington Post* columnist was dead, outside the consulate, protesters held up posters with Khashoggi's name. Local journalists flocked to the scene. Hatice Cengiz, Khashoggi's fiancée, and his friend, Turan Kislakci, himself a journalist, made for sympathetic characters as they kept vigil outside the consulate. They gave interviews to local and international reporters, while police sorted through reams of surveillance footage from the thousands of cameras all over Istanbul and even inside taxis.

[*Read: How to respond to a diplomatic crisis like Khashoggi's disappearance*]

The first revelation came on October 6. Reuters cited unnamed Turkish security officials as saying that Khashoggi was probably dead, killed inside the consulate shortly after his arrival. The international media began booking flights for Istanbul. Once they arrived, many set up tarps on a grassy patch between the consulate entrance and a supermarket across the street.

Subsequent episodes featured an array of sordid details, relayed by local TV and even international media like *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*. Security-camera footage showed Khashoggi entering the consulate and a doorman welcoming him inside. In another lurid twist, *Sabah*, a newspaper close to the Turkish government, plastered the faces of the 15 Saudis who allegedly arrived on two private jets hours before Khashoggi's disappearance across its website. A two-and-a-half-minute video montage of the comings and goings of the alleged death squad's private jets and vehicles, handed by unnamed sources to Turkish television channels, showed strange movements. It strongly suggested the men had come for the sole purpose of confronting Khashoggi, and then quickly left. It was like something out of *Homeland* or *The Americans*.

In local media, there were whispers of the existence of audio and possibly even video evidence of the killing, with ever grislier details from the recordings trickling in. One Turkish official, speaking to *The New York Times*, likened the scene inside the consulate to the gore in *Pulp Fiction* and alleged that one of the 15 men had brought along a bone saw. On Wednesday, a report in *Yeni Safak*, a pro-government paper, alleged that the recordings showed Khashoggi was hacked into pieces, and his fingers cut off while he was still alive just before he was beheaded. (An unnamed Turkish official confirmed the details to the *Times*.)

Regular consumers of Turkish media are accustomed to stories based on a mix of authentic material and bits of misinformation. For reporters dependent on single government sources, it's near impossible to independently verify what they're being handed.

Thus the awkward moment when both Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Turkey's foreign minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu denied an ABC News story that Washington's top diplomat had heard audio and read transcripts of. (The symbiotic relationship between Turkish security forces and the mass media dates back to at least the 1990s, when generals would summon friendly editors during the war against separatist Kurds in the southeast and feed them developments about the conflict.)

In Khashoggi's case, the Turks have great source material to work with. The story is less of a whodunit and more of a will-they-admit-it, but with tremendous implications for power relations in the Middle East.

Erdoğan's aides lurk in the background, playing the role of shadowy manipulators. They've revealed few details of the investigation, publicly issuing benign assurances that relations with Riyadh remain strong. Turkey's justice minister and Istanbul's prosecutor have said that the investigation into Khashoggi's disappearance is ongoing, and will soon be completed.

The divergence between the Turkish officials' public pronouncements and the aggressive, cinematic media coverage is a version of good cop / bad cop, meant to put pressure on Saudi Arabia and its White House allies.

[Read: [Why won't Turkey release the Khashoggi tapes?](#)]

Turkey and Saudi Arabia have, for decades, been rivals for Islamic leadership, as well as business partners and strategic allies. In 2013, they found themselves on opposite sides of Egypt's coup. Ties dipped further with the rise of Mohammed bin Salman, now Saudi Arabia's crown prince. He's a hasty young man who launched a crusade against tiny Qatar, a staunch ally of Turkey. Ankara may see curbing the ambitious crown prince's power as a way of improving relations with Riyadh. But Erdoğan knows that only the White House can convince the kingdom to change, or induce King Salman to dump his 33-year-old son, a possibility reportedly floated by some close to the royal family.

Certainly, the great show the Turks are putting on could come to naught. Officially, Saudis are simply ignoring the leaks, insisting that nothing officially released incriminates them, and blaming their rivals in the tiny state of Qatar for propagating the narrative.

“Soon, drama of the disappearance of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Turkey will come to an end,” said a [commentary](#) in the pro-government *Saudi Gazette*.

“Truly this is nothing but a comedy act that turned to international media and was orchestrated by haters and ill-wishers in Qatar who were working day and night to come up with this skit.”

The narrative the Turks have unspooled over the past two weeks has already frayed relations between Riyadh and Washington and badly damaged MbS, who has been cast as the bullying villain. This will likely weaken him in the long run.

“The Saudis have given the Turks a helluva spy thriller,” Stein said. “They don’t have to lie. They’re just drip, drip, dripping.”

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