

Erdogan holds all the cards in the Jamal Khashoggi mystery



(CNN) It was trailed as Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's great reveal. Finally, after weeks of murky leaks to journalists, Turkey clearly wanted to give the impression that it was going to provide evidence that tied Saudi's Crown Prince, Mohammed Bin Salman, to the murder of Jamal Khashoggi.

But his address to Turkey's parliament on Tuesday will have pleased US President Trump as much as it will have the Saudis: it contained no smoking gun directly implicating his Middle East ally.

Erdogan, however, did kick enough dirt and, along with copious leaks over recent weeks from his officials, leaves a Damoclean sword dangling over both Trump and bin Salman.

Erdogan says Khashoggi was victim of 'ferocious' pre-planned murder

There is no doubt that US CIA chief Gina Haspel, who recently arrived in Turkey, will be hoovering up any more scraps she

can get out of Erdogan's tight grip – specifically on the much talked-about recording of Khashoggi's "ferocious murder," of which Erdogan made no mention.

He did, however, drop some new claims that hadn't yet been drip-fed to journalists: that a private jet flew in the day before Khashoggi's killing with three Saudis aboard; that Saudis at the consulate removed security cameras before Khashoggi arrived; and that a team of consular staff did reconnaissance on a forest on the outskirts of Istanbul and at Yalova, a city about a 55-mile (90-kilometer) drive south of Istanbul.

He also specifically pushed back on Saudi claims of an accidental killing of Khashoggi, saying: "We have significant signs that this was not something spontaneous, that it was planned," adding that "In light of the known facts, there are certain questions that people are asking."

His speech amounted to many more questions, for which Erdogan demanded answers:

"Why did these 15 people, all of whom had qualifications related to the incident, gather in Istanbul on the day of the murder? We want an answer to that question. On whose orders did these people come there? We want an answer. Why was it only possible to access the consulate building days later, and not immediately? We want an answer."

He appealed to King Salman of Saudi Arabia – whose grip on power and whose own faculties have been an open question in western capitals of late – to help answer a number of questions – top among them, the whereabouts of Khashoggi's body.

He also demanded that Saudi Arabia explain why it had 15 top officials fly in and out of Turkey on chartered jets, all congregating at the consulate in the hours before Khashoggi's arrival, and dispersing back to Saudi soon after.

Saudi Aramco CEO on Khashoggi's death 01:27

His conclusion? That Khashoggi's "ferocious murder" could not have happened without planning and approval from the highest levels, which Saudi still denies.

"Trying to blame a few members of the security and intelligence staff for such an incident will satisfy neither us, nor the international community. The collective conscience of humanity will deem it satisfactory only when everyone who

is responsible, from the person who gave the order to those who executed it, is called to answer.”

So, not quite the “nothing will remain hidden” speech that was promised by his party officials, but also not entirely a damp squib.

However, for the 20 minutes it took him to set out his narrative in contradiction to the Saudi explanation, Erdogan had the world’s attention.

And he used it to maximum effect, demanding Turkish jurisdiction over the investigation – openly challenging the Saudi justice minister, who over the weekend claimed the case as theirs to investigate.

Erdogan said: “I am calling on the King of Saudi Arabia, and the highest level of the Saudi administration. The incident has occurred in Istanbul. Therefore, I propose that this team of 15+3 people, 18 people in total, who have been arrested, should be tried in Istanbul. The decision will be theirs. But this is my proposition.”

Khashoggi’s death taking place on his doorstep has handed Erdogan the single largest piece of leverage he is ever likely to have over his regional nemesis, the Saudi Crown Prince.

Whereabouts of Khashoggi’s body still unknown 02:20

Many in Turkey believe that the Crown Prince’s bill is finally coming due. Erdogan seems to be gambling that western leaders agree.

Bin Salman’s hard-line approach to leadership has graduated from kidnapping a Prime Minister to locking up members of his own family to attempting to blow up his relationship with Canada.

Now, if Erdogan’s assertions are correct, bin Salman’s coup de grâce could be complicity in the murder of a journalist.

If no one in Riyadh will tell the emperor he has no clothes, Erdogan appears to be trying to build an international consensus so the young Crown Prince gets the message.

In retrospect, it seems unconscionable he could have been allowed to get this far. Stranger that it could take a figure like Erdogan to take him down over the issue of human rights and freedom of speech.

Erdogan’s jails hold many journalists critical of him and he has amassed the powers of his once semi-democratic state in his own authoritarian hand. He is hardly a paragon of virtue.

But bin Salman represents an enduring if not existential threat to his state.

At 33, bin Salman is set to become King and a regional power broker for decades. Erdogan's political Islam is one of the biggest threats to his royal rule.

In the end, Erdogan's speech was more a reveal of his own strategy than lurid details and evidence of the murder and responsibility itself.

Right now, Erdogan simply didn't need to reveal his full hand, because the three most important people listening today will have heard the message loud and clear.

King Salman, Trump and the Crown Prince will know exactly what Erdogan intends to do next: drip incriminating information until he gets what he wants – the trial of 18 senior Saudis on his turf, bin Salman brought to heel and who knows what else from President Trump.