

**Turkish politics**

## Turkey halts Khashoggi trial as Ankara and Riyadh seek to reset ties

Turkish exporters report easing of unofficial Saudi blockade as detente gathers pace



Murdered journalist Jamal Khashoggi. Human rights campaigners condemned the 'political decision' to halt the trial of suspects in his killing © Mohammed Al-Shaikh/AFP/Getty Images

**Laura Pitel** in Ankara and **Andrew England** in London YESTERDAY

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An Istanbul court has halted the trial of 26 Saudis accused of murdering the journalist Jamal Khashoggi, drawing a line under a case that had poisoned relations between Turkey and Saudi Arabia as the two nations strive for a diplomatic reset.

In a move likely to attract strong criticism from human rights groups as well as friends and family of the former Washington Post columnist, the court announced it had approved a prosecutor's request to close the case and transfer the file to Riyadh after receiving approval from the Turkish justice ministry.

The decision, which comes as Saudi Arabia has started easing an unofficial embargo on goods from Turkey, also lifted Turkish arrest warrants for the suspects, who were being tried in absentia, as well as Interpol red notices that sought their arrest around the world.

Milena Buyum, a campaigner for human rights group Amnesty International, who attended the hearing, described the outcome as an "appalling and clearly political decision".

Hatice Cengiz, Khashoggi's fiancée, said she would appeal against the ruling. Speaking outside the court, she said she and the journalist's other supporters would not "abandon" their search for justice for his killing.

Khashoggi, who was a critic of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, Saudi Arabia's day-to-day ruler, was last seen entering the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in October 2018 as he sought to obtain documents needed for his marriage.



Hatice Cengiz, Khashoggi's fiancée, outside the court in Istanbul. She plans to appeal against the decision to halt the trial © Ozan Kose/AFP/Getty Images

His remains were never found, but Turkish investigators concluded he was strangled by a Saudi hit squad before his body was dismembered and dissolved in acid.

Ibrahim Kalin, a senior adviser to Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan, said in an interview with the Financial Times before Thursday's hearing that Ankara wanted to "turn a new page with Saudi Arabia".

Over the past year, regional powers — including Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt — have moved to de-escalate tensions with neighbours.

"We have had issues, of course, because of the Khashoggi case. But . . . we believe we have done our part," Kalin said.

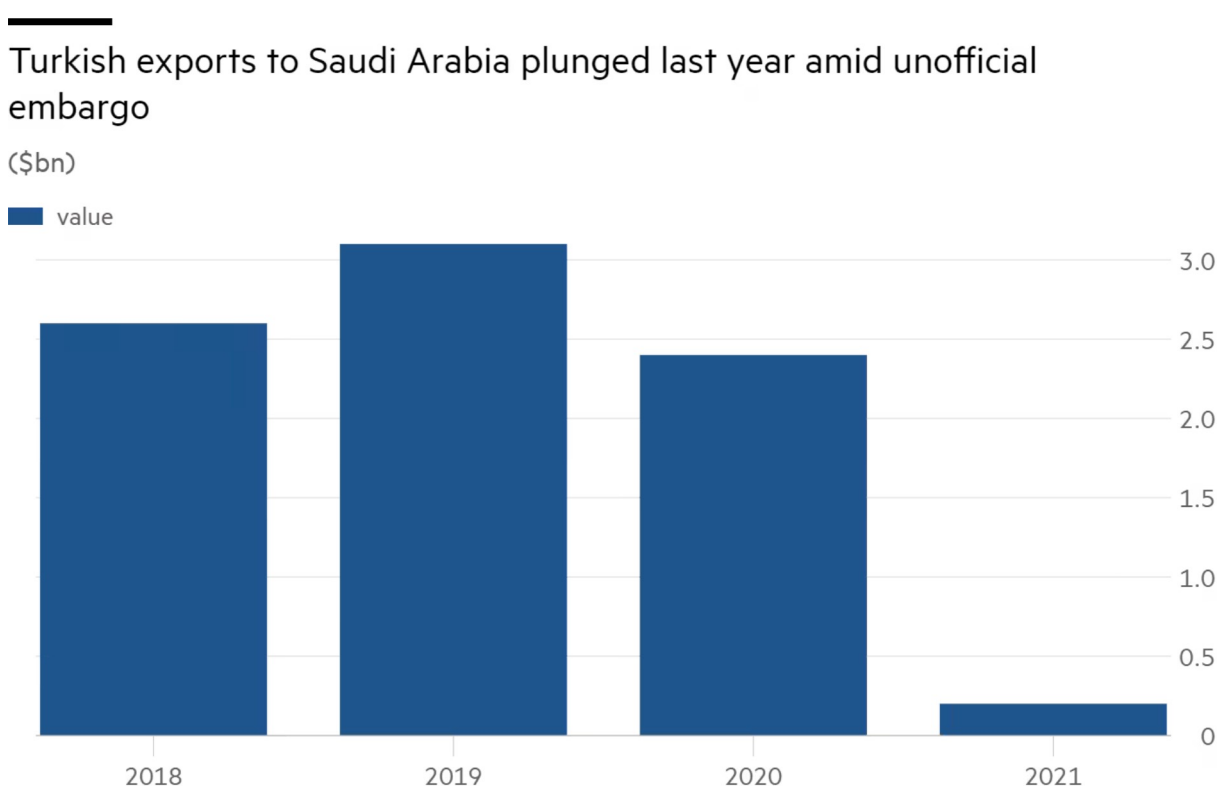
In the weeks after the killing, Turkey's president Recep Tayyip Erdogan said "the highest levels of the Saudi government" had ordered the murder. That was later echoed in a US intelligence report that concluded Prince Mohammed must have authorised the operation to capture or kill Khashoggi. Saudi Arabia has insisted the

killers acted alone in a rogue operation.

A Saudi court in September 2020 sentenced eight unidentified individuals to between seven and 20 years in prison for the murder in a trial the UN said lacked transparency and fairness.

Khashoggi's murder strained the kingdom's ties with the US and severely tarnished Prince Mohammed's image as he sought to champion social and economic reforms in the ultra-conservative kingdom. But western leaders, spurred in part by the assessment that Prince Mohammed is likely to become king of the world's largest oil exporter and will rule for decades, have started to embrace him again. French president Emmanuel Macron met him in Riyadh last year, and UK prime minister Boris Johnson visited him in the Saudi capital last month.

Turkey, which sanctioned a drip-feed of leaks with gruesome details about the killing, witnessed a plunge in its exports to Saudi Arabia in autumn 2020 as the Gulf kingdom imposed an unofficial embargo.



Source: Turkish Exporters' Assembly (TIM)  
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Lifting the de facto blockade was Turkey's top demand as the two countries worked towards a detente in recent months, according to a person familiar with the negotiations.

Riyadh's main demand in the talks was that Turkey should close the Khashoggi investigation.

Turkey's exports to the Gulf kingdom reached almost \$59mn last month, compared with \$18.9mn in March 2021, according to the Turkish Exporters Assembly, an industry body. But the figures remain far below the \$349mn total in March 2020.

Mustafa Gultepe, head of the Istanbul Apparel Exporters' Association, said Turkish textile producers had noticed a "gradual improvement" in the ease of exporting to Saudi Arabia in recent months.

Kalin, who also serves as a spokesman for Erdogan, confirmed the shift, saying conditions for Turkish exporters had improved "just a little bit".

While he described progress as "too slow" and "not as good as we would like to see", he said he expected a "normalisation of trade relations and other political relations with Saudi Arabia" in the period ahead.

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