

Armed attack on US consulate in Istanbul

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On July 9, at about 10:30 a.m., a group of assailants opened fire on police in front of the US consulate in Istanbul. A gun battle ensued in which three police officers and three of the four attackers were killed.

Another police officer who was involved in the gun battle and a civilian driver of a police tow truck, as well as bystanders who were lined up to apply for US visas, were injured in the attack. The wounded were rushed to nearby hospitals but reportedly did not suffer life-threatening injuries. No injuries were reported to staff inside the consulate.

Istanbul's chief prosecutor, Aykut Cengiz Engin, told reporters, "The attackers, who were 20-25 years old, used pump-action shotguns and handguns. The attack was carried out by four people. One of the attackers fled the scene in the vehicle used in the assault."

Turkish Interior Minister Besir Atalay told reporters that no one had claimed responsibility for the attack.

According to news reports, three of the four attackers got out of a stolen car, armed with shotguns and handguns, and fired first at the police hut and then at the consulate gate. The police post is outside the consulate's main public entrance, from where steep steps lead up to the well-fortified building, which is surrounded by high and thick walls. The consulate is located on a hill in Istinye, a densely populated residential neighbourhood on the European side of the city.

The consulate was moved to this high-security location in 2003, following the September 11, 2001 terror attacks on New York and Washington and a 2003 attack by terrorists against the British consulate, a bank and two synagogues in Istanbul that killed 58 people. A Turkish Sunni Islamic fundamentalist group alleged to have links to Al Qaeda, called the Great Eastern Islamic Raiders Front, claimed responsibility for the 2003 attack.

An eyewitness to Wednesday's attack, Yavuz Erkut

Yuksel, told CNN-Turk television that the assailants emerged from a white vehicle and surprised the guards. He was quoted as saying, "One of them approached a policeman while hiding his gun and then shot him in the head." According to another eyewitness, the attackers were bearded men with long hair.

Quite rapidly, the police identified the perpetrators as Turkish citizens—Erkan Kargin, a resident of Bitlis, which is a predominantly Kurdish city located in eastern Turkey, Bulent Cinar and Raif Topcil, who were born in Bitlis.

The fourth assailant, who drove the car, escaped. According to the newspaper *Milliyet*, the car was found abandoned on Wednesday night and the police have identified the driver. As of this writing, the fourth attacker, who is believed to have been wounded, had not been caught.

Milliyet reported that one of the gunmen, Erkan Kargin, travelled to Afghanistan two years ago, where he received training. Other press reports quoted police sources as saying the suspects belonged to the Great Eastern Islamic Raiders Front.

However, the Turkish government has not confirmed these reports and a US State Department spokesman said he could not confirm or deny claims of an Al Qaeda connection to Wednesday's attack. US Ambassador Ross Wilson told reporters in Ankara that the attack was an "obvious act of terrorism" directed against both the US and Turkey.

Following the identification of the attackers, the police raided a number of addresses across the city and some people were taken into custody for questioning.

The motive for the attack remains unclear. While some media reports claim that the attackers fired on the consulate as well as the police hut, others say the attackers' target was only the Turkish police guarding the building.

Sedat Laciner, the head of the Ankara-based

International Strategic Research Organization (ISRO/USAK), told *Today's Zaman*, "At first sight, the attack appears to be pointing to Al Qaeda," adding that it might be a symbolic assault on both the United States and the Turkish police. "If you look at similar attacks in the Middle East," he continued, "you will see that they are directed more at the local forces protecting Western interests than at the West itself. Laciner clearly based his comments on the assumption that the attack was perpetrated by Islamists.

The attack came at a point of intense political crisis in Turkey, with the government of the Islamic-based Justice and Development Party (AKP) facing a ban at the hands of the Turkish Constitutional Court. On July 1, the chief prosecutor of the Supreme Court of Appeals presented oral arguments for banning the governing party on the grounds that it violates the secularist principles of the Turkish state. The case is, in fact, an attempt to carry out a legal coup against a popularly elected government and reflects intense divisions between sections of the ruling elite closely aligned with the "secularist" military and those supporting the bourgeois AKP government.

These tensions have been reflected in the manner in which newspapers have reported Wednesday's attack. Newspapers supporting the "secularist" camp, particularly the staunchly Kemalist *Cumhuriyet*, have emphasised the role of religious fundamentalism. Islamist papers, on the other hand, have downplayed this aspect of the attack.



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