

Russian ambassador to Turkey assassinated in Ankara

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An off-duty Turkish policeman shot and killed the Russian ambassador to Turkey, Andrei Karlov, Monday in front of a horrified audience at a photo exhibition in Ankara.

The gunman was identified as a 22-year-old member of the Ankara riot police, Mevlüt Mert Altınta. Dressed in a black suit and carrying his police ID, he entered the art gallery where Karlov was introducing an exhibition of photographs titled “Russia through Turks’ eyes.” He drew a pistol, shot the ambassador repeatedly in the back, and then began shouting at the crowd in both Turkish and Arabic, “Don’t forget about Aleppo, don’t forget about Syria,” along with Islamist slogans.

Heavily armed Turkish police then stormed the gallery, killing the gunman. At least three other people were wounded in the incident.

The chilling images of the ambassador’s murder and the subsequent ranting by his assassin were captured on video and have been widely circulated.

The assassination has taken place in the context of a ferocious anti-Russian campaign mounted by the Obama administration and the US media, in which Russia’s role in providing military aid to the Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad in retaking the city of Aleppo from Western-backed Islamist militias has played a major role.

The killing of the ambassador also came on the eve of a scheduled meeting in Moscow between Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu and his Russian and Iranian counterparts, Sergei Lavrov and Mohammad Javad Zarif, to discuss the ongoing ceasefire in and evacuation of previously opposition-held eastern Aleppo, along with proposals for a more comprehensive settlement of the five-and-a-half-year-old Syrian war.

Anger in the West over the loss of the last urban bastion of the Al Qaeda-linked militias—a strategic defeat in the US-orchestrated war for regime change—has been

intensified by the collaboration of Ankara, Moscow and Tehran. Washington was excluded from today’s talks.

The Syrian regime change operation brought Russia and Turkey to the brink of war in November of 2015, when the Turkish air force ambushed and shot down a Russian warplane carrying out airstrikes near the Syrian-Turkish border. The incident resulted in a freezing of relations between Moscow and Ankara and Russia’s imposition of economic sanctions against Turkey.

Turkey’s President Recep Tayyip Erdogan sought a rapprochement with Moscow last June, offering an apology for the downing of the Russian plane. This was followed a month later by an abortive military coup, which supporters of Erdogan blamed on the United States and a movement led by opposition cleric Fethullah Gulen, who lives in Pennsylvania. Relations between Moscow and Ankara became closer following the coup, leading to the recent collaboration in brokering the plan for the evacuation of eastern Aleppo.

Both the Russian and Turkish governments condemned the assassination of Karlov as a “provocation” aimed at disrupting relations between the two countries. Both governments likewise described the killing as a terrorist act, though they appeared to differ in their assessment as to who was responsible.

“A crime has been committed and it was without doubt a provocation aimed at spoiling the normalization of Russo-Turkish relations and spoiling the Syrian peace process which is being actively pushed by Russia, Turkey, Iran and others,” Russian President Vladimir Putin told a televised meeting at the Kremlin. “We must know who directed the killer’s hand,” Putin added, addressing himself to Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, Sergei Naryshkin, the head of the SVR foreign intelligence service, and Alexander Bortnikov, the head of the domestic FSB security service, who were also in attendance.

Turkey's President Erdogan, speaking in a televised address on Monday night, described the killing as a "provocation given our cooperation regarding Aleppo," adding that he had spoken to Putin and stressed, "We are determined to maintain our ties with Russia."

Both sides made clear that the planned tripartite meeting between the Russian, Turkish and Iranian ministers in Moscow would go ahead on Tuesday.

The gunmen's statements about Aleppo and Syria and his shouting in Arabic about jihad strongly suggested that he was acting either in concert with or in support of the Islamist militias that have suffered a stunning reversal in Aleppo over the past several weeks.

According to some reports, the Islamic State (ISIS) denied any connection with the killing, while web sites connected with the Al Nusra Front, the Syrian Al Qaeda affiliate that has been the backbone of US-backed forces in Aleppo, hailed the killing.

Nonetheless, Turkish officials have indicated that they are pursuing an investigation aimed at proving that the riot policeman was actually a member of the Gulenist movement, which the government charged was behind last July's coup attempt. Over the past several months, the Turkish government has purged thousands of civil servants, teachers, police and members of the military charged with being connected with the Gulenists.

Government officials have suggested that the slogans shouted by the gunman after the shooting were merely a diversion aimed at concealing his true affiliations. A spokesman for Gulen said that the cleric had condemned the killing and described the suggestions that he was responsible as "laughable."

The Turkish government has obvious motives for denying that a member of an elite police unit was a sympathizer or operative of the Syrian Al Qaeda affiliate. Ankara covertly provided extensive support for the Al Nusra Front and similar Islamist militias, with its security forces collaborating in the funneling of arms and foreign fighters into Syria.

Any disagreements as to who was immediately responsible for the killing notwithstanding, leading political figures in both Moscow and Ankara blamed the US and the West for the assassination.

Ilnur Cevik, chief presidential advisor to Erdogan said Monday: "Growing relations and intensive cooperation in all areas between Turkey and Russia has created anger in the West, especially in the United States and Germany. The latest example has been the joint efforts of the two countries to save the civilian people of Aleppo. It was

inevitable that the West would try to sabotage these relations. It is sad that they used a policeman affiliated to Fethullah Gulen's terrorist organization to assassinate the ambassador."

In Moscow Alexei Pushkov, a member of the Duma—the Russian legislature—and former chairman of its foreign affairs committee, charged that Western propaganda about Russia organizing a "massacre" and "genocide" in Aleppo served to incite the attack.

"The hysteria around Aleppo raised by the Western media has consequences," Pushkov told Russian television. "This murder is precisely a consequence of attempts to blame Russia for all the sins and crimes she did not commit. They are completely ignoring the crimes of fighters in Aleppo, and that forms a distorted and false picture of what is happening in this city, which contributed to this terrorist act."

Senator Frantz Klintsevich, deputy chairman of the Russian upper chamber's defense and security committee, went further, charging that the assassination was "a planned action."

"Everyone knew that he was going to attend this photo exhibition. It can be ISIS, or the Kurdish army which tries to hurt Erdogan," he said. "But [it] may be—and it is highly likely—that representatives of foreign NATO secret services are behind it."

Whatever the authorship of the assassination, the prospect of it further cementing ties between Russia and Turkey can only serve to heighten tensions with Washington, which, the impending change in administrations notwithstanding, remains committed to asserting US imperialist hegemony over the Middle East.



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