

What the Assassination of the Russian Ambassador May Be Telling Us about Erdoğan's Turkey

fpri.org/article/2016/12/assassination-russian-ambassador-may-telling-us-erdogans-turkey/

December 23, 2016

E-Notes

[Michael A. Reynolds](#)

Michael A. Reynolds is a Senior Fellow in the Foreign Policy Research Institute's Program on the Middle East and an Associate Professor in Princeton's Department of Near Eastern Studies. [Read More](#)



The assassination of the Russian Ambassador to Turkey in an Ankara art gallery on December 19 was a dramatic event in every way. The ambassador had just begun speaking to the audience when a man pacing behind him, neatly dressed in coat and tie and appearing perhaps to be part of his entourage, suddenly pulled out a pistol and fired nine shots into the ambassador.

The low-key cultural event, the opening of an exhibit of photographs entitled, "From Kaliningrad to Kamchatka: Russia Through the Eyes of Travelers," had a greater significance: it marked the first such public appearance of the Russian ambassador since November 2015 when the Turkish air force's downing of a Russian military jet near the Turkish-Syrian border had triggered a severe crisis in relations between the two countries. That crisis lasted until Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan made an uncharacteristically apologetic overture to Russian President Vladimir Putin this past summer. The ambassador's public appearance at the art gallery was a sign of the restoration of normal relations between the two countries. Still more significant was the fact that the assassin struck on the eve of a planned meeting in Moscow between the foreign ministers of Russia, Turkey, and Iran. The agenda for that meeting was the situation in Syria.

That situation, the assassin made clear, was the reason for the ambassador's death sentence. "We die in Aleppo, you die here," he shouted as the diplomat lay bleeding on the floor. Since July of this year, the Syrian city of Aleppo has been the site of an epic siege. The Syrian Army, backed by Russian air support and Iranian-led militias, are now on the verge of taking the whole of the city from the Syrian armed opposition and thereby dealing those rebels a decisive defeat. The plight of the rebels in Aleppo has received extensive attention in the West, and media coverage there has portrayed the tactics of the Assad regime and the supporting Russian expeditionary force as exceptionally brutal. Earlier this month the mayor of Paris even had the Eiffel Tower go dark to show solidarity with the besieged Aleppines. Inside Turkey, coverage has been no less intense, and the proximity of the war has amplified the passions connected to it.

The assassin of the Russian ambassador was not a Syrian, but a twenty-two year old Turkish police officer named Mevlut Mert Altıntaş. Lest anyone be left in confusion as to whom Altıntaş meant by "we," Altıntaş was clear. Upon gunning down the ambassador, he recited in Arabic "We are the one who pledged allegiance to Muhammad, to wage jihad," gave a *tekbir* (a shout of *Allahu Akbar*, "God is Great"), and held aloft a single index finger, a gesture favored by Sunni Islamists to symbolize the unity of God (albeit with his left hand, as the preferred hand, the right, was grasping his pistol). "Do not forget Aleppo, do not forget Syria," he exhorted his stunned audience. In short, Altıntaş identified as a Sunni Muslim, not as a servant of the Turkish state, and had taken it upon himself to exact revenge on Russia for its role in backing the Syrian government and Iranian forces in Syria.

To have a Turkish state employee, and worst of all a police officer, assassinate a foreign diplomat is a tremendous embarrassment to the Turkish government. Turkish officials were quick – probably much too quick – to point their fingers at Fethullah Gülen, a Turkish preacher who until recently commanded an estimated 5 million Muslim followers in Turkey and around the world. Gülen resides in Pennsylvania, the beneficiary of an unusual American visa program. The Turkish government accuses Gülen of orchestrating the failed putsch of July 15 and has asked for his extradition. [As I have argued elsewhere](#), there is no doubt that Gülen has a great deal to answer for in subverting law and governance in Turkey over the past several years, and Ankara's outstanding request for extradition deserves the most serious consideration. Thus far, however, little evidence tying Altıntaş to Gülen has emerged.

A more straightforward and plausible explanation may not be difficult to find. Radical Sunni currents are neither new nor unusual in Turkey. They have been part of Turkey's political underground from the founding of the republic in 1923. Although the Turkish Republic has a long history of suppressing religious movements that challenge the state, it has an almost as venerable tradition of coopting and using fringe or radical illegal elements that can assist the state.

The pattern of state actors recruiting religiously motivated radicals arguably extends back to the pre-republican, late Ottoman period when an embattled Ottoman empire, outgunned and outweighed by the Great Powers, sought to boost its geopolitical heft by mobilizing networks that linked Muslims outside the empire with those inside. These networks ranged from public and non-violent charitable ones and religious brotherhoods to clandestine paramilitary groups.

During the Cold War, the Turkish Republic made use of Islamist and ultra-nationalist radicals to counter Communist and Leftist influence and to combat Kurdish separatism. There was nothing especially unusual about Turkey's use of these underground groups. States battling severe challenges from non-state actors routinely recruit illegal and extralegal elements such as gangsters and political radicals as allies. By granting illegal but cooperative actors reprieve from prosecution in exchange for performing the "dirty tasks" that the law formally forbids, states acquire proxies that can be effective at rooting out underground threats. Because such arrangements belie the state's claim to uphold the law and monopolize the legitimate means of violence, however, they cannot be openly acknowledged. And a dangerous tradeoff comes with the blurring of the lines of legality and loyalty. Employees of the state sometimes can begin to identify with and serve the causes of the subterranean organizations they are dealing with.

Altıntaş is hardly the first young Turkish radical to make world news by gunning someone down. Perhaps the most famous Turkish hit man remains Mehmet Ali Ağca, who was just twenty-three when he shot Pope John Paul II four times in Rome in 1981 in a nearly successful assassination attempt. To this day little is known about Ağca's motives or who was backing his assassination attempt. One theory is that the Soviet Union working through its Bulgarian Communist allies sent Ağca to kill the popular anti-Communist and Polish pope in the hopes that this would help quell the burgeoning Solidarity Movement in then-Communist Poland. Another is that Ağca was involved in an Iranian plot against the Pope ordered by Ayatollah Khomeini. What is known about Ağca, however, is that prior to 1981 he had been a member of Turkey's ultranationalist "Idealist Hearths" (*Ülkü Ocakları*), had killed a famous and influential left-wing Turkish journalist in 1979 on the Idealists' behalf, and was subsequently sprung from prison by a Turkish crime boss, Abdullah Çatlı. Çatlı was no ordinary criminal. He was known for his ultranationalist sympathies and as his death in the Susurluk scandal in 1996 revealed conclusively, he was a criminal who had worked closely with Turkish security services right up until the moment he died. As for Ağca, he is now out of prison and remains a revered figure among Turkish far right circles.

A more recent Turkish assassin of note is Ogün Samast, who in 2007 murdered Hrant Dink, an Armenian-Turkish journalist. In response to Dink's efforts to highlight the fate of Armenians in Ottoman and Turkish history, ultranationalists undertook a public campaign branding him as a traitor. That campaign culminated in Samast's attack. Samast at the time was just seventeen years old, and at the trial it became clear that the teenager had not acted alone and had been manipulated by others. Moreover, irregularities during the trial and the release of photographs showing Turkish police officers standing alongside Samast in detention and proudly mugging with him as if he were a hero led many Turks to the conclusion that the security services were engaged in a cover-up and that higher-ups had sanctioned the assassination of Dink.

The point in bringing up the examples of Ağca and Samast is not to argue that Altaş fits into a quintessentially Turkish pattern of assassins, nor is it to suggest that he acted on behalf of a conspiracy inside the Turkish security services. Thus far no evidence conclusively linking Altaş to other plotters has surfaced. Rather, these examples illustrate the ways in which members of the Turkish security services have been bound up with the underground far right and its causes. Although in the realm of ideas ultranationalists and Sunni radicals diverge, in practice the groups meet and overlap. Their lists of enemies are largely the same and their sympathizers tend to come from similar backgrounds. The nationalists typically regard being a Sunni Muslim as an essential part of Turkish identity.

Since Syria was the issue that agitated Altaş, it would be useful to review Turkey's role there. In 2011, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's forcibly suppressed protests against his rule throughout the country. The severity of Assad's crackdown coupled with his pointed refusals to heed Erdoğan's appeals to refrain from violence led Erdoğan eventually to call for his overthrow. The following year, the United States and Turkey began joint operational planning to bring down the Syrian president. Turkey subsequently began cooperating with some Syrian opposition groups and lent backing to some rebel militias as well. The Turkish effort has had two basic goals: to topple Assad's regime and to block the emergence of an independent or autonomous Kurdish entity that might undermine Ankara's control of Turkey's own heavily Kurdish southeast. The precise extent of Turkey's collaboration with the multifarious Syrian rebel groups is unclear. At a minimum, up until the summer of 2015 Turkish authorities turned a blind eye to foreigners traveling through Turkey to Syria to fight against Assad and permitted fighters from Syria to recuperate inside Turkey. Some, including Vladimir Putin, charged the Turks with actively assisting radical Sunni groups inside Syria, including the Islamic state.

Again, leaving aside the unproven allegations of direct Turkish support to the Islamic state and Al-Qaeda affiliates, Turkey's support for Sunni Syrian rebels has been neither unusual nor surprising. The Pentagon and American CIA also attempted to mobilize Sunni rebels for the sake of overthrowing Assad. But where for Americans the conflict in Syria remains geographically remote and culturally distant, of little interest to the general American public, and of only professional interest for American soldiers and spies, for Turkey the war is intimate, high stakes, and emotional. Nearly three million Syrian refugees are already inside Turkey, and the question of Syria's territorial integrity has direct implications for Turkey. The success of Kurdish militias in Syria in carving out a *de facto* autonomous region

inside Syria has inspired Kurdish separatists inside Turkey and alarmed Turkish nationalists, thereby stoking a merciless ongoing conflict between Kurdish militants and the Turkish security forces.

Not least, the sectarian overtones of the Syrian civil war, where a Shi'i international that is led by Iran and includes Lebanon's Hezbollah and Shi'i militiamen from Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan fights on the side of Assad against an opposition dominated by radical Sunnis, have resonated powerfully inside Turkey, where the great majority of the population is Sunni. For these Turks, the participation of their historical rival Russia on the side of Assad further underscored the perfidious nature of the anti-Sunni coalition.

Erdoğan throughout his political career has played on the theme of oppression of Sunni Muslims to effect, and with his Syria policy it was no different. In order to rally support for the idea of overthrowing Assad the ruling AK Party and their supporting media outlets have often framed the tactics of Assad and his backers as wanton barbarism directed against all Sunnis. Ankara has also played the ethnic card, arming ethnic Turkmen inside Syria and facilitating the formation of units named in honor of Ottoman Sultans. Notably, the ultranationalist Idealists have also flocked from Turkey to Syria to take up arms. Russia's bombing of Turkmen militias may well have helped precipitate the Turkish decision to shoot down the Russian jet in 2015. It was a Turkish Idealist in a Turkmen unit who reportedly killed the Russian pilot after he ejected from his aircraft. Inside Turkey, public demonstrations against "Murderous Russia" became a regular feature of Turkish political life following Russia's intervention. Indeed, as recently as a week ago Turkish citizens staged a mass protest outside the Russian consulate in Istanbul. Although the majority of Turkish citizens remain skittish about intervening in Syria, the Syrian civil war and the Turkish media's coverage of it have indisputably heightened hostility toward Russia and energized the Islamist and ultranationalist sectors in Turkey.

Thus when Erdoğan earlier this year patched up relations with Putin by apologizing for the downing of the Russian jet and offering compensation to the pilot's family, he performed a pivot that was stunning in the realm of diplomacy but a disorienting and hence risky one in the domestic arena. After being goaded to loathe Putin's Russia as a sinister and barbarous foe, many Turks on the Islamist and ultranationalist right have found it difficult to follow Erdoğan and embrace Russia, particularly when it is not Russia that has backed away from its goals in Syria. Perhaps in the same way that the staunchly anti-Communist Richard Nixon was able to pull off a pivot to the People's Republic of China in 1972, only a Turkish leader with credentials on the Turkish right like Erdoğan can reverse policy on Syria and resume cooperation with Russia. But Erdoğan faces dangers that Nixon never did. Some of his critics, unlike Nixon's, are armed, and as Altıntaş demonstrated, some of them are serving inside Turkey's security services. The possibility that the loyalties of others who work for the state might become confused is all too real.

In the immediate aftermath of the assassination Ankara and Moscow alike asserted immediately that the attack will not derail their relations. The meeting between the foreign ministers of Russia, Turkey, and Iran in Moscow went ahead as planned and even concluded with a joint declaration on Syria. The three countries intend to continue their talks in Kazakhstan. Thus for all its visual drama, Altıntaş's crime had no practical impact. But that does not mean it lacks significance. Just as many Sunni activists in the Arab world and elsewhere outside Turkey openly hailed the death of the ambassador as justified, there can be no doubt that privately a significant number of their Turkish counterparts did as well. The killing powerfully illustrated both the simmering sectarian and nationalist anger inside Turkey and the fissures inside Erdoğan's own coalition.

Worse, the assassination may point to an alarming decline in the discipline and professionalization of Turkey's security services. Turkey's armed forces, gendarmerie, and police for the past several years have been undergoing a test as severe as any they have ever experienced in their histories. From within, they were subjected to comprehensive subversion by the followers of Fethullah Gülen, who infiltrated the ranks of the police and then went after the upper ranks of the armed forces, jailing hundreds of senior officers on wholly fabricated charges. From without, they find themselves fighting simultaneously against two relentless, deadly and effective foes, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the Islamic State. These struggles have left Turkey's soldiers, gendarmes, and police confused, angry, and above all, disoriented.

In his fight against Assad in Syria and his contests against rivals and enemies at home, Erdoğan has not hesitated to whip up his base of Sunni Turks. He has done so by often playing on their communal identity and playing up contemporary conflicts as new episodes in epic struggles against hoary foes. One consequence of such rhetoric has been to blur the boundaries of Turkish Republican identity to an unprecedented degree. Are those who bear arms in the name of Turkish Republic fighting on behalf of the republic, its laws, all its citizens, and its elected government? Or are they fighting on behalf of something more elusive but grander, such as Islam against the unbelieving Kurdish socialists? The Sunni community against the Alawite Assad and his Shi'i Persian backers? Or the descendants of Sultan Osman against the Imperialist Russians and their lackeys? The various possible answers an official, police officer, or soldier might give to these questions will produce very different forms of behavior.

In Syria Erdoğan has overseen what is likely the largest covert operation backing irregular armed units in the history of the Turkish Republic . The men serving in those units, including volunteer fighters from Turkey who now will likely return home, certainly do not conceive of their struggle as one solely for the sake of the republic. Whether or not their handlers in the Turkish security services do is a very large and open question. Altıntaş, who despite serving only inside Turkey performing relatively mundane police tasks, made it clear he did not.

A great, and unfortunate, irony is that whereas just a few years ago Erdoğan sought to transcend the limitations of traditional Kemalism by building upon a shared Muslim identity to better incorporate Kurds into the republic and build stronger ties to Turkey's Arab neighbors, today he finds himself embroiled in desperate struggles against the two great bugbears of Kemalism: Kurdish separatism and militant Islam. As he belatedly pursues a realpolitik gambit to shore up the Turkish Republic by cutting his losses in Syria and drawing closer to Russia so as to block further advances by the PKK (and Islamic State) inside Syria, Erdoğan may discover that under his rule over the past decade the institutional and ideational foundations of the republic have deteriorated to the point that far from being the president of a unified modern state with disciplined and effective institutions, he will soon be more akin to a warlord at the head of a surly and unhappy tribe, the members of which he can never wholly trust.