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## Consequences of the Assassination of the Russian Ambassador to Turkey

Karol Wasilewski

*The assassination of Andrei Karlov, the Russian ambassador to Turkey, was initially perceived as a threat to relations between Turkey and Russia. However, statements voiced by the two countries' presidents declared the murder to be provocation aimed precisely at spoiling these relations. Thus, the incident may facilitate rapprochement between the two countries. Accusations that the assassin was linked to the Gülen movement may also lead to tensions between Turkey and the United States.*

**Assassination and Aftermath.** Andrei Karlov, Russian ambassador to Turkey, was killed in Ankara on 19 December. The incident took place during the opening of the photo exhibition *Russia Through Turks' Eyes* at the Contemporary Art Centre in the "governmental" Çankaya district. The assassin was Mevlüt Mert Altıntaş, a 22-year-old Turkish police officer, who had served in Ankara's anti-riot units since 2014. He was off duty at the time of the incident, but was able to enter the building using his police ID card. The assassination was supposed to be a show of dissent against Russia's policy in Syria. After shooting at Karlov the assaulter shouted: "Don't forget about Aleppo, don't forget about Syria."

At present, little else is known about Altıntaş. Although some claims that he was most probably linked to the Gülen movement or Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (formerly known as the Al-Nusra Front) appeared in Turkish press immediately after the attack, they were based either on slight or doubtful evidence. Neither is there any convincing answer to the most important question, which is whether the assassin acted alone or was a member of some nationalist or Islamist terror organisation. The fact that he was killed by the security forces after the attack does not help in clarifying this.

Initially, the incident raised fears that relations between Turkey and Russia could become strained once more. Yet both sides were quick to announce that the ambassador's killing will not have a negative impact in this respect. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Vladimir Putin were united in describing the assassination as provocation aimed at the damaged rapprochement between Turkey and Russia. Furthermore, both presidents stressed that they will continue cooperation towards ending the Syrian Civil War.

**Aleppo and the Race for al-Bab.** It is no coincidence that the presidents' statements referred to Syria. It seems that the current situation there offers a context for reading the consequences of the ambassador's assassination. This stems from Syria's importance for the policies of both countries, as well as current dynamics in the conflict. Intensification of cooperation may allow Turkey and Russia to reach some of their aims in foreign and security policy.

Bashar al-Assad's Aleppo offensive, which began recently, raised serious anxiety in Turkey. The Syrian dictator's military success, which would help strengthen his position, constituted a huge challenge for Turkish decision-makers. Since they have been on the side of the Syrian opposition for a long time, strengthening al-Assad and, in the longer term, extending his time in power, would mean a failure of Turkey's Syrian policy, and indicate a serious need for it to be revised. What is more, al-Assad's military offensive threatened Turkey's plans in Operation Euphrates Shield, which began in August 2016. The aim of the operation was to draw the Islamic State (IS) away from the border between Turkey and Syria, and to prevent the formation of a "Kurdish corridor" in northern Syria. The next step in the operation was aimed at taking over the city of al-Bab, which has been occupied by the IS. Seizing the city, located 30 km from the Turkish border and 40 km from Aleppo, is a strategic aim of Turkey's operation, because it will help to stop the process of linking Kurdish territories in northern Syria. However, al-Assad is also interested in occupying al-Bab because it will contribute to stopping the flow of Syrian rebels to the south of the country.

These two issues were a cause of intensive diplomatic communication between Russia and Turkey, which has been taking place in the past few weeks. Turkish decision-makers acted upon immense internal pressure, because the Aleppo offensive raised enormous objections among Turkish society. Huge protests took place on 12 December in front of both the Russian embassy in Ankara, and the country's consulate in Istanbul. Among the protestors were groups supporting the Turkish government, who in recent years have been mobilised around nationalist and Islamist lines, as well as support for the Syrian opposition. This caused Turkish politicians to embark on a serious diplomatic effort to convince Russia to declare a ceasefire, which would facilitate Aleppo's evacuation. At the same time, they have been very busy in attempting to gain Russia's support for the operation in al-Bab, which would help to minimise the failure of Turkey's Syrian policy.

Since the normalisation of relations between Turkey and Russia in June 2016, the Russian government has been suspicious of Turkey. The fact that most of Turkey's achievements in Operation Euphrates Shield took place after ad hoc consultations between the two countries may be seen as proof of that. Russia was afraid that the Turkish army's operation in northern Syria may contribute to a significant strengthening of the Syrian opposition, which would eventually turn against al-Assad. At the same time, however, Russia tried to remain open to Turkey's interests. This was probably the case in Turkey's al-Bab offensive, the most recent stage of which began on 9 December. By taking such a position, Russia hoped to weaken Turkey's relations with NATO. In addition, Turkey and Russia have recently been united in at least one aim, the creation of the most suitable circumstances for their own interests in the Syrian Civil War by the time the new American administration takes over.

**Prospects.** Under current circumstances, Andrei Karlov's assassination should not have negative consequences on relations between Turkey and Russia. Neither country is interested in escalating the situation. On the contrary, further strengthening of cooperation may help them to achieve some of their foreign and security policy aims, including the Syrian question, which is of utmost importance.

For Russia, collaboration with Turkey is a key element of its policy aimed at weakening NATO's unity and gaining the most favourable outcome in the Syria Civil War. To that end, Moscow may use the Russian diplomat's killing as a bargaining chip in its negotiations with Turkey, especially in regard to Turkey's support for the anti-regime opposition. This possibility was suggested by Putin, who said after the attack that it would result in stronger anti-terrorist cooperation between the two countries. Although restraining Turkey's Syrian aims will not be an easy task, one cannot argue that Andrei Karlov's killing damaged Turkey's position in negotiations with Russia.

Even before the assassination, cooperation with Russia was, for Turkey, a guarantee of realising its reduced interests in Syria. In the face of the failure of its policy aimed at overthrowing al-Assad, which is almost certain, it is extremely important for Turkey to seize al-Bab. Therefore, one can expect further compromise between Turkey and Russia in their stances on the Syrian Civil War. For example, it cannot be excluded that Turkish decision-makers will make concessions on the future of al-Assad's regime and support for the Syrian opposition, in exchange for a guarantee of preserving Syrian territorial integrity. This turn of events may be suggested by a meeting between the foreign ministers of Turkey, Russia and Iran, which took place on 20 December in Moscow. During a press conference, ministers announced that they would continue their cooperation to achieve a national ceasefire in Syria and to reach an agreement between the Syrian regime and the opposition. It seems that this process could be stopped only if Turkish society offers significant resistance aimed directly at Erdoğan's policy. Although signs of such resistance have been seen in Turkey of late (for instance the abovementioned anti-Russia protests), there is no evidence that they are considered of utmost importance for Turkish politicians, at least for now.

The fact that Turkey seeks fulfillment of its basic security interests beyond the structure of NATO constitutes a challenge for its Western allies. Notably, it is worrying that Turkey's plans in Syria depend on Russia. Having such strong instruments to influence Turkey, Russian decision-makers may try to diminish its engagement in NATO's deterrence policy towards Russia. Turkey's stance of strengthening the Alliance in the Black Sea basin may signal whether it is ready to block decisions necessary to preserve the security of NATO members.

Andrei Karlov's killing may also contribute to further raising tensions between Turkey and the United States, because of accusations that the assassin was linked to the Gülen movement. Its leader, Fethullah Gülen, who has been living in the United States, has been accused by the Turkish government of inspiring the failed coup in the country earlier this year, and the movement's members of shooting down the Russian Su-24 in November 2015. After the ambassador's killing, both Turkish and Russian pro-government media were underlining that the killer was linked to the movement, which may suggest that this argument would be used to pressure the U.S. into extraditing Gülen. This card was also supposedly played by the Turkish foreign minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu in his recent phone call with U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry.