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Assassination in Ankara: the Middle East Crisis is Engulfing Turkey

By Patrick Cockburn

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The assassination of the Russian ambassador to Ankara by a 22-year-old riot policeman underlines the degree to which Turkey is being destabilised by the hatred and violence spreading from the wars in Syria. Spectacular killings and bombings are happening every few days in which the identity, affiliations or motives of the perpetrators are often in doubt because the attacks are a reflection of the multiple crises threatening to tear Turkey apart.

The circumstances surrounding the killing of ambassador Andrey Karlov by Mevlut Mert Altintas are an example of this over-supply of possible suspects. Many Turkish observers regret that he was shot dead by the security forces soon after the assassination because his connections point in different directions and the reason for his actions may never be explained.

The international media has generally focused on his shout “Don’t forget Aleppo! Don’t forget Syria!” This fits in with a simple narrative that a lot of Turks are enraged by Russia’s support for President Bashar al-Assad in Syria and for his recapture of east Aleppo. Maybe one of them decided to do something about it.

But these cries were not the killer’s first words after he had fired the fatal shots and may not have been the most significant. These were in Arabic and spoke of those “who give Mohammed our allegiance for jihad,” suggesting that the speaker had moved in jihadi circles in Turkey. This argues against the killing being a spontaneous response to events in Aleppo, but does not tell one much about the gunman’s affiliations.

The best informed Turkish commentators are suggesting that these were with Jabhat al-Nusra, formerly the al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria or with the movement of Fethullah Gulen, which the Turkish government blames for the attempted coup on 15 July. On the other hand, they admit that he could have been a lone assassin who happened, from his point of view, to be in the right place at the right time.

Turkish and Russian leaders are almost over-assiduous in reassuring each other that the murder of a top Russian diplomat will not break their new-found bonds of friendship. President Vladimir Putin and President Recep Tayyip Erdogan made statements to that effect and, soon after the Turkish, Russian and Iranian foreign ministers met in Moscow for a pre-arranged discussion on Syria. After failing to protect Mr Karlov, Turkey will probably have to pay a price by being more accommodating to Russia in Syria.

What is not in doubt is that Turkey is becoming a more violent place and a weaker power. In the last 10 days alone the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) or one of its offshoots have killed 58 people, mostly soldiers and police in carefully planned bomb attacks. The political leaders of the Kurdish minority, an estimated 14 per cent of the 80 million Turkish population, are being charged with terrorist offences for expressing even the mildest form of dissent. The same may be starting to happen to the Alevi who make up a further 15 per cent of the population. The failed military coup of 15 July provoked a purge of soldiers, civil servants, universities and media suspected of Gulenist connections with more than 100,000 sacked or suspended and 37,000 arrested. There is a continuing state of emergency and the purge has extended well beyond suspected Gulenists to include anybody critical of Mr Erdogan and his ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP).

It did not have to turn out this way. As the Arab Spring so-called spread across the region six years ago, Turkey might have served as a mediator to prevent violence and contain crises. Instead, it backed the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria and elsewhere and tolerated ever more extreme jihadis. Mr Erdogan was certainly not alone in thinking that there would be regime change in Damascus, but he was the one worst affected when the project failed.

Turkey is now faced with the nightmare of Kurdish control along most of its border with Syria and Iraq. In Syria, there is a de facto Kurdish state, in military alliance with the US, ruled by the Syrian branch of the PKK. The Turkish government has established a narrow anti-Kurdish *cordon sanitaire* further west, but it remained largely mute while the Syrian armed

forces retook east Aleppo. Turkish policy in northern Syria is now directed against the Kurds and hopes of getting rid of Mr Assad have languished.

For all Mr Erdogan's belligerent talk about military intervention in Iraq and Syria over the last six months, his actions on the ground have been cautious. The temptation may still be there to burnish his nationalist credentials and demonstrate his control over a heavily purged Turkish army by sending it deeper into Syria and even into Iraq.

But these ventures may be beyond the capacity of a Turkish state that lacks foreign allies prepared to back its policies. There are hopes in Ankara that a Donald Trump administration would be more sympathetic to the Turkish position than President Obama, but nobody knows if the new US position is going to be much different from the old. From Turkey's point of view, Russia and Iran may not be great allies but they could be very nasty enemies.

Governments in deep trouble sometimes play the nationalist card to get themselves out of it by military intervention abroad. The result is usually disastrous, though there is popular support among Turks for action against the PKK in its foreign enclaves. A Turkish newspaper even speaks of "draining the swamp of the Qandil", a peculiarly ill-chosen metaphor referring to the PKK's bases in the Qandil mountains, one of the greatest natural fortresses on earth.

The assassination of Mr Karlov is one more symptom showing that the general crisis in the Middle East and North Africa is affecting Turkey. The forces unleashed in Syria and Iraq are exacerbating existing divisions in Turkey. Mr Erdogan is extending his authoritarian rule but he rules a weakening state unable to cope with mounting crises at home and abroad.