

Under False Pretenses: Who Directed the Assassin to Kill the Russian Ambassador in Turkey in 2016?

[Mahmut Cengiz](#)

Motivation for the assassination of Andrei Karlov, the Russian ambassador to Ankara, remains shrouded in mystery five years after off-duty Turkish police officer Mevlut Mert Altintas committed the crime during the opening of an art exhibition in Ankara on December 19, 2016. Chaos ensued when Altintas (circled in the [photo](#) below) calmly pulled out his duty gun and fired at least eight rounds, [shouting](#) in Arabic and Turkish, “Allahu Akbar! Don’t forget Aleppo. Don’t forget Syria. Unless our towns are secure, you won’t enjoy security. Only death can take me from here. Everyone who is involved in this suffering will pay the price.”



Speculation about why Altintas acted as he did have run the gamut, but [three theories](#) have come to the forefront. First, Turkish government officials blame the Gulen movement, which they designated as a terrorist organization right after the [suspicious July 15, 2016, coup attempt](#). Second, Altintas, who was opposed to increasing economic ties between Turkey and Russia and opposed to Russia’s support for the Assad regime in Syria, operated as a lone actor. Third, suspicion has been cast on the Kurds who are fighting against ISIS. The leaders of both Turkey and Russia were prudent [in their statements](#) after the assassination. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said, “I describe this attack on Russia’s embassy as an attack to Turkey, Turkey’s state and nation,” while President Vladimir Putin said that “the crime was a “provocation designed to spoil” relations between Russia and Turkey and “derail the peace process in Syria.”

As might have been expected, the Second Heavy Penal Court of Ankara, which [announced its verdict](#) in the assassination case on March 9, 2021, said that the Gulen movement was complicit in [Karlov’s death](#). Russia and experts of the Western world, however, do not support the Turkish government’s theory. This article attempts to shed light on the indictments Turkey issued in the Karlov case and delves into questions related to the Gulen theory and the lone-actor theory that need to be reinvestigated. The Kurdish theory is not addressed here because no evidence exists to even suggest that such a scenario is plausible.

Turkey's Accusations in the Indictment

Like it had done with other investigations of notable attacks in Turkey since the anti-corruption scandals came to light in late 2013, the court accused Fethullah Gulen and his movement of plotting the assassination of Karlov and persuading Altintas to commit the crime. Before examining the details of Karlov's indictment, however, it is necessary to explain how the Turkish justice system works and why the investigation and prosecution of notable attacks always have the same scapegoats: former police officers, former military personnel, and Gulenists. The December 2013 anti-corruption investigations, which used solid evidence to implicate Erdogan, his family members, and Erdogan's cabinet, is a prime example. Erdogan accused allegedly Gulenist police officers to plot a scheme to overthrow the government and oust Erdogan from power. Furious about such an unconvincing plan, Erdogan responded by launching a retaliatory crackdown against the Gulenists and subjecting all members of the movement to relentless oppression.

Erdogan's implacable grudge against Gulen has harmed the credibility of Turkey's justice system because, now, every investigation is directed to conclude that Gulenists were somehow the perpetrators. This hijacking of the Turkish justice system helps to explain why Turkey was ranked near the bottom of the *constraints on government powers* category in the 2020 [Rule of Law Index](#). The World Justice Project compiles the index each year and reflects how the influential nonprofit civil society organization perceives 128 countries' adherence to the rule of law. Turkey ranked 124th on the list.

The government's disregard for the rule of law in Turkey has meant the demise of bottom-up investigations that aimed to collect evidence and then identify the suspect and the rise of top-down investigations that name the suspect first and then fabricate evidence against the predetermined suspect. Prosecutors now routinely use copy-and-paste indictments filled with fabricated evidence presented by intelligence officials. Prosecutors who were opposed to the directives promulgated by Erdogan and his government were accused of being members of a terrorist organization and then put in jail. The indictments prepared after the 2013 anti-corruption scandals were no different and include many contradictions that Western countries consider to be suspicious.

Suspicious Investigations by Turkey's Judicial System

An examination of how the prosecution and conviction systems work in Turkey suggests a pattern of subterfuge that undermines the credibility of the government's indictment of Altintas for the assassination of Karlov. That pattern involves the use of fabricated and dubious evidence and the statements of secret so-called witnesses provided by intelligence officials and the police for the sole purpose of indicting a perceived enemy of the government. Prosecutors are complicit in the charade, signing the bogus indictments and referring them to the court without question.

The police investigation that targeted members of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) is a case in point. During this investigation, the police collected solid evidence about the spying activities of IRGC members in Turkey and how they had targeted the U.S. Consulate in Turkey. The government, however, ignored the evidence and shut down the investigation. In another case, the government shut down a police investigation that targeted the Tahsiye Group, an al Qaeda-affiliated organization led by Mehmet Dogan. Dogan had become a target of the law enforcement when, during a speech, he praised Osama Bin Laden and told his followers that they have a binding duty (fardh) to join Osama Bin Laden's army in Afghanistan. In a third case, the government relentlessly punished the police investigators who examined several trucks that belonged to Turkey's Intelligence Office. The investigators found that the trucks contained arms and explosives destined for jihadist groups in Syria. Despite solid evidence and video footage showing arms hidden inside the trucks, the government shut down the case. In yet another case, the government shut down the December 17 and 25, 2013 anti-corruption investigations that implicated Erdogan, his family, and members of his cabinet. Reza Zarrab, the money launderer for the corrupt government officials, transported \$20 billion to Iran on a route through Turkey at a time when the European Union and the United States had imposed embargoes on Iran for its ambition to possess nuclear

weapons. The police had proved that Zarrab was giving bribes worth millions of euros and dollars to Turkey's bureaucrats and ministers, but the government disregarded the evidence and released Zarrab and his accomplices. Zarrab, however, was arrested in the United States on March 19, 2016. At Zarrab's trial, the U.S. prosecutors were able to use all of the evidence—including wiretappings—that the Turkish police had collected within the scope of their corruption investigations from three years ago and which the Turkish government alleged that they had been fabricated by the Turkish police investigators. A fifth case involves the conviction of police officers who allegedly had ignored the killings of Armenian journalist Hrant Dink in Istanbul in 2007. The court announced its verdict on March 2021; however, Dink's family and the family's lawyers believed that the investigation had overlooked critical elements and were not satisfied with the court's decision. The common thread that ties these five cases together is the government's adamant contention—despite clear evidence to the contrary—that all the defendants were Gulenists who deserved lengthy, and even lifelong, prison sentences.

The outcome of the government's investigation of the July 15, 2016, coup attempt differed slightly from its usual strategy. This time, the government accused not only Gulenists but also Americans of plotting the failed coup. Evidence uncovered since then, however, indicates the July 15 coup attempt was one of the most suspicious events of Turkey's history. Some high level politicians in Turkey have said that Erdogan knew about the coup in advance and did not try to stop it because he believed the fallout from a coup would be to his benefit. The coup, therefore, was not a failed coup but rather a fake coup. The author's previous articles about the coup emphasizes the idea that a small group of military personnel who were provoked into staging a badly orchestrated coup and paid a colossal cost for doing so, as Erdogan used the event to undermine Turkey's democracy and turn a democracy into an authoritarian regime.

Details and Questions from the Altintas Indictment

The prosecutor accused 28 suspects in a 600-page indictment and concluded that Gulen was the number one suspect. According to the indictment, the prosecutor made the following accusations:

- Altintas joined religious meetings of Gulenists before the December 17 and 25, 2013, corruption scandals.
- An SD card (provided by an anonymous witness) contained encrypted content identified Altintas as a Gulenist and noted that Altintas broke his ties with Gulenists after the December 17 and 25, 2013, corruption scandals.
- Gulenists directed Altintas to infiltrate and join the radical Islamist group Sosyal Doku Vakfi (SDV-Social Fabric Association). The prosecutor based this accusation on the radical slogans Altintas uttered when he assassinated Karlov, believing that Altintas wanted to draw attention away from Gulenists and create the perception that ISIS and al Qaeda were to blame for the assassination.
- Gulenists created a plan to kill the Russian ambassador (i.e., Karlov) in 2016. The prosecutor based this accusation on an inference he made from one episode in a movie series broadcast in 2014 on a Gulenist media outlet. It was in that episode that a fictitious ambassador was killed.
- Some Gulenists, using a virtual private network, tapped into the social media accounts of Altintas in Northern Cyprus and then deleted some information and made alterations to those accounts.
- Altintas met with several Gulenist suspects and was directed to kill Karlov. The prosecutor based this accusation on the results from Historical Traffic Search (HTS) data.

The following questions still need to be answered:

- Was Altintas really a Gulenist police officer? For example, one of the police reports concluded that Altintas and his family had no relations with the Gulen movement during the time when Altintas killed Karlov. In addition, the Gulenists firmly rejected the idea that Altintas was a member of the movement when he killed Karlov and said that no evidence exists that members of

the movement has used violence even though they have been harshly oppressed and all their assets confiscated.

- Why did the prosecutor not investigate Altintas' radicalization and his association with suspects linked to al Qaeda?
- Why did the prosecutor ignore Altintas' relationships with SDV, a Salafi radical association?
- Why did the prosecutor fail to identify any suspects after allegedly uncovering some suspicious IP addresses in Northern Cyprus?
- After examining 30 minutes of HTS data captured from 500 meters (1,640 feet) away and used for signals intelligence, how did the prosecutor come to a specific conclusion about several individual suspects when the duration of the captured data was short and hundreds of thousands of people were in the area from which the data were obtained?
- Why did the prosecutor not investigate the person who called Karlov's wife, Marina, before the assassination? In her statement to the prosecutor, Marina Karlov said that she received a mysterious phone call on December 14 or 15, 2016, from Moscow, in which the caller wanted to know whether her husband had bodyguards to protect him.
- Why did the prosecutor not question one of the witnesses, Abdulkadir Sen, who was affiliated with al Qaeda and whose brother, Ibrahim Sen, was being held in the Guantanamo Bay prison because of his linkages with al Qaeda? U.S. authorities had accused the Sen brothers of transferring \$600,000 to al Shabaab in 2012 and, in 2014, British and French investigators asked Turkish authorities for information about the Sen brothers. When investigators first questioned Enes Asim Silin, one of the witnesses to the assassination of Karlov, Silin said that Altintas and Abdulkadir Sen met on October 8, 2016. Sometime later, Silin suspiciously changed his statement, saying that the two men did not meet on October 8, 2016.
- Why did the prosecutor not question the weak security at the art museum where Karlov was killed? According to Marina Karlov, her husband went to the exhibition with no bodyguard and weapon, and only one security officer (unarmed) was inside the building.
- Why did Turkish officials fail to provide enhanced security inside the museum when they knew that demonstrations against Russia's involvement in the Syrian conflict occurred just a few days before the assassination?
- Why did not the prosecutor question the possibility of arresting Altintas alive? According to the prosecutor, Altintas entered the art museum at 6:31 p.m., followed by Karlov at 6:45 p.m. Altintas shot Karlov to death at 7:05 p.m., and the police arrived 20 minutes later, at 7:25 p.m. Altintas did not take his own life and instead waited for the police to come to the scene of the crime. Also according to the prosecutor, clashes between Altintas and the police ensued, and Altintas was killed by the police at 7:42 p.m. However, according to the statement of a police officer who took part in the clashes, Altintas fell to the ground, after which another police officer kicked the murder weapon away from the wounded Altintas, and then the police shot Altintas in his head several times. Altintas did not attempt to escape, nor did he attempt to hold anyone hostage. The police, however, chose to kill Altintas rather than capture him alive. The outcome raises the possibility that Altintas wanted to be silenced.

Now the Second Theory: Was Altintas a Lone Actor Inspired by al Qaeda Ideology?

The second theory contends that, in his effort to punish Russia for its involvement in the Syrian conflict, Altintas acted on his own volition when he assassinated Karlov. Such lone-actor terrorism has been a threat to the world since the early 2010s. Individuals who engage in lone-actor terrorism operate according to their own timetable, are not directed by any terrorist leader or terrorist organization, and may be inspired by one or more radical ideologies. Most lone actors, however, have been inspired by ideologies of either al Qaeda or ISIS. Given that Altintas was a self-radicalized individual with close ties to SDV and given that the Syrian branch of al Qaeda, al Nusra Front, has claimed responsibility for

Karlov's assassination, proponents of the second theory believe that their interpretation of assassin's motivation has more credibility than any other proposed theory.

Altintas' Radicalization

Details in the prosecutor's indictment of Altintas provides clues about how Altintas was self-radicalized. Various models explain how individuals are radicalized, and, according to one of them, radicalization is a four-step process: (1) pre-radicalization, (2) conversion and identification, (3) conviction and indoctrination, and (4) action. At the *pre-radicalization step*, according to the details of the indictment, Altintas' introvert personality made him susceptible to being affected by the teachings of the Turkish radical Islamist Nurettin Yildiz. The indictment also noted that Altintas had complained about his family, telling friends that his family was not practicing Islam. According to Altintas family, he drank alcohol and was not a religious person until he attended the Turkish National Police Academy in 2012. In his second year in the academy, family members said, Altintas began to sympathize with radical religious groups and joined the religious programs offered by Yildiz.

At the *conversion and identification step*, the indictment indicates that in 2013, Altintas began to question his job and Turkey's approach to Islam. For example, Altintas began to complain about his position as a police officer, telling his friends that it is not appropriate to work in a state until it is ruled by Islamic law, that he was planning to resign from his position as a police officer, and that he was against the democratic elections.

At the *conviction and indoctrination step*, Altintas seemed to have become an ardent believer in jihadist ideology. For example, Altintas shared extremist messages on a WhatsApp group about Syria and ISIS. He also used hate rhetoric against the United States and said that the United States was inflicting cruelty on the people in Islamic countries. Altintas also was followed the news in Syria and criticized Russian atrocities in Syria.

At the *action step*, Altintas sought to engage in deeds that would serve his ideology. For example, he wanted to travel to Syria, join a jihadist group, and become a martyr. He also became involved in donation programs that send money to Syria. When investigators examined Altintas' computer, they discovered that he had downloaded a video in February 2016 titled "Al Qaeda: You Only Are Responsible Yourself," which began with a speech by Osama bin Laden. Altintas' computer also contained a draft email to mrltns@gmail.com, dated July 27, 2015, that Altintas was preparing to be a martyr.

SDV and Salafism in Turkey

Turkey has been one of the top 10 countries with the most jihadists joining al Qaeda or ISIS groups in Syria. In 2015, more than 2,000 Turkish jihadists joined one of these terrorist organizations. Turkey's government has been criticized for ignoring the activities of jihadist groups in Syria and for allowing the militants to use its borders freely not only to transfer militants but also money and logistics. In 2015, Russian authorities published satellite images purportedly showing Turkish trucks transporting oil from ISIS-controlled areas in Syria.

Nurettin Yildiz, a retired imam and director of SDV, played an essential role in the radicalization of many individuals, including Altintas. Yildiz is known for his anti-Semitic and jihadist speeches. In one of those speeches, he said, "Jews are the symbols of brutality and enjoy killing of women and children." Yildiz also is an advocate of Salafism in Turkey and regularly holds meetings and gives sermons on topics such as Salafi-interpreted jihadism and support for jihadists in Syria. He also is a fervent supporter of Erdogan and the AKP. As an example, a page on the SDV website and a google search on Yildiz bring photos of Yildiz with previously-investigated suspects for their roles in transferring arms and explosives to Syria.

After the assassination of Karlov, the al Qaeda-affiliated group in Syria known as Fatah al-Sham Front (formerly al-Nusra Front) claimed responsibility for the assassination of Karlov in a letter the group

published online. The letter talks about the “Revenge of Aleppo” and claims that Altintas was not only a riot police officer but also a member of the al-Nusra Front. Erdogan, however, said in a 2016 speech that al-Nusra Front is not a terrorist organization, only to reverse his stance two years later and designated the group as a terrorist organization.

To conclude, Turkey’s Second Heavy Penal Court of Ankara announced its verdict in the Karlov assassination case in March 2021, concluding that the Gulen movement was responsible for the crime. The court ignored an investigation report that said Altintas committed the crime as a radicalized lone actor with link to al Qaeda-affiliated individuals. The court’s decision appears to have been based on a government-directed investigation that declared an alleged perpetrator and then tried to find or fabricate evidence to fit its contrived scenario. In Russia and the Western world, the verdict has been deemed unsatisfactory. It is not realistic, of course, to expect reliable investigations and prosecutions under the current authoritarian regime in Turkey. Further investigation of the Karlov assassination is needed to determine who directed Altintas to kill the Russian ambassador, who was behind the government-directed investigations, who ignored potential evidence that could have led to the identification of the real culprits, who chose not to provide adequate protection for Karlov inside the exhibition, and who directed officers to kill Altintas at the crime scene even though it would have been possible to capture him alive.