

CRITICAL QUESTIONS

The Terrorist Attack on the U.S. Consulate in Istanbul

Samuel Brannen

July 9, 2008

Q1: What happened?

A1: According to U.S. and Turkish press accounts, four 20- to 25-year-old bearded, armed men exited a vehicle, walked up to the outer security checkpoint of the U.S. consulate, and opened fire with shotguns and pistols on the Turkish police guarding the building. The initial volley caught the police by surprise. In the ensuing gun battle, three police officers were killed, several others injured, and three of the gunmen killed. One managed to escape. No one in the consulate was ever in any danger. The consulate is one of the newest and most secure in the world and is built quite literally like a fortress, with layers of security to withstand the kind of threats that can be expected in a post-9/11 U.S. outpost. The consulate is located in Istinye, a quiet and prosperous residential neighborhood on the European side of Istanbul, to the north of the city's center.

Q2: Is the timing of this attack significant?

A2: This attack comes at a time of extreme domestic tension in Turkey, with a Constitutional Court case against the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) underway that seeks to close the party and ban its leaders for violating constitutional principles of secularism. Simultaneously, a major investigation is ongoing into a secretive organization called *Ergenekon*. The country is shocked each day as new details emerge in the press of coup plots, planned "false flag" terrorist operations, and information operations—all aimed at removing the current government from power. Suspected members of the group include two retired four-star generals.

Q3: Who was responsible for the attack?

A3: There are a number of active terrorist groups in Turkey that could be responsible for this attack, some of which have known links to al Qaeda. The Turkish press has focused on Islamist terrorist groups including the Great Eastern Islamic Raiders Front (IBDA-C), a group that took responsibility—later, proven falsely—for a series of devastating truck bomb attacks in Istanbul in November 2003. The style of this attack, however, matches that of any one of a number of groups linked to Kurdish separatism, such as the terrorist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). It is noteworthy also that the United States designated in January 2008 the Kurdistan Freedom Falcons (TAK) as a terrorist group. Terrorist attacks by small groups of armed assailants belonging to Kurdish separatist organizations against Turkey's security forces have been unfortunately common throughout Turkey for the last three decades in a conflict mostly concentrated in the country's southeast that has claimed the lives of at least 37,500 people, including dozens in the past six months in a new outbreak of violence. In remote southeastern Turkey today, three German tourists were reportedly kidnapped by the PKK.

Q4: What was their motive?

A4: Conspiracy theories are never lacking in Turkey, and no doubt there are many that will spin from this event. The worry is that some may be true and relate to the ongoing tension in the country. All is not as it seems. The reasons that Islamist groups may have chosen to attack the U.S. consulate are obvious. Kurdish terrorist groups, though, have not previously attacked U.S. targets. But because of recent outspoken support for Turkey's fight against the PKK and intelligence sharing by the United States, PKK leaders have threatened reprisal, and other linked groups may now consider U.S. interests a legitimate target. Since November 2007, the United States has been sharing real-time, actionable intelligence with Turkey about the whereabouts and activities of the PKK in northern Iraq. Turkey's military has conducted upwards of 60 cross-border operations of various duration and intensity into mountainous, rural northern Iraq.

Samuel Brannen is a fellow in the International Security Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C.

Critical Questions is produced by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a private, tax-exempt institution focusing on international public policy issues. Its research is nonpartisan and nonproprietary. CSIS does not take specific policy positions. Accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions expressed in this publication should be understood to be solely those of the author(s).

© 2008 by the Center for Strategic and International Studies. All rights reserved.