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## **The Attack on the US Embassy in Ankara: A Warning for the Turkish Government**

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On Friday, February 1<sup>st</sup>, the American Embassy in Ankara was attacked by a suicide bomber, killing a Turkish guard and wounding several others. Soon afterwards, a far-left, outlawed Turkish organization *Devrimci Halk Kurtuluş Partisi-Cephesi* (DHKP-C) (“The Revolutionary People’s Liberation Party–Front”) claimed responsibility. In a statement, the DHKP-C criticized American interference in Syria, Libya, Egypt and Iraq and demanded the withdrawal of NATO soldiers and recently installed US-made Patriot missile defense batteries from Turkish soil. Moreover, with the attack, the DHKP-C made a strong statement against the Turkish government, warning it against welcoming foreign troops on Turkish soil. Although the DHKP-C has been largely marginalized since the 1990s, it is worth examining whether the group might be experiencing a revival, against the background of the crisis in Syria and US support for Turkey against the Asad regime.

Over the last six months prior to the attack on the U.S. embassy, the DHKP-C carried out attacks on three different police stations in Istanbul, killing three police officers. Following the attack on the U.S. embassy, President Abdullah Gül’s statement that the Turkish police department and the intelligence services had been “on alert” concerning a possible DHKP-C attack indicated the Turkish authorities’ awareness of

the group's increased activity.<sup>1</sup> So did the crackdown carried out by the police against alleged supporters of the organization just days before the embassy attack, in which more than 80 people were taken into custody, including nine lawyers and five journalists.

Listed as a terrorist organization by the Turkish state as well as the European Union and the US, DHKP-C's ultimate goal is to replace the existing regime in Turkey with a Marxist-Leninist one by means of violent revolution. The organization's historical roots can be traced back to the 1970s, the heyday of leftist movements in Turkey. DHKP-C eventually emerged as a splinter group of the radical Marxist group *Devrimci Sol* ("Revolutionary Left," also known as DEV-SOL) after a fallout within the movement over the leadership position. Between 1983 and 1994, DEV-SOL was responsible for the killing of 131 people including Turkish civilians, American diplomats, Turkish judges and police officers.<sup>2</sup> In 1994, the leader of the movement, Dursun Karataş, formed DHKP-C, adding *cephe* ("Front") to the organization's name, which indicated their belief in the importance of "revolutionary violence," and indeed, the group resumed its deadly actions. Its most publicized attack occurred in 1996, when Özdemir Sabancı, from the well-known Sabancı family,<sup>3</sup> was gunned down by a DHKP-C member in his office.

The rising tensions on the Turkish-Syrian border and the increased involvement of Turkey's NATO allies in the developing crisis form the backdrop of the DHKP-C's latest attack. After Syrian artillery shells hit the Turkish border town of Akçakale in October 2012, killing five Turkish civilians, NATO members affirmed their commitment to safeguarding the defense of the Turkish border in light of the instability and ongoing violence in Syria. By the end of 2012, it was decided to deploy Patriot anti-missile batteries in southern Turkey, operated by US, German and Dutch

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<sup>1</sup> "Gül: Emniyet teyakkuzdaydı maalesef önlenemedi," *Milliyet*, 4 February 2013, <http://siyaset.milliyet.com.tr/gul-emniyet-teyakkuzdaydi-maalesef-onlenemedi/siyaset/siyasetdetay/04.02.2013/1664429/default.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Samih Teymur, "An Analysis of Terrorist Recruitment by Observing The Revolutionary People's Liberation Party/Front (DHKP-C) Terrorist Organization in Turkey" (PhD diss., University of North Texas, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> The Sabancı family owns the Sabancı Holding, a conglomerate of companies active in a myriad of sectors from banking to retail, making the Sabancı one of Turkey's wealthiest and most influential families. Through the Sabancı Foundation, the family also continues to invest in philanthropic work by launching social and cultural institutions which are funded by family members themselves and by the income generated by Sabancı Holding companies.

units, to protect the coastal cities adjacent to the Syrian border from rockets which might be fired from Syria.

Russia expressed strong reservations about the deployment; moreover, Turkish public opinion in the region was strongly opposed to it. Much of the local population expressed frustration about the presence of foreign soldiers on Turkish soil. Throughout the month of January, leftist and nationalist groups organized demonstrations calling for a withdrawal of the missiles. German troops stationed near the city of Kahramanmaraş were met with protestors' violence shortly after their arrival. As a demonstration against the missile deployment escalated in Iskenderun on January 23, leftist activists threatened five German soldiers who were shopping in the city in civilian clothing. The demonstrators grabbed one of the soldiers and pulled a bag containing white powder over his head.<sup>4</sup> The soldiers managed to escape with the help of Turkish security guards.

At the same time, the Turkish political arena was teeming with criticism against the government's decision to allow the deployment of Patriot missiles in Turkey. The main opposition party, the CHP (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, the Republican People's Party), harshly criticized the move by calling it an "imperialist act" of the government. Slamming the government's foreign policy decisions, the CHP argued that by allowing these missiles on its soil, Turkey had become a 'party' to the Syrian conflict, thus endangering the safety of the Turkish people.<sup>5</sup> At first, the other main opposition party, the MHP (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, the Nationalist Movement Party), voiced similar concerns and echoed the CHP's demand that the government should explain its decision to the parliament. Party leader Devlet Bahçeli worried whether the real reason behind the deployment of the missiles was to help Israel's defense.<sup>6</sup> Later, the MHP somewhat recanted and expressed its support for the missile system, although it continued to demand that the government should openly name the source of the threats against which the missiles were expected to defend.

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<sup>4</sup> "Patriot'-Einsatz: Wütende Menge bedrängt deutsche Soldaten in der Türkei," *Der Spiegel*, 23 January 2013.

<sup>5</sup> "Turkey became part of Syria crisis," *Hürriyet Daily News*, 6 November 2012, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-became-part-of-syria-crisis-chp.aspx?pageID=238&nid=34025>.

<sup>6</sup> "2 haftada ne değişti?" *Sabah*, 28 November 2012, <http://www.sabah.com.tr/Gundem/2012/11/28/2-haftada-ne-degisti>.

The perpetrator of the attack on the US Embassy, Ecevit Şanlı, a member of the DHKP-C, had been imprisoned in 1997 for multiple attacks on a police station. In 2002, he was sentenced to life imprisonment, but a year later he managed to flee Turkey. The Turkish authorities reported that Şanlı had returned to Turkey from Germany using false identity documents.<sup>7</sup> Notably, over the last two decades, the DHKP-C has adopted an increasingly international character and its members in the Diaspora have demonstrated a will and an ability to react to what they consider undesirable developments in Turkey. Although most of the group's activities are carried out in Turkey, its relatively small branches in Europe play an important role in funding the movement and providing refuge for its leaders. In this respect, the group's activities in the Netherlands, which houses the third largest Turkish expatriate community following Germany and France, can serve as an example.

As in other Western European countries, the organization of the Turkish community in the Netherlands has always reflected the polarization between the secular Turkish government and supporters of religion-based political movements (such as Milli Görüş) and other opposition groups. The DHKP-C has a small branch in the Netherlands, with only a few dozen adherents.<sup>8</sup> Its activities have usually been limited to non-violent protest actions (petitions, graffiti, hunger strikes) with the aim of showing solidarity with hunger strikers or political prisoners in Turkey and otherwise gaining media attention for the political situation there. In 2004, the Dutch General Intelligence and Security Services (*AIVD*) reported that the 'cultural' side of the group (its music festivals and social gatherings) had become more important to its sympathizers in the Netherlands than its political message.<sup>9</sup>

Notwithstanding its minimal popularity, the *AIVD* had already reported in 1998 that the DHKP-C in the Netherlands was actively funding the activities of the

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<sup>7</sup> "DHKP-C claims responsibility for the attack on U.S. Embassy," *Hürriyet Daily News*, 1 February 2013, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/suicide-bomber-member-of-the-outlawed-leftist-group-dhkpc-erdogan.aspx?pageID=238&nID=40308&NewsCatID=341>.

<sup>8</sup> Arjen van der Ziel, "Turkse terreurgroep eist vertrek Nederlandse Patriots," *De Volkskrant*, 4 February 2013.

<sup>9</sup> Dutch General Intelligence and Security Services, "Annual Report 2005," [http://www.aivdkennisbank.nl/jaarverslag-2011/CSearch.RGhrcCBj/aDU1408\\_Revolutionaire-VolksbevrijdingspartijFront.aspx](http://www.aivdkennisbank.nl/jaarverslag-2011/CSearch.RGhrcCBj/aDU1408_Revolutionaire-VolksbevrijdingspartijFront.aspx).

organization in Turkey, usually from criminals or through the extortion of Turkish restaurant owners.<sup>10</sup> In addition, the DHKP-C's former leader Dursun Karataş had at one time taken refuge in the Netherlands and eventually died there in 2008. The AIVD categorizes the DHKP-C as a 'non-jihadist terrorist group' and consistently monitors its activities in the Netherlands that serve to support terrorism in Turkey. One result of this was that three DHKP-C members who were active in Amsterdam were declared "undesirable aliens" by the Dutch Immigration and Naturalization Services (IND) in 2010 and evicted from the Netherlands.<sup>11</sup>

Although the influence of the DHKP-C in Turkish politics can be considered minimal and its followers are relatively few, the movement has managed to expand its networks internationally. Its foothold in several European countries provides the group with the necessary financial support and serves as a hiding place for high-profile leaders. The DHKP-C's acts have usually been small-scale and were mainly intended to attract media attention for its political goals. However, its actions have been lethal in the past and the attack on the U.S. Embassy has proved once again that the movement does not shy away from violence. The situation in Syria has provided the DHKP-C, a marginal political group in Turkey, with new incentives to promote its ideology.

Two conclusions can be drawn from the DHKP-C attack on the U.S. embassy in Ankara. First, not only Turkey, but also the U.S. and NATO allies have become part of the Syrian crisis and are being targeted for it by radical groups. Secondly and more importantly, this attack demonstrates that there is no agreement within Turkey as to how to approach the crisis in neighboring Syria and that opposition to Turkish foreign policy has begun to be expressed through violence. In face of the uncertain future of its neighbors, the Turkish government will remain compelled to carefully balance any NATO-coordinated action with domestic political exigencies.

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<sup>10</sup> Dutch General Intelligence and Security Services, "Annual Report 1998," Chapter on terrorism and other political violence, page 37, [http://www.aivdkennisbank.nl/jaarverslag-2011/aDU1777\\_Revolutionaire-Volksbevrijdingspartij-Front-DHKP-C-Devrimci-Halk-Kurtulus-Partisi-Cephesi.aspx](http://www.aivdkennisbank.nl/jaarverslag-2011/aDU1777_Revolutionaire-Volksbevrijdingspartij-Front-DHKP-C-Devrimci-Halk-Kurtulus-Partisi-Cephesi.aspx).

<sup>11</sup> Dutch General Intelligence and Security Services, "Annual Report 2010," Chapter on terrorism, page 9, [http://www.aivdkennisbank.nl/jaarverslag-2011/aDU2895\\_Niet-jihadistisch-terrorisme-DHKPC.aspx](http://www.aivdkennisbank.nl/jaarverslag-2011/aDU2895_Niet-jihadistisch-terrorisme-DHKPC.aspx).

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