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Turkish **Operation Euphrates Shield**, the U.S. military's **Operation Noble Lance** have had as their primary objective the destruction of the ISIS death grip on the Fertile Crescent and freeing the region from the continued depravation caused by the hardline ISIS controlling forces. Experts agree that Moscow, Tehran and Damascus are all concerned that, as the Turkish, U.S. and the PYD / YPG Kurdish rebel forces push deeper into the Syrian controlled areas, such actions could further loosen Assad's hold on the region. Moscow is currently supporting Assad's Syrian regime in its own battle against national rebel forces. However, actions by the U.S., as recently as mid-November, brought further joint operations into question. The assassination of the Russian ambassador on December 19th throws the Turkey-Russian relationship, already chilled to the point of freezing, to another new low. The continuation of the tensions between Turkey and Russia will ultimately bring the U.S. and Russia into direct confrontation.

The vast number of Kurdish rebel forces reminds one of the adage, *you can't tell the players without a score card!* Just such a score card is included at the end of this brief.

According to initial reports, the assassin, **Mert Altintas** (standing with gun in hand in the photo) of Russian Ambassador **Andrei Karlov** (shown prone in the photo) shouted, "We die at Aleppo, you die here!" as he shot the Ambassador during a public speaking engagement. Altintas was a Turk assigned as part of Karlov's security detail. Early reports indicate that he was believed to be a Gulenist. As such, he would have been devoted to Islamic cleric **Fethullah Gulen**. Gulen orchestrated a poorly timed coup attempt in the July 2016; but, it has left the National Police with a substantial number of Gulenists in their ranks. Seeking Turkey's return to an Islamic State, the Gulenists were allied with Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP) between 2002 and 2010, but early observers believed that the Gulenists saw it as a marriage of convenience to get into the national political scene. Heavily ensconced in the National Police, the Gulenists had a particularly a strong presence in the Turkish Air Force in the summer of 2016. There was an initial attempt in the coups' early hours for a Turkish fighter



iCourtesy STRATFOR - Yavuz Alatan, RFP/Getty Images

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plane to shoot down President **Recep Tayyip Erdogan**'s plane. It was an attempt which failed and set the coup on its own path to failure.

Even if Altintas, who was soon killed by other security personnel on the detail, was more directly connected to ISIS or some other faction, it will not deter Turkey's president from using it as a reason for further eradication of Gulenists from national positions. Retribution by those loyal to Erdogan against Gulenists is also used by ISIS as their continued attacks on the West. According to "A Turkish security official said Ankara saw 'very strong gunman who killed Russia's ambassador there on follower of a US-based Muslim cleric blamed for failed coup in July. Also, a public representative of cleric Alp Aslandogan, denied any link and said the exiled the murder as a 'heinous act.'"ⁱ



Fethullah Gulen

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The Turkish government has named those who have linked themselves as followers of Gulen, *The Gulenist Terrorist Organization or FETO*. The *Star Daily* claimed that the assassination was "A bullet from FETO."ⁱⁱ Will such a presupposition of FETO's guilt stir any retaliation here in the U.S.? For the neighbors of 1857 Mt. Eaton Road, Saylorsburg, PA, we pray not. Those who live next door to an internationally known Muslim cleric who is an enemy of the strong-armed president of Turkey and now, perhaps, a former Russian KGB Officer who also happens to be President of Russia, may want to take an extended vacation in Florida this winter. In fact, responding to reporter's question about retaliation for the ambassador's assassination, he said, "ISIS will regret what they have done, this is not Benghazi and I am NOT Obama."ⁱⁱⁱ

In conjunction with the objective of crippling ISIS, Turkish and U.S. forces have been aiding PYD / YPG Kurdish rebel forces also fighting ISIS. Kurdish tribal groups are extremely diverse. There remains, sometimes, just the tiniest thread that might link one to the other. There is a contention that the Kurdish rebel forces that are battling Assad for control of Syria would be willing to capitalize on a working relationship with the PYD / YPG for, if nothing else, the benefit of the support of the Turkish and/or U.S. military forces that could be part of the bargain. Whether such a marriage deal could be struck is yet to be seen and, as for the bride's dowry, whether Erdogan or the incoming U.S. president would be amenable to pushing militarily for Assad's ouster, that seems a longshot. After President Obama's failure to fulfill his commitment to strike Assad if he used chemical weapons, one can be sure that no retaliation from the U.S. will occur before the inauguration of the new president in late January. Such a bold move against Putin's protectorate upon taking office would normally be unfathomable. With President-elect Trump, it's more like an even bet

The Kurdish forces battling against Syrian national forces, who are backed by the Russian army, took a major hit at Aleppo in the early fall. Last year when Turkish forces downed a Russian fighter



jet near Aleppo, Erdogan had the basis for a more intense incursion into the area to keep the interlopers at bay. Erdogan did not stretch his actions further than the initial strike primarily because he must play a careful balancing act between Moscow and Washington. He finds it in his best political interests to hedge his bets when dealing with either one. In November of this year, came the announcement, by the Pentagon, limiting any further action alongside the Turkish forces, even as those Turkish units prepare to move deeper into Syria. The actions by the U.S., are seen by many as President Obama's retreating in his resolve in the battle to decapitate ISIS. Obama appears to be attempting to prevent any action that could be viewed as antagonistic toward Russian President Putin. Such reticence, when President Obama is called on it, is usually vindicated, at least in the President's mind, as essential to prevent any retaliation by Russia against other U.S. interests in the region. This would include U.S. interests in Europe and NATO. It comes at a time that NATO is facing a hard-sell of its own validity across Europe.

Observers should pay very careful attention to what events may precipitate the inauguration in January. Continued agitation by forces loyal to ISIS is anticipated. Direct actions across Europe and possibly directly involving U.S. interests world-wide should be considered probable.

ⁱ <http://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/blog/2016/12/20/turkish-officials-believe-fethullah-gulens-feto-is-behind-attack-on-russian-envoy/>

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ [FB.com/hostilityagainsttyranny](https://www.facebook.com/hostilityagainsttyranny)



THE KURDS

Despite their strong cultural identity, the Kurds have yet to achieve a similar level of political cohesion. This list includes some of the most prominent Kurdish groups currently in the Middle East.



KDP | POLITICAL PARTY

The **Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP)** was established in 1946. Its leader, Massoud Barzani, is the president of Iraqi Kurdistan.

PUK | POLITICAL PARTY

The **Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)** was founded in 1975 by Jalal Talabani. The civil war between the KDP and PUK lasted from 1994 to 1998.

GORRAN | POLITICAL PARTY

Gorran, the second-largest Kurdish party in Iraqi Kurdistan, split off from the PUK in 2009, undermining the PUK and KDP's dominance in Kurdish politics.

PESHMERGA | MILITARY FORCE

The **peshmerga** are Iraqi Kurdish military forces. Many brigades are under the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs' control, though some serve as military wings of the PUK and KDP.

HDP | POLITICAL PARTY

The **Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP)** is a pro-minority opposition party, with 59 seats in Turkey's 550-seat parliament. HDP has criticized the government's handling of militancy in Turkey's primarily Kurdish southeast.

PKK | MILITANT GROUP

The **Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)**, founded in 1978 by Abdullah Ocalan, waged an insurgency against the Turkish state from 1984 to 2013. Turkey broke the cease-fire in 2015 when it bombed PKK camps in Iraqi Kurdistan.

TAK | MILITANT GROUP

The **Kurdistan Freedom Falcons (TAK)** claims to be separate from the PKK but is in fact the PKK's specialized urban terrorism wing.



PYD | POLITICAL PARTY

The **Democratic Union Party (PYD)** was established in 2003 and is ideologically similar to the PKK.

YPG | MILITARY WING

The **People's Protection Units (YPG)** are the PYD's military wing and came to prominence during the fight against Islamic State.

KDPI | POLITICAL PARTY

The **Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (KDPI)** was established in 1945 as a pan-Kurdish party. It has historical links to Iraq's KDP and does not have official representation in Iran's parliament.

PJAK | MILITANT GROUP

The **Party of Free Life of Kurdistan (PJAK)** was founded as a PKK offshoot in 2004. It seeks to establish a democratic Kurdish republic within Iran and has a history of clashing with security forces.



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