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# Old Ghosts from the Cold War: The Ankara Embassy Bombing, 1 February 2013



[TRADOC G-2 Intelligence Support Activity  
\(TRISA\)](#)

Complex Operational Environment and  
Threat Integration Directorate (CTID)





# OEA Team Threat Report



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## Purpose

- To inform the Army training community of the circumstances surrounding the 1 February 2013 suicide vest improvised explosive device (SVIED) bombing attack on the U.S. Embassy in Ankara, Turkey.
- To differentiate the perpetrators of the Ankara attack from militant Jihadist threat actors attempting to influence the course of events in the Levant.
- To explain how the Ankara embassy bombing serves as an example of evolving tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP) threat actors employ in complex operational environments.

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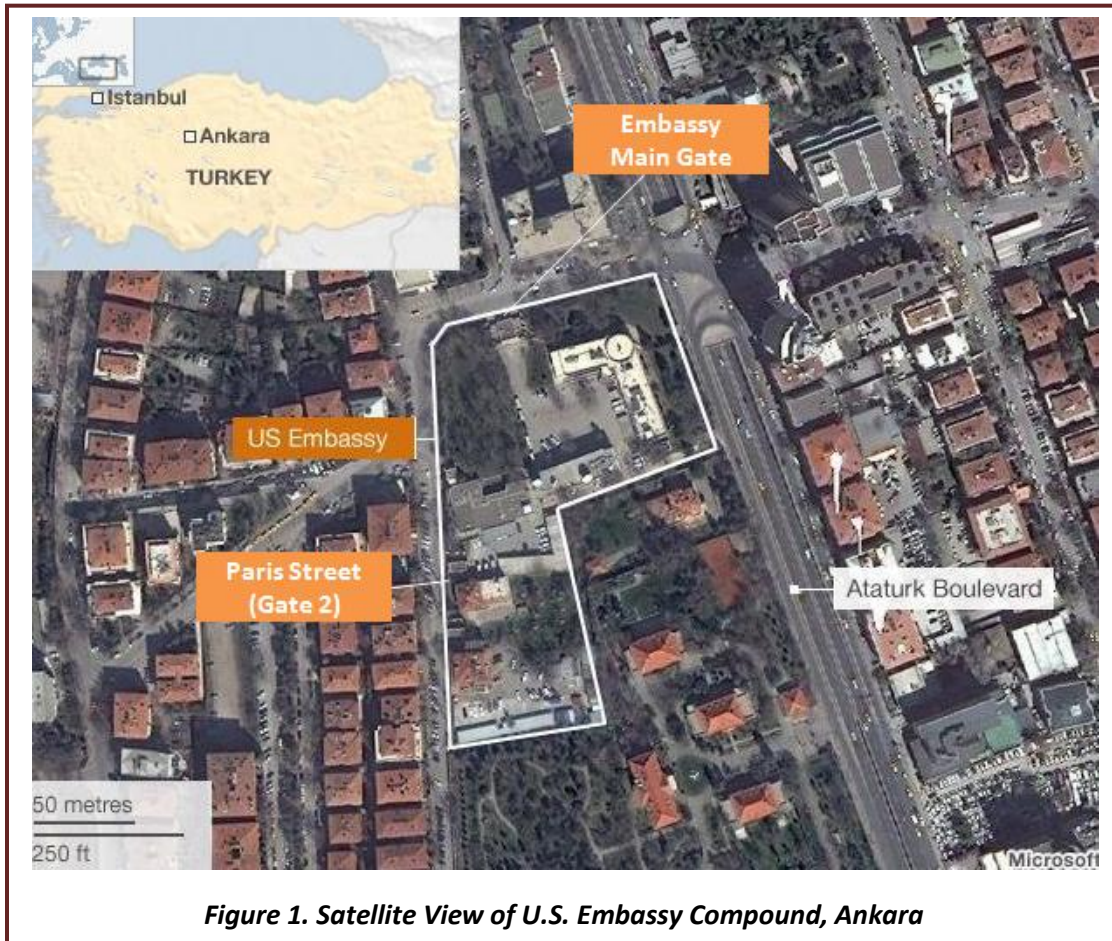
## Executive Summary

- On 1 February 2013 a Turkish national named Ecevit Sanli posed as a courier, and used the ruse of delivering mail to get within striking distance of his target: the American Embassy in Ankara, Turkey.
- A post-incident investigation later revealed Sanli to be a convicted terrorist who had reentered Turkey illegally. He had also long been a member of the outlawed Revolutionary People's Liberation Army/Front (DHKP/C), an anti-NATO Marxist/Leninist Organization.
- This was the DHKP/C's first violent attack against an official agency of the U.S. government, and was partially rooted in secular motives reminiscent of the Cold War era.

*Cover photo: Security Official at Gate 2, U.S. Embassy at Ankara, Turkey, 1 February 2013 ([RAPID Report Number 3057-1, 26 February 2013](#)).*



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***Figure 1. Satellite View of U.S. Embassy Compound, Ankara***





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## Map



**Figure 2. Map of Turkey**

## Introduction

Newly-appointed Secretary of State John Kerry experienced a challenge on his first day at the office on 1 February 2013. No sooner had he been sworn when he learned that the American Embassy in Ankara, Turkey, had suffered an attack by a lone suicide bomber. Although two people, including the perpetrator, died at the scene, a measure of consolation still remained: no American lives had been lost, and what terrorist experts characterized as “the robust, layered security” of the U.S. Embassy compound prevented serious penetration of its exterior perimeter and minimized the number of casualties.<sup>1</sup> The embassy building, constructed during the 1950s, numbered among ten diplomatic compounds scheduled for a complete renovation, subject to Congressional approval of State Department 2013 funding priorities. Still, embassy staff benefited from incremental upgrades already carried out over the past ten-year period. Equally noteworthy was the sacrifice made by the deceased guard, 46-year-old Mustafa Akarsu, a 20-year veteran of the embassy security force, who had aspirations of becoming an American citizen and sending his children to college in the United States. The U.S. Ambassador to Turkey, Francis Ricciardone, attended Akarsu’s funeral. “Mustafa was a great hero,” observed Ricciardone. “God knows how many would have died if he hadn’t been there.”<sup>2</sup>



*Figure 3: The American Ambassador and his wife place flowers on the grave of Mustafa Akarsu*

## A Confusing Array of Threat Actors

Although Turkish authorities lost little time identifying the organization they suspected of carrying out the Ankara embassy attack, their American ally reserved judgment. Because there are so many political players in Turkey with their various agendas and axes to grind against the government of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his Western NATO allies, the bombing incident ignited a public process of elimination among media pundits.

It was only natural that, in light of the Benghazi attack in Libya the previous September, radical Islamic Jihadists, especially al-Qaeda (AQ), immediately came to mind as the most likely perpetrators. So too did the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a separatist organization that has waged a bloody guerrilla war against the government for the past three decades, with the goal of establishing an independent Kurdish state in what is presently southeastern Turkey.

In the venue of state-sponsored terrorism, Syria immediately surfaced as a prime candidate both willing and able to mount a suicide attack of the sort made against the U.S. Embassy in Ankara. The Turks also suspected the Syrian regime, under the leadership of President Bashar al-Assad, of complicity in an



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earlier bombing incident in the Turkish city of Gaziantep in August 2012. Another plausible candidate heading the list of potential state-sponsored terrorists was Iran, a country openly sympathetic to Assad's Syrian regime. The Iranians were also openly hostile to the imminent deployment of NATO Patriot missile batteries along Turkey's troubled southern border with Syria.

Finally, Turkey's spectrum of home-grown radical organizations is so broad that fixing responsibility for individual terrorist acts often poses a major challenge unless a particular group publicly steps forward to acknowledge the deed. In 2010 and 2011, fewer than half of the terrorist attacks in Istanbul could be attributed to a specific organization. Radical entities operating in Turkey include extreme right-wing nationalists, free-lance intelligence operatives, and any number of indigenous Islamic extremists.

## **Marginalized Marxists: Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures (TTP)**

Amidst all the speculation to the contrary, the Turkish government stood behind its initial suspicions regarding the organization responsible for carrying out the Ankara embassy bombing. In the weeks leading up to the attack, officials had been rounding up dozens of suspects associated with the outlawed Revolutionary People's Liberation Party, known by its Turkish acronym of DHKP/C.

During the 1970s the group espoused a Marxist-Leninist world view Americans formerly associated with the Baader-Meinhof gang in Germany and the Red Brigades in Italy. The DHKP/C originally called itself Devrimci Sol (Revolutionary Left), but in 1994 changed its name to the Revolutionary People's Liberation Army/Front. Although the organization's name changed, its values remained constant. The DHKP/C banner displays the hammer and sickle and red star symbols typically adopted by Communist organizations during the Cold War. One expert on Turkish policy currently on the faculty of St. Lawrence University observed that the DHKP/C is trapped in an "ideological time warp;" that its members have "cut themselves off" from the mainstream of Turkish society in a way that allows them to talk "to each other in a soundproof box," thus reinforcing the illusion that their outmoded message still resonates with a twenty-first-century political audience.<sup>3</sup> Though perhaps fading in relevance, the DHKP/C still manages to draw both recruits and funding support from the sizeable enclaves of marginalized Turkish expatriates currently residing in European countries. Its popularity with native Turks, though fading, fluctuates with the ups-and-downs of popular feeling toward NATO.



**Figure 4. Ecevit Sanli with SVIED**





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Forensic DNA testing, together with a statement posted by the DHKP/C on its own website, ended speculation over where to place responsibility for the Ankara embassy attack. Both confirmed the Turkish government's initial suspicions. The DHKP/C announced that one of its members, Ecevit Sanli, had made the ultimate sacrifice on behalf of the cause.

Sanli's actions were, at one and the same time, consistent with views held by the DHKP/C and a new variation of the TTP normally employed by that organization. Previously the TTP most frequently used involved planting "sound bombs" in Istanbul. These were most commonly detonated in trash cans, and the noise they made was primarily intended to frighten people as opposed to inflicting serious casualties. Exceptions to this general rule included a September 2012 suicide bombing that killed a policeman in an Istanbul suburb and, three years earlier, a foiled attempt by a female suicide bomber whose detonator malfunctioned to assassinate a former Minister of Justice at a university in Ankara. Consistent with its Marxist credo, the DHKP/C was also known for targeting U.S. business interests in Istanbul, exemplified by a May 2012 bombing of a U.S.-run restaurant. The Ankara embassy bombing, however, stands out as the organization's first violent attack against an official agency of the U.S. government.

Although the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the DHKP/C maintain a cordial dialogue and share a common Marxist philosophy, each has its own distinctive goals. The PKK advocates carving a sovereign Kurdish state out of what is now Turkish territory, whereas the DHKP/C aspires to overthrow the Turkish government and replace it with a new regime founded on Marxist-Leninist principles. Turkey and the United States have formally designated both the DHKP/C and PKK as terrorist organizations. Of the two, the PKK enjoys much broader popular support (at least among ethnic Kurds), and therefore presents a potentially greater capacity to foment a widespread insurgency than is the case with the DHKP/C. The National Counterterrorism Center indicates that between 2008 and 2010, groups sympathetic to the PKK were responsible for 60% of the attacks that occurred throughout Turkey, while only 5% were attributed to either the DHKP/C or radical Islamist groups. Terrorist actors responsible for the remaining 35% have yet to be identified. Both the PKK and the DHKP/C have well-established links to Turkish expatriate communities in Europe.

The DHKP/C's attack on the Ankara embassy represents a milestone in its use of violent TTP against Americans. Although in recent years the group has generally refrained from attacking U.S. targets, it has a consistent history of stridently opposing perceived American involvement in Turkish affairs. A statement posted on the organization's website, *The People's Cry*, drew the motivation behind the attack into sharper focus. Alongside a posed picture of Ecevit Sanli attired in paramilitary garb complete with a suicide vest, it read, "Murderer America! You will not run away from the people's rage." The statement demanded the removal of NATO Patriot missiles that were scheduled to go operational three days after the attack and observed, "Our action is for the independence of our country, which has become a new slave of America."<sup>4</sup>

Ross Wilson, who formerly served as U.S. ambassador to Turkey from 2005 to 2008, suggested that the DHKP/C was attempting to score "a twofer" in the Ankara embassy attack.<sup>5</sup> Besides capitalizing on popular opposition to NATO's deployment of Patriot missile in Turkey, the group could also embarrass



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the Turkish government and its security forces, and portray the United States as the root cause of Prime Minister Erdogan's opposition to the regime of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad.

## The Checkered Past of Ecevit Sanli

Ecevit Sanli, the man who carried out the suicide bombing of the American Embassy, was born in 1973 in Turkey's port city of Ordu. He later resided for a time in Gököy in northeastern Turkey. By the time of the Ankara embassy attack, Sanli's membership in the DHKP/C had spanned 20 years.

In 1997 a Turkish court tried Sanli for his role in a rocket attack against a military facility in Istanbul. Convicted of terrorism and subsequently sentenced to prison, he gained notoriety in leftist circles in 2000 by participating in a series of hunger strikes protesting the allegedly execrable conditions in Turkish prisons. Dozens of inmates died as the authorities forcibly suppressed these hunger strikes.

While the hunger strike episode was still ongoing, doctors diagnosed Sanli with Wernicke-Korschoff syndrome, a brain disorder that commonly results from malnutrition. Its symptoms include impaired vision, muscle coordination issues, memory loss and, in some cases, hallucinations. Meanwhile during this same period, Sanli had been transferred to a maximum security facility. After serving five years of his prison term, in 2002 Sanli secured an early release after the Turkish parliament passed a law granting exceptionally humane treatment for prison hunger-strikers afflicted with Wernicke-Korschoff syndrome.

Shortly after Turkish authorities paroled Sanli, he violated his probation and fled to Germany, which hosts the largest Turkish expatriate community in Europe, and apparently found shelter there among DHKP/C sympathizers. Germany, like the U.S. and Turkey, designated the DHKP/C as a terrorist organization, and bans any political activity on its behalf. In 2009 German authorities briefly detained Sanli for possessing DHKP/C propaganda. They continued to keep tabs on him thereafter until October 2012, when he seemed to "drop off the radar screen" of government law enforcement agencies.<sup>6</sup>

Meanwhile in 2002 Turkish authorities had tried Sanli in absentia, and sentenced him to life in prison. After obtaining false identity documents (the alleged forger is currently pending trial in Turkey), Sanli returned by way of Greece to his homeland, where he remained in hiding until the day he detonated his explosive vest at the U.S. Embassy gate in Ankara. At the time of his death, 15 years had elapsed since Sanli last contacted his father. The elder Sanli attributed his son's actions to ignorance. "What can I do?" asked Sadik Sanli. Ecevit "threw himself into the fire. He burned himself as well as me."<sup>7</sup>

## The Events of 1 February 2013

Shortly after 1300 hours local time, closed circuit television (CCTV) cameras positioned outside the Paris Street side of the U.S. Embassy perimeter captured images of a lone figure, whom guards apparently mistook for a courier, walking toward the security checkpoint at Gate 2, carrying what appeared to be an envelope. Subsequent DNA analysis confirmed the "courier's" identity as DHKP/C member Ecevit





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Sanli. Once Sanli reached Gate 2, Mustafa Akarsu, the guard posted there, opened the exterior (Paris Street) door of the gatehouse, a routine procedure in the absence of a drop-slot for packages.

Another security camera captured what happened after Sanli stepped into the checkpoint's interior. Once inside, the bomber unsuccessfully attempted to pass through a metal detector. When its alarm sounded, Sanli apparently panicked and reached for the detonator on his SVIED. CCTV footage went black immediately after a voice yelled, "Run away, a bomb!" The ensuing explosion



**Figure 5. Closed Circuit Television image of Sanli (background) approaching Gate 2**

killed both the terrorist and the security guard, and seriously wounded Didem Tunkay, a well-known Turkish television journalist who also happened to be passing through the checkpoint when Sanli detonated his SVIED. Tunkay's purpose in visiting the embassy that day was to have tea with the American Ambassador. Once her condition improved enough to ensure that her life was no longer in jeopardy, Ambassador Francis Ricciardone paid her a visit at a nearby Ankara hospital.

Sanli was apparently familiar enough with the embassy's physical configuration to know that walk-in visitors entered the embassy compound through Gate 2. He was probably unaware, however, that upon entering the checkpoint he would immediately encounter concentric rings of physical security. Embassy protection included a series of metal detectors and a glass security barrier of sufficient strength to save the life of Tunkay and two embassy guards stationed on the interior side of a partition that separated the walk-in area from another manned by guards who screened vehicles.

A subsequent analysis of the crime scene revealed that Sanli carried 13 pounds of TNT—a quantity sufficient to destroy a 2-story building—in addition to a hand grenade that produced a secondary explosion when Sanli detonated his suicide vest. The blast was strong enough to blow the checkpoint door off its hinges. People a mile away from the scene heard the explosion, which also shattered the windows in nearby buildings. One shop-owner on Paris Street noted pieces of flesh strewn among the tree branches and other debris that littered the area near the blast scene. Another witness observed "a lower leg and other human remains" lying in the street.<sup>8</sup>

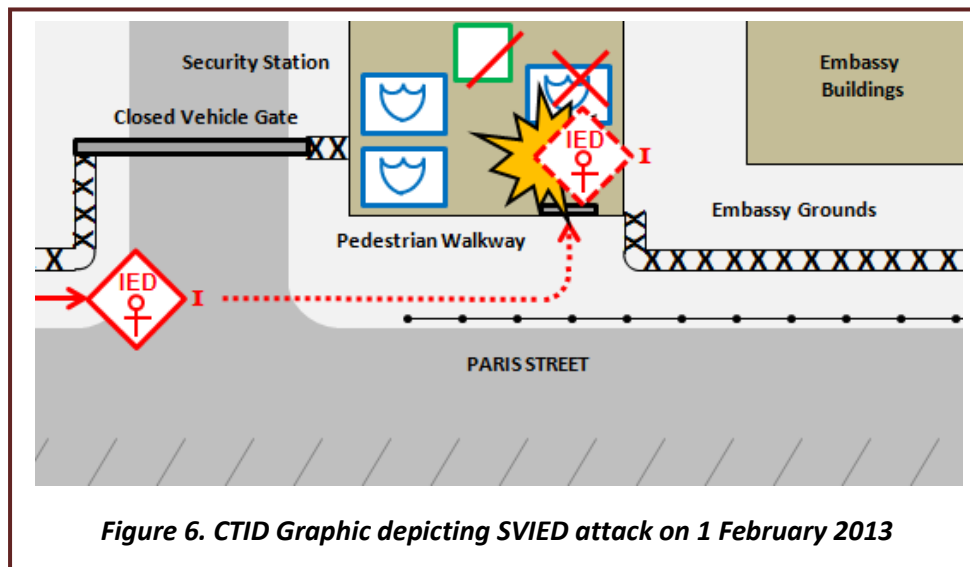
Immediately following the bombing, embassy personnel as well as Turkish police sprang into action, the former by moving present-for-duty staff to a safe haven inside the compound, and the latter by making an impressive show of force outside the embassy perimeter. So large was the police presence outside the compound that some observers feared that the suicide attack might be a terrorist diversion intended to draw first responders into a kill zone where a second explosion would then exponentially



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increase the number of casualties. Fortunately, however, these fears were not realized; security personnel promptly restored order and Ambassador Ricciardone emerged shortly after the incident to condemn the terrorist perpetrators, express solidarity with the Turkish government, and extend American sympathies to the family of the slain security guard.



*Figure 6. CTID Graphic depicting SVIED attack on 1 February 2013*

### Analyst Assessment

Undoubtedly a large disparity exists between the public explanation given by the DHKP/C for the suicide bombing of the Ankara embassy and the actual core reason that led to the attack. At the time of the 1 February incident, it was common knowledge among Turks that the newly-arrived NATO Patriot missile batteries were scheduled to “go hot” in about three days. Although this imminent reality surely infuriated the DHKP/C leadership, it also incidentally presented the group with an exceptional opportunity to capture media attention. The emphasis placed on Patriot missiles by the People’s Cry website supports the conclusion that the DHKP/C hoped to capitalize on this issue by using it as a propaganda weapon in the organization’s ongoing information war against the regime of Prime Minister Recip Tayyip Erdogan.

Another important consideration is a long-standing cozy relationship between the DHKP/C and Syrian intelligence services that dates as far back as the Cold War. It is true that the leftist organization’s membership and track record sometimes cause it to be seen as a proxy in the arena of state-sponsored terrorism. Still, in the high-stakes game where its regime’s survival hangs in the balance, it seems unlikely that Syrian intelligence (or Iran either, for that matter) would risk arousing American anger over a relatively trivial SVIED incident that promised very little in the way of strategic payback. To assume



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that either Syria or Iran played a key role in conceiving or planning the Ankara embassy attack carries a risk of oversimplification.

The 1 February SVIED attack most likely resulted from a combination of cult mentality and retaliation borne out of desperation. The DHKP/C collectively sensed that Prime Minister Erdogan left it with little choice but to punish a regime that recently had placed it under immense pressure. Over time, the organization's demonstrated tendency to commit brash acts for no better reason than obeying the whims of its leaders has caused many Turks and outsiders alike to perceive it as something resembling a cult.

Tensions elevated in January 2013 when the government received new intelligence indicating DHKP/C intent to attack foreign targets. Before the end of the month, security forces had rounded up more than one hundred of the group's members in a country-wide sweep. This preemptive strike by government authorities followed in the wake of leftist demonstrations in Adana, Gazientep, and the port city of Iskenderum that entailed burning American flags and protestors chanting, "Yankee go home." More than anything else, the attack on the American Embassy in Ankara represents pushback from an outmoded Marxist faction that a reliable and proactive regional ally of the United States is speeding down the road to ultimate extinction.

## Training Implications

- Soft targets that are also highly visible, especially U.S. government agencies with gaps in their physical security, enable threat actors to manipulate international news media into magnifying the importance of specific terrorist attacks.
- The Ankara embassy bombing is an excellent example of an "SVIED Recon and Return" attack explained on page 63 in TRADOC G2 Handbook No. 107 C3, [A Soldier's Primer to Terrorism TTP](#).
- Layered physical security and force protection measures, together with current and well-rehearsed evacuation plans, can potentially minimize or neutralize the effects of a terrorist attack.
- Training scenarios simulating this type of attack would require very few role players, and could be easily tailored for use in home station training environments.
- Insurgents may use IEDs as a diversion for drawing first responders into a kill zone rigged with one or more additional IEDs intended to maximize the number of casualties.



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## Related Products

Follow these links to view related products:

- [Abiding Threat at Camp Chapman](#)
- [Taliban Attack on Camp Bastion](#)
- [Indonesia Embassy Bombing in Paris](#)

See also the [Red Diamond Newsletter](#), which contains current articles on a variety of topics useful to both soldiers and civilians ranging from enemy TTP to the nature and analysis of various threat actors.

For detailed information on weapons and equipment, see the [Worldwide Equipment Guide](#).

AKO: <https://www.us.army.mil/suite/portal/index.jsp>

**Threat Products: AKO“Easy-Link”**  
Contemporary Operational Environment and Threat Integration Directorate

The screenshot shows the AKO (Army Knowledge Online) interface. On the left, there is a login section with fields for Username and Password, and a 'Login' button circled in red. Below this is a 'CAC Login' section. On the right, there is a 'Favorites' list with a search bar. The search results show a list of items, with 'TRISA-CTID' highlighted in red. A red arrow points from the search bar to the highlighted item. The interface also includes a navigation menu on the left with various links like 'Home', 'About', 'Contact', etc.

1. Login
2. “Click” Files
3. Search to:  
TRADOC G2  
TRISA-CTID
4. “Click” & Find !





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## POCs

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913-684-7929 (COMM)  
552-7929 (DSN)

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## Figure Credits

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Figure 1. Satellite view of U.S. Embassy Compound, Ankara, modified. [RAPID Report Number 3057-1, 26 February 2013.](#)  
Figure 2. Map from [Nationmaster.com](#).  
Figure 3. The American Ambassador and his wife place flowers on the Grave of Mustafa Akarsu. [U.S. Embassy, Ankara.](#)  
Figure 4. Ecevit Sanli with SVIED. [RAPID Report Number 3057-1, 26 February 2013.](#)  
Figure 5. Closed Circuit Television image of Sanli approaching Gate 2. [RAPID Report Number 3057-1, 26 February 2013.](#)  
Figure 6. CTID graphic depicting SVIED attack on 1 February 2013.

## End Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Scott Stewart, [“Soft Targets Back in Focus,”](#) Stratfor Security Weekly, 14 February 2013.
- <sup>2</sup> [“U.S. Ambassador Attends Security Guard’s Funeral,”](#) *Hurriyet Daily News*, 2 February 2013.
- <sup>3</sup> Christopher Torchia, [“Turkey Embassy Bombing: Communism, Cold War Tactics Behind Militant Attack,”](#) *Huffington Post*, 2 February 2013.
- <sup>4</sup> Seltem Lyigun and Nick Tattersall, [“Turkey Says Tests Confirm Leftist Bombed U.S. Embassy,”](#) Reuters, 2 February 2013.



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<sup>5</sup> Ross Wilson, [“Ankara Embassy Bombing: Not Another Benghazi,”](#) Atlantic Council, 1 February 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Fitsanakis, [“German Authorities had Monitored Turkish Bomber of U.S. Embassy,”](#) IntelNews.org, 5 February 2013.

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