



Months after a trio of Kurdish activists were shot, the case remains unsolved. The sole suspect is a more complex character than previously reported

In Paris, three murders and a mystery

BY NICHOLAS VINOCUR AND ALEXANDRA HUDSON

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The three Kurdish activists living in Paris were about to embark on a trip when they disappeared, their phones ringing endlessly as colleagues tried to locate them. The next morning, Jan. 10, a friend opened the locked door of their office in the city centre and found a scene of horror.

Lying face-up on the floor of a large waiting room in the Kurdish Information Centre was the body of Leyla Saylemez, 25. Blood had trickled from her nose and mouth. A few paces behind her, partly hidden by

a coffee table, were the tangled bodies of two comrades: Fidan Dogan, 32, a prominent spokeswoman for Kurdish issues in France, and Sakine Cansiz, 55, a founding member of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which has fought a bloody 30-year struggle for Kurdish autonomy from Turkey.

All three women had all been shot at close range, investigators later said. They bore frozen, stunned expressions, the friend who discovered the bodies told Reuters, which has uncovered new details about a

GUNNED DOWN:

The victims were killed at close range but with no sign of a struggle. A member of the Kurdish community who attended the scene wore the women's portraits pinned to their coat

REUTERS/CHRISTIAN HARTMANN

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case that may affect the peace process between Turkey and the PKK.

The friend declined to be named, but Murat Polat, an activist who also arrived at the scene, said: “We were horrified, everyone was in shock. There was a lot of fear. People thought they might be targeted too.”

The murders quickly became a rallying point for Europe’s ethnic Kurds, who number more than a million. The PKK is outlawed as a terrorist organisation by Turkey, the United States and the European Union. But for many Kurds, the group is a symbol of a stateless people, and Cansiz a hero.

In the hours after news of the murders emerged, thousands of people gathered near the Kurdish Information Centre on Rue Lafayette chanting, “We are all PKK,” as riot police stood by.

Visible on news footage of the gathering is Omer Guney, a Turkish immigrant to France who had joined the activists’ scene months before. Clean-shaven and wearing a hefty winter coat, he stood near the door to the apartment building that houses the centre as France’s Interior Minister Manuel Valls described the murders as an “execution.”

Guney had driven Cansiz to the office on the morning of the killings. By Jan. 21, the 30-year-old was the prime suspect in the case, after closed-circuit television footage showed he had also been at the premises later on the day of the murders.

Many Kurds suspect the killer or killers, whoever they were, were part of a Turkish plot to infiltrate the PKK and assassinate the activists. The PKK’s leader, Abdullah Ocalan, who is incarcerated on a Turkish island, recently agreed to a historic ceasefire with the Turkish state.

Mehmet Ulker, head of an umbrella organisation of Kurdish groups in France, said he believes the murders were meant to intimidate the Kurds as talks over a possible ceasefire began. Muzaffer Ayata, 57, a founding member of the PKK who has lived in Germany since 2002, told Reuters there were signs shadowy elements within



UNDER INVESTIGATION: Omer Guney, a 30-year-old Turkish immigrant to France, is being held by French authorities investigating the case. He denies being responsible for the killings. **REUTERS/FIRAT NEWS AGENCY/HANDOUT**

the Turkish state “committed this assassination to sabotage the peace process.”

Turkey has denied such allegations, suggesting instead that the murders were related to internal disputes in the PKK. It blames the PKK for the deaths of more than 40,000 people, mostly Kurdish, who have died since the militant group took up arms against the state in 1984.

Guney is being held in a Paris jail under formal investigation for “murder related to a terrorist enterprise” and “criminal conspiracy.” He denies he killed the women. His lawyer told Reuters that a medical condition made him incapable of committing such an elaborate crime. He had been treated for a tumour in his brain, his lawyer said, though activists who knew Guney say

he showed no obvious impairment.

Many questions remain. If Guney was involved, was he set up? Were the three women killed by just one person? What was the motive?

“The investigators are walking on eggshells,” said Guney’s lawyer. “The diplomatic context is very sensitive; they are not taking any chances.”

A Reuters examination has found fresh information about Guney’s past and how he came to mix with the PKK despite it being unclear whether he had any Kurdish roots. A man who many in the Kurdish community call a maverick emerges as a complex character, a gun enthusiast with health problems who has had at least one brush with European police.

“ALWAYS ARMED”

Guney was born in the Turkish city of Sarkisla in the region of Sivas as the only son, along with four daughters, of a Turkish family. According to Guney’s state-appointed lawyer, Anne-Sophie Laguens, his family immigrated to France in the

“He suffers from very serious neurological difficulties.

Anne-Sophie Laguens

the state-appointed lawyer for Omer Guney, describing his health problems

mid-1990s and installed themselves in the outer Paris suburb of Garges-les-Gonesse.

Neighbours confirmed that in 2005, Guney's parents opened a kebab restaurant in the nearby suburb of St. Denis. A nearby barber said he knew Guney's father and described his family as "nice people who never spoke about politics."

Little is known about Guney's early life in France except that he received a high school-level diploma as a mechanic from a French lycee. Laguens said that at some point Guney moved to a town on the outskirts of Munich, Germany, to live with his wife, a Turkish woman he had met in France and married in 2003.

There, Guney held a job for several years at a medium-sized firm called Kinshofer, which makes cranes and forklifts.

A colleague who worked with Guney between 2009 and 2011 described him as a "fairly neutral guy" who always appeared well-dressed in suits or jeans and suit jackets, and had a keen interest in weapons. Guney owned an air pistol that he took with him to work and had the image of a Kalashnikov rifle as the background screen of his telephone, the colleague said.

"Once an Albanian told me to be careful, 'Guney is someone who is always armed'," he said.

At Kinshofer, staffed by many Turks from Guney's home region of Sivas, some Turkish workers harassed Kurdish employees, the colleague said. Guney did not join in; instead, he took an interest in Kurdish issues, telling the colleague that he had a Kurdish grandmother. It was not possible to verify that claim.

The work colleague said Guney expressed an interest in meeting other Kurds. "He always said to me, 'tell me who you are meeting, who are your contacts, take me with you, you can trust me ... I have good friends who will make sure nothing happens'."

At one stage Guney said he had a tumour in his head and took several months off work. When he returned, he told the

Main areas of Kurdish population

● Kurdish majority areas

▨ Mixed population areas



Source: M. Izady – Gulf/2000 Project, Columbia University

colleague that he was fine, but that his marriage was deteriorating.

"He told me, 'I have nobody,'" the colleague said.

In 2011, Guney divorced his wife and began to make frequent trips to France, his lawyer said. During one of these trips he joined a Kurdish association in Villiers-le-Bel, a town not far from his parents' home. The director of the association, the Kurdish Cultural House, recalled signing Guney's membership application form but found him unremarkable.

"Our group is open to anyone of any background, including Turks, so there was no reason for me to be suspicious of Guney," said Mehmet Subasi. "At that level of the organisation, there is no screening."

Local activists said it was not unusual for left-wing Turks to join their movement, which may offer a haven to those feeling marginalised in European society.

Guney began to spend more time at the association, offering to help with errands.

He gave different versions of his background to different members, telling one that his father was Kurdish and another that he merely assumed a Kurdish identity to obtain political asylum in France, two activists who knew Guney said.

Ulker, the head of the Kurdish umbrella group in France, said that Guney's story seemed to change depending on the background of the person he was addressing. "When he spoke to an Alevi, he would say 'I am an Alevi, too,'" Ulker said, referring to a Muslim sect in Turkey. "When he spoke to a Sunni, he would say 'I am also a Sunni (Muslim)'. And when someone exposed him he would say, 'Ah, I was only joking'."

In August 2012, Guney returned to his home in Germany and said he had to move out of his rented room immediately, according to his former landlady. Neighbours friendly with Guney's parents said this move coincided with the death of his grandmother.

According to his lawyer, Guney travelled to Ankara, Turkey's capital, several times in

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2012, flying on low-cost airlines.

Meral Danis Bestas, a leader of the Kurdish BDP Party in Turkey who travelled to Paris and spoke to investigators, said on Friday that it was “very strange” no information about why Guney travelled to Ankara was forthcoming from French police. A French judicial source said investigators were still verifying the trips and were exchanging information with Turkey.

Guney’s lawyer told Reuters: “The trips were to find a perfect wife.”

MENTAL HEALTH

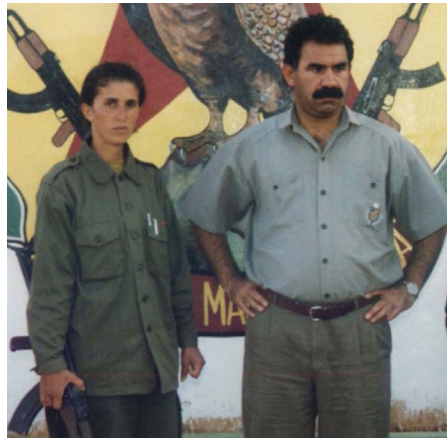
After returning to Paris, Guney moved back in with his parents and briefly worked as a maintenance officer at the Charles de Gaulle airport. The stint was cut short when Guney suffered a seizure on the job and was taken for treatment at the Saint-Anne Hospital in Paris, a specialist centre for neurology and psychiatry, his lawyer said.

She said Guney was diagnosed with a brain tumour which caused frequent bouts of amnesia and provoked seizures. An uncle of Guney’s from Sivas interviewed on Turkey’s CNN affiliate said that he was “unable to remember what he ate an hour ago.” After his release from hospital, Guney received 700 to 800 euros per month in French disability payments.

“He suffers from very serious neurological difficulties,” Laguens said.

During this period of unemployment in early 2012, activists said, Guney started to appear at the Kurdish Cultural Centre in central Paris. The large facility houses several Kurdish associations, and is a short walk from the Kurdish Information Centre, which is known as an office for PKK activists. Nobody recalls having met Guney before he turned up.

“We realised later that nobody really knew him. He hung around the Centre, he smiled, he talked to people in Turkish, but nobody knew his family or friends,” said Polat, the activist who attended the scene of the murders soon after they were discovered.



ARMED STRUGGLE: Sakine Cansiz with gun in hand, pictured in 1995 alongside Abdullah Ocalan, leader of the PKK militant group.

REUTERS/ILHAS NEWS AGENCY

In photographs from an outing with activists in March 2012, Guney is seen on the first floor of the Eiffel Tower hoisting a banner hailing Ocalan, the jailed leader of the PKK.

Berivan Akyol, a translator for the Kurdish community, said that despite his neurological problems Guney was capable of showing up on time for appointments, was able to drive and never complained of headaches or lost his balance.

Thanks to his fluent French, Guney was often called upon to translate for Kurdish women who wanted to communicate with their doctors, activists said. He also occasionally worked as a driver.

Last December, Guney accompanied a group of Kurdish activists on a trip to the Netherlands for a rally in the southwestern town of Ellemeet attended by PKK officials in Europe. The rally was broken up by 150 Dutch police, who arrested 55 people. Among them were Guney and Saylemez, the 25-year-old activist later shot in Paris (whose name in some reports has been spelled Soylemez). Guney was released the same day without charge.

That month, Guney moved into a flat in a high-rise building in the Paris suburb

of La Courneuve, with a Turk of Kurdish origin whom he had met at the Villiers-le-Bel association. In an interview with Firat, a news agency linked to the PKK, the flatmate said that Guney owned five mobile phones which he refused to lend, and had shown him a gun. The flatmate, who was taken in for questioning by police along with Guney on Jan. 17, did not respond to repeated requests for comment.

Subasi of the Kurdish association in Villiers-le-Bel said that after the murders he had questioned the flatmate, who had told him the gun shown to him by Guney had looked real. Guney’s lawyer said the gun was merely an air pistol and explained his interest in weapons as a cultural proclivity of Turkish men.

THE VICTIMS

On Jan. 8, the day before the murders, Sakine Cansiz went to renew her French residency visa in Paris, said Akyol, the Kurdish translator. To Cansiz’s outrage, police refused to issue the visa that day, saying it was not ready, according to Akyol, who spoke to Cansiz about the process. The police declined to comment.

“I told her, ‘Calm down, this is France, there is no point in getting excited,’” Akyol said. “She could not hide her militant side, that was part of her personality.”

Cansiz’s temperament formed part of her legend among PKK supporters and Kurdish activists. Known by her code name “Sara” in the PKK, she had joined Ocalan’s movement as a student in the early 1970s before becoming a fighter. The PKK originally sought an independent Kurdish state, but has moderated its demands to seeking political autonomy and cultural rights.

Arrested by Turkish forces in the early 1980s, Cansiz spent a decade in the infamous Diyarbakir prison in eastern Turkey, where she said she was tortured. The experience forged a mindset based on unwavering personal discipline, said Ulker and other Kurdish activists.

Turkish sources said Cansiz had her differences with the organisation's elite. She had fled to Europe in the 1990s and followed a nomadic lifestyle, travelling between Paris, Brussels and Cologne, Germany, cities with large Kurdish exile populations.

Though Kurdish activists said she had come to deal mainly with women's issues in the PKK, Cansiz almost certainly retained a wider political role.

According to a 2007 diplomatic cable revealed by WikiLeaks, U.S. officials saw her as a key figure in the flow of funds sent from Europe to PKK leaders in Iraq - a role that has prompted speculation the killings' motivation may have been robbery, not politics. Ayata, the founding member of the PKK who lives in Germany, said Cansiz had nothing to do with financing the group.

On Jan. 9 Cansiz was planning to travel to Cologne and then on to attend conferences in Qandil, a district in the mountainous borderlands of northern Iraq where the PKK operates permanent bases, said a PKK official. Some Kurds believe Cansiz opposed the ceasefire talks. Ulker disagrees.

"There are disagreements in the PKK, like any organisation, but Cansiz was not a renegade," he said. "The reason for this killing, whoever was behind it, was to intimidate and provoke the Kurds as the (ceasefire) talks began, to cow them into weakness."

Saylemez, who was killed alongside Cansiz, was an area manager in the PKK youth organisation, and had planned to accompany her better-known comrade to Germany. "She was due to come to Germany the day she died," her sister Yasmin told Reuters. "We never expected something like this could happen in Europe. Never."

The other woman at the centre was Dogan, who acted as an informal spokeswoman for Kurdish issues in France. The role had led her to meet journalists and officials, including President Francois Hollande.

The three were bright, fit and experienced. At 55, the combat-trained Cansiz

continued to rise early each morning to go on an hour-long run or exercise in her room, according to Akjol.

Could one man with a mental impairment shoot all three with clinical accuracy?

10 BULLETS

Prosecutor Francois Mollins said the main piece of evidence linking Guney to the killings is closed-circuit TV footage showing him entering the Kurdish Information Centre building with Cansiz around 9 a.m. on Jan. 9. Guney told interrogators he left the building for good at 11.30 a.m.

But cameras across the street recorded him entering with a shoulder bag shortly after noon and emerging, alone, at 12:56 p.m. Guney later said he could no longer recall exactly what time he had left the building but he maintained the women were alive when he did, according to his lawyer.

Forensic specialists found no signs of a struggle inside the office. There were four empty glasses in the kitchen sink, Ulker and other Kurdish sources assisting the police said. It appeared the three victims knew their killer and had been caught by surprise, police sources said.

Dogan had her coat on as though she had been about to leave the office, a converted apartment, said Polat, the Kurdish activist who attended the scene, and Cansiz was bleeding from several head wounds. She and Saylemez both had blackened, swollen eyes, said Ulker, who saw the corpses at the morgue. Aside from the bodies on the floor and a packed suitcase lying open next to the coffee table, the room was neat and undisturbed.

“It was a deliberate murder and assassination. As long as it remains unsolved ... then the peace process is in danger.

Selahattin Demirtas

a co-leader of the Kurdish BDP party

Autopsies showed the women were killed by bullets fired into their heads at close range, three each for Dogan and Saylemez, and four for Cansiz. Ballistics experts found two brands of 7.65mm calibre bullets at the site. Molins said the bullets had "most likely" been fired from a single gun. The attack "looked like the work of a professional," a judicial source told France's TF1 television.

Traces of gunpowder were found on a bag in Guney's car. Guney cannot explain the traces because the reason for them being there "is too uncertain," said his lawyer. Partial DNA traces recovered on a bullet casing from the murder scene were inconclusive and no gun has been recovered, the prosecutor said.

Some Kurdish activists at the Information Centre suggest others might have gained access to the building via an entrance leading into its hallway from an adjacent grocery store, which was closed and shuttered that day.

In the aftermath of the shootings, Guney stayed in and around Paris. As well as being caught on CCTV in the crowd outside the centre, he also attended a rally in memory of the victims on the outskirts of Paris a few days later.

Activists asked Guney to help police with their investigation because he had been Cansiz's driver on the day of the women's murder, said Polat. Guney went to police for an initial round of questioning on Jan. 16 and was asked to return the following day.

Anti-terrorism investigators questioned Guney and his flatmate for about 96 hours, the maximum period allowed in terrorism cases in France. The flatmate was released while Guney stayed in custody. On Jan. 21 a prosecutor told journalists that Guney was "probably the author or one of the authors of these acts".

Under French law Guney could remain in jail for up to a year, with possible extension to a maximum of four years, subject to review by judges overseeing the case.



AFTERMATH: The killings provoked shock and outrage, with members of the Kurdish community placing flags, flowers and candles outside the Kurdish Information Centre in Paris. **REUTERS/CHRISTIAN HARTMANN**

French judicial sources declined to comment on their theories for a possible motive. Though police sources at first touted several suggestions, ranging from a love spat gone wrong to internal PKK score-settling to a temporary bout of insanity, they have since stayed silent.

Guney has claimed to be the victim of a Franco-Turkish plot, according to Ulker's conversations with police, and told police that surveillance footage had been tampered with to remove images of other men, according to Ulker. Guney's lawyer denied he mentioned a plot during questioning.

French and Kurdish media reported that Guney told police he was a member of the PKK, potentially fuelling suspicions that the killings were related to tensions within the organisation. But the PKK leadership denies Guney was a member, and Guney's lawyer said that he did not claim to be a fully fledged member of the organisation.

PKK sources prefer to point the finger at Turkey. They said warnings by Turkish government officials days after the shootings

that PKK officials were unsafe hinted at state involvement in the murders. Roj Welat, a senior PKK fighter based in northern Iraq, described the killings as a "political massacre" and "an international conspiracy."

Turkish officials reject such allegations.

After decades of conflict, the decision by Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan to talk openly with PKK leader Ocalan is fraught with political risk. Erdogan has to carry with him a sceptical conservative establishment; Ocalan has to keep the obedience of fighters in the remote mountains of Qandil, some harbouring doubts about the process.

The Paris shootings had an almost immediate political impact. After news of the deaths, Ocalan suspended talks with Turkey for five or six weeks and demanded that the killer be identified, according to Ulker who has talked with people in the Kurdish BDP party who visited Ocalan.

In late March Turkey and the PKK finally signed a ceasefire agreement. At the same time a wider peace process continues and the deaths of the three activists remain

a sensitive issue.

Yesterday, Selahattin Demirtas, a co-leader of the Kurdish BDP party, told Reuters: "It was a deliberate murder and assassination. As long as it remains unsolved, as to who was behind this, then the peace process is in danger. That is why it is important to find out who was behind the murders."

Additional reporting by Daren Butler and Ayla Jean Yackley in Istanbul; Chine Labbe and Nicolas Bertin in Paris; Editing By Richard Woods and Simon Robinson

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