

Tuesday Changed Everything

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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A discussion of how the Istanbul airport attack will affect Turkey's tourism sector, its war footing against ISIS, its domestic political climate, and other key factors.

The Cipher Brief spoke with Soner Cagaptay, the Beyer Family Fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute, to discuss the dramatic implications of the latest major terrorist attack in Turkey.

The Cipher Brief: How could Tuesday's attack on Ataturk International Airport in Istanbul impact Turkey's security moving forward?

Soner Cagaptay: This is a serious escalation by ISIS, which has thus far engaged in what I call limited warfare against Turkey. ISIS has targeted Turkey in the past but has shied away from major strikes. For instance, ISIS hit the old city in Istanbul and afterward Istiklal Street. These attacks pale when compared to the scope, the damage, and the impact of the airport attack. The Ataturk airport attack is not only significant because it killed dozens of people and injured more than 100, but also because it will have a negative effect on Turkey's economy and tourism industry. This could cost Turkey billions of dollars. The country's image of being a place that's safe for business and safe for tourists to visit is also going to be tarnished.

The attack further suggests that this is a major escalation from ISIS. The group has gone from being in limited warfare with Turkey to being fully engaged in war with Turkey. Turkey's reaction will probably be something of equal level. Thus far, Turkey has committed itself to fighting ISIS but only in a limited sense. The relationship between Turkey and ISIS has really evolved. It started as what I would call a "Cold War" in 2014, when the group first emerged in Iraq and captured the city of Mosul. That relationship started a cold war in the sense that at that time ISIS took hostage a number of Turkish diplomats at the council in Mosul, and Turkey wanted to secure their release. There was also a Turkish enclave inside Syria, which was surrounded by ISIS, and Turkey wanted to obviously evacuate those soldiers. But at that time, for example, ISIS did not execute the Turkish diplomats and it did not overrun the Turkish enclave because it still was engaged in cold war with Turkey. It didn't really want to hit Turkey

because it was using Turkey at that time as a conduit, a passageway to smuggle foreign fighters into Syria and to smuggle antiquities and oil out of Syria and Iraq, as well as to bring in funds and weapons.

That cold war came to an end once Turkey was able to secure the release of its hostages and also evacuate its enclave inside Syria. The evacuation happened in February last year, and at that time, the relationship moved to what became what I called earlier this state of limited warfare, with ISIS launching a couple of attacks, Turkey increasing border controls, and Turkey coming on board with the U.S. to combat ISIS. But it was not full-scale war until Tuesday.

Tuesday changes everything. Following Tuesday this is now all-out war declared by ISIS against Turkey, and Turkey will respond in kind.

The question was never in my view a question of if ISIS would attack Turkey in a spectacular way like this, but when it would. This is primarily due to the fact that if ISIS represents an anomaly in Islam, Turkey represents what's normal in Islam. Turkey is a secular country with a democratic constitution, full gender equality, a member of NATO, in accession talks with the EU, a friend of the U.S., and has just made up with Israel. Everything Turkey has is antithetical to everything ISIS wants to create. So the question wasn't if, it was when the group would attack.

But there are also tactical reasons why ISIS attacked. One is that Turkey has been working with the U.S. inside Syria to push back against ISIS. Turkish-backed rebels were actually combatting the group in the Azaz Corridor. They were pushing ISIS from the west side of that corridor, and then the U.S.-backed Kurds were pushing from the east side of that corridor. ISIS felt the heat of Turkish assistance to the U.S. and wasn't happy about this and decided to finally call it off and launch the war with Turkey that was ultimately unavoidable. Moving forward, the Turkish-ISIS relationship has entered into this stage.

TCB: How is Turkey likely to respond? Are we going to see more domestic crackdown on ISIS cells operating in Turkey?

SC: There will certainly be a massive domestic crackdown as well as increased cooperation with the U.S. to shut the Turkish-Syrian border. That's where Turkey will need the U.S. to bring in technological and other intelligence assets that are distant from Turkey's arsenal, such as drones and others.

Border control is going to become a huge issue because I wouldn't be surprised if we find out that the terrorists who blew themselves up came through that border. It is also likely -- as was the case in the previous attacks -- that the attackers were Turkish citizens who went to Syria, became radicalized, and came back. The two previous attacks were carried out by actual Turkish citizens who went to Syria, became radicalized, and then came back to kill several Turkish citizens. So there is an element of border control, which is going to become more important.

Then there will be more airstrikes -- Turkey with its allies. The last part of potential Turkish action is the most doubtful: Turkish conventional troops, ground troops.

Turkey will have to act harsh for a couple of reasons. Number one, ISIS hit the Turkish economic capital, it hit Turkey's reputation, and it wants to damage the Turkish tourism industry and the Turkish economy. So the government has to react. But there's another issue here: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who is basically running a political campaign as a strong-man right-wing president, cannot let ISIS get away with this. Erdogan's AKP party has maxed out twice at 49.5 percent in the most recent elections of 2011 and 2015. Erdogan wants to become an executive-style president and he wants to change the constitution. He wants to change Turkey's system from parliamentary democracy to a presidential system, and he has over 50 percent of the vote for that. Erdogan has been running a national campaign as a strong man to build his popularity. He will therefore have to react with an iron fist to show that he's a tough guy, and he won't let ISIS get away with it. That's why you will likely see a massive crackdown, stronger border controls and Turkish airstrikes.

But the last part that's missing is the deployment of Turkish troops in Syria. Until this incident there wasn't much support for Turkish intervention in Syria -- the public was against it. Now most Turks are so appalled and disgusted that there will be, not unanimous, but stronger public support for intervention. But the issue here is that Turkey cannot really send troops into Syria without Russia's blessing, especially after the plane incident in November, when Turkey shot down a Russian plane, which had violated Turkish airspace. Russia effectively made northern Syria its no fly zone, meaning a no fly zone for Turkish planes. Russia set up an air defense bubble, and the Russians are basically flying there looking for groups of planes to shoot down in retaliation for the November incident. So for Turkey to send in conventional troops, it needs Russia's blessings.

Enter the letter that Erdogan sent to Putin only two days ago, just before the attack in Istanbul, when he expressed his regrets for the plane incident, to which the Russians responded positively, lifting some travel restrictions for tourists. Of course the relationship is not normalized yet, there's still a long way to go. Putin wants a full apology from Erdogan before he'll normalize.

TCB: How could this attack affect the tourism industry and business investments in Turkey moving forward?

SG: Turkey's economic power is to be reckoned with and a lot of it is invested in Istanbul, as I have written in my book, *The Rise of Turkey* (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-rise-of-turkey-the-twenty-first-centurys-first-muslim-power>). Istanbul is the sixth most visited city in the world, and the Istanbul airport is the third busiest in Europe and eleventh in the world. It's the airport that offers the most flights to most destinations. The attack will hurt that and hurt the idea that this is a hub that's safe and convenient. And it will also hurt Turkey's image that this is a country that is safe to do business with and safe to travel to. That's why Turkey did its best to clean up the airport and put it back into service in under 24 hours after the attack, unlike Belgium, which took them weeks to reopen. Turkey could not afford to have the image that the country's been shut down, and it wanted to show that it's resilient, it's okay, this is just a lapse, and that of course Turkey is strong and kicking.

But we know that ISIS has networks inside Turkey. We know that it has used Turkey to cross into Syria for a long time. We also know that ISIS is aware of the weaknesses of the Turkish security system and that it will exploit them to unfortunately carry out more attacks. The Turkish government really has to ruthlessly crack down now on ISIS networks so that similar events don't take place.

Overall, the effect on tourism is going to be very negative. Because of past terror attacks and the Russian boycott after the plane incident, tourism has already suffered. Tourism revenues were at their worst in the past 20 years even before the attack in Istanbul. Now they'll go down even further. More than 35 billion people visit Turkey, it is the sixth most visited country in the world, and it makes more than \$30 billion in revenue from tourism.

TCB: The signs point to this being an ISIS attack, but was there any initial thought that it could have been a Kurdish militant group that conducted the attack?

SC: The signs always seem to have pointed to ISIS. The main reason is that the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) carried out two suicide attacks in Ankara, this year, but there was substantial backlash from Turks, who were appalled that the group was killing fellow citizens, as well as from the western world, where the PKK tried to clean up its image as a terrorist organization as the PKK franchises -- Party for Democratic Union, the PYD and its military YPG -- are fighting ISIS. The PKK image is of course different, and I think the PKK realized that more suicide attacks would tarnish the group's image and prevent it from cleaning up its image. So the PKK was ruled out primarily because of that. ❖

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