

What Is Behind the Istanbul Attack?

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Brief Analysis

The Islamic State's choice of target likely reflects a very deliberate attempt to short-circuit U.S.-Turkish military efforts along the Syrian border and exacerbate tensions in Europe.

The January 12 Islamic State (IS) attack in Istanbul appears to have multiple motives. First, by striking in the heart of the old city center -- which has many mosques, museums, and tourists, but few Turks -- the group targeted the country's lucrative tourism industry and its \$30 billion in annual revenues. At least ten people were killed in the suicide blast, all of them tourists. If such attacks continue, they would have a debilitating effect on the industry and, in turn, the country's balance of payments.

Second, by bringing the war to Turkey's largest city, IS aims to undercut the planned U.S.-Turkish campaign against its forces in Syria, which is reportedly scheduled to begin in a matter of weeks following Vice President Joe Biden's January 23 visit to Ankara. The apparent goal of the joint plan is to capture the sixty-mile-long Jarabulus-Azaz corridor along the Syrian border, most of which is currently held by IS. If successful, the campaign would effectively plug the group's last overland conduit from Syria into Turkey and Europe. The IS leadership is well aware that such a development would hurt its finances, recruitment efforts, and prestige, so it appears to have acted preemptively in the hope that Turkey will stand down or at least not escalate its military efforts. And by keeping the Istanbul attack relatively limited -- at least compared to its larger operations in Paris and elsewhere -- the group is likely signaling that it can inflict much worse damage inside Turkey if Ankara launches a full-scale war against it in concert with Washington.

Third, while IS may not have known the nationality of the people it targeted, it deliberately conducted the attack in an area heavily frequented by German and other European tourists; indeed, at least nine Germans were killed. The group therefore seems intent on exacerbating anti-Muslim sentiments on the continent and driving further backlash

against German chancellor Angela Merkel's pro-refugee policy. Any such backlash would be a sad bit of irony, since many of the refugees Merkel has admitted are fleeing IS brutality in Syria.

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