

The War on Terror Arrives in Istanbul: Implications for Turkey, Europe, and the United States

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Brief Analysis

Last week's suicide bombings in Istanbul -- the first pair on November 15 targeting two synagogues, and a second pair on November 20 targeting the city's British consulate and a high-rise building housing a British-owned bank -- cost Turkey dearly, with 57 dead and more than 700 injured. Many of the victims were Turkish Muslims, with smaller numbers of Turkish Jews, Turkish Christians, and foreign citizens among them.

Perhaps the most striking repercussion of the attacks is that Turkey has now clearly emerged as a new front in the war on terror. Al-Qaeda claimed responsibility for the bombings, and indeed, Turkey represents everything that the organization wants to destroy. Al-Qaeda hopes to wipe out Muslims who embrace the West, Jews, Christians, democracy, and secularism, and Turkey constitutes the ultimate threat to that goal. As long as Turkey shines as a secular democracy, it stands as a rebuttal of al-Qaeda's core ethos. Given Turkey's critical role in this regard, Ankara and its allies must consider what additional steps they can take to counter the terrorist threat against Turkey.

Background: A New Kind of Threat for Turkey?

The modus operandi of the suicide bombings -- which required excellent strategic planning and tons of explosives, and which were carried out by Turkish citizens -- points to a striking new phenomenon: Turkish Islamist terrorist groups, once regarded as minor, have reinvented themselves thanks to al-Qaeda's international network, and are now able to inflict massive damage in Turkey. For example, prior to last week, the Great Eastern Islamic Raiders' Front (IBDA-C) -- which took responsibility for all four attacks together with the Abu Hafez Masri Brigades, an al-Qaeda affiliate -- was thought to have limited terrorist capabilities. Since its emergence in the 1990s, IBDA-C had typically conducted attacks using only Molotov cocktails or handguns, until the Turkish security forces crushed the group in 1998.

The fact that IBDA-C or other local groups (e.g., the "Turkish Hizballah," an Iranian-supported Sunni Kurdish group that conducted several gruesome individual killings in the 1990s until it, too, was crushed by the government) are currently able to carry out massive attacks in Turkey indicates an exponential increase in their operational capabilities. For example, the intelligence to which the terrorists apparently had access proved crucial to the effectiveness of at least one of the attacks. The bomb-filled suicide truck that targeted the British consulate did not

crash into the main consulate building, but rather struck a small villa inside the compound where British consul general Roger Short was working temporarily. The bombers were evidently privy to this information beforehand and planned their attack accordingly: Short was killed in the bombing.

What Ankara Can Do

Some Turks will have difficulty accepting their religion as a driving force behind terrorism. These include conservative segments of the Turkish populace, as well as certain members of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) -- a party that, although rooted in Turkey's Islamist opposition, often describes itself as a conservative democratic movement. Some might even turn to fabricated scenarios to explain terrorist attacks. Following last weekend's synagogue bombings, for example, the Islamist and conservative press (e.g., newspapers such as *Yeni Safak* and *Vakit*, which thrive thanks to Turkish freedoms -- freedoms that Muslims in other countries do not enjoy) was awash with escapist conspiracy theories naming various Western countries and even Israel as the culprits behind the attacks.

The AKP government could have considerable impact on this issue. AKP is well positioned to explain to Turks that the small minority of Muslims who are terrorists do not make Islam itself a terrorist religion -- unless of course the silent majority of Muslims fails to prevent religion-based terrorists from hijacking their faith. Such a message would be particularly potent if AKP were to remind Turks that al-Qaeda has taken responsibility for the latest bombings, and that the organization has ample motivation to continue targeting Turkey. Because al-Qaeda's battle against Turkey is an ideological one, Ankara cannot hope to appease the organization. Thus, Turkey's only recourse is to crack down on al-Qaeda and its affiliates now in order to quash what would likely become a continuing wave of violence.

What the International Community Can Do

Given al-Qaeda's extensive international ties, Turkey cannot defeat this threat without international cooperation. In particular, Ankara could use help from two of its principal allies, Europe and the United States.

What can Europe do? Although many of Turkey's small, militant Islamist groups were crushed by Ankara during the 1990s, they continue to operate freely in the European Union (EU). Two of the most notable examples are the previously mentioned IBDA-C and the Union of Islamic Communities (UIC), an organization based in Germany and intent on reestablishing the caliphate.

Some EU governments may not want to rock the boat by targeting such groups. After all, no Turkish terrorist cells have attacked their EU host countries. If the EU does not tackle this problem now, however, it could face the problem of a destabilized Turkey later. Shutting down IBDA-C, UIC, and other Turkish terrorist organizations would not only help safeguard Turkey, but would also enhance the EU's own security against terrorist attacks.

What can the United States do? Last weekend's synagogue attacks were perpetrated by militants who had likely been trained in Iran and had spent time in Pakistan and perhaps even Afghanistan. Al-Qaeda probably sent these cadres into Turkey via Iran or northern Iraq, an area whose porous borders with Iran make it a viable conduit into Turkey. According to intelligence reports, Turkey recently arrested al-Qaeda terrorists attempting to cross into the country from northern Iraq, including members of the Kurdish fundamentalist group Ansar al-Islam.

In light of these facts, the United States should take responsibility for leading the fight against Iraq-based terrorist groups. These include Ansar, which is likely the principal liaison between al-Qaeda, Iran, and local terrorist cells in Turkey (e.g., the previously mentioned Turkish Hizballah). Although Ansar and al-Qaeda's support base in northern Iraq was diminished by U.S. action during the war, it apparently remains active. Washington can help Ankara by immediately and directly confronting Ansar and other groups in northern Iraq, bringing the region's Kurdish leadership into the struggle while ensuring that the border with Iran is tightly sealed.

Turkey Can Weather the Al-Qaeda Threat

Most Turks are liberal and tolerant Muslims, and their country is armed with a strong tradition of secularism. With brisk action by the AKP government, sincere backing from the EU and Washington, and help from friendly foreign intelligence organizations, Ankara can effectively counter al-Qaeda's imminent threat. The alternative is the possible destabilization of this overwhelmingly Muslim, yet modern and democratic society. That would be a grave setback for the global war on terror.

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