

The Synagogue Bombings in Istanbul: Al-Qaeda's New Front?

[Ely Karmon](#)

Policy #806

November 18, 2003

On November 15, 2003, two car bombs exploded in simultaneous attacks on two synagogues in Istanbul during Sabbath services, killing 24 people and injuring more than 300. In an effort to bypass the tight security measures that the Turkish authorities had implemented around the synagogues, the attackers apparently detonated their bombs while driving nearby the buildings. One bomb hit Neve Shalom, Istanbul's largest synagogue, while the second blast severely damaged the Beth Israel synagogue in the district of Sisli. In both instances, the vast majority of casualties were Muslim Turks.

The Neve Shalom synagogue had been the scene of a 1986 attack in which Palestinian terrorists from the Abu Nidal organization killed twenty-two worshippers. In 1992, Neve Shalom was targeted again, this time by terrorists linked to a group called "the Turkish Hizballah" (thanks to increased security, this attack caused no casualties).

Turkish authorities recently revealed that they may have identified two suicide bombers responsible for the latest attacks: Mesut Cabuk, a member of the Turkish Islamic Movement, and Azad Ekinci, a member of the Great Eastern Islamic Raiders' Front (IBDA-C), a radical Turkish group. Both men had apparently spent an extended period of time in Iran. Although IBDA-C took responsibility for the synagogue bombings, Turkish officials are skeptical about the claim. The attacks, which involved tons of explosives and a great amount of coordination, may have been too sophisticated to have been carried out by small Turkish Islamist groups.

Turkey as an al-Qaeda Target?

On November 16, the Arabic-language newspaper al-Quds al-Arabi reported that the Abu Hafez Masri Brigades had claimed responsibility for the bombings. Masri, a close associate of Osama bin Laden, was killed in a U.S. assault during the war in Afghanistan. The Masri Brigades had previously claimed responsibility for the November 2002 attacks on an Israeli jet and on the Paradise Hotel in Mombassa, Kenya, as well as the August 2003 strike on the Marriott Hotel in Jakarta, Indonesia.

The Masri Brigades are an affiliate of the global al-Qaeda network, and the targets and modus operandi of the synagogue bombings point to al-Qaeda as the primary suspect. Indeed, the organization has many reasons to attack Turkey. First, bin Laden sees the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the subsequent abolishment of the Muslim caliphate, and the secular revolution of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk as the beginning of Islam's degradation and humiliation. Bin Laden has consistently compared the effect of these events to the humiliation that the United States went through following the attacks of September 11, 2001. Second, al-Qaeda has long questioned the nature of the Turkish regime, particularly in light of Ankara's foreign policy. Turkey is unique in its status as an overwhelmingly Muslim, yet democratic and secular nation. It is a close, important ally of the United States, a member of NATO, and an active partner in the international military force sent to Afghanistan. It is also an ally of Israel and has a strategic cooperation agreement with the Jewish state. Moreover, Turkey is the only Muslim country that has offered to send peacekeeping forces to Iraq following Operation Iraqi Freedom. (The Turkish parliament affirmed the measure in an October 7 vote. The plan has not been implemented, however, because of fierce opposition from the Kurds and the Iraqi Governing Council.)

Targeting Jews

Since the creation of the World Islamic Front for Jihad against the Jews and the Crusaders (i.e., the United States and all Western Christian nations) in February 1998, bin Laden has designated Jews as the primary enemies of Islam. Yet, only after the debacle it faced in Afghanistan in late 2001 did al-Qaeda begin to target Jewish communities and interests directly. For example, the first successful al-Qaeda attack after the defeat in Afghanistan was a suicide bombing on April 11, 2002, outside the ancient synagogue on the Tunisian island of Djerba, which killed fifteen foreign tourists and four Tunisians. Sulaiman Abu Ghaith, al-Qaeda's spokesman, eventually claimed the attack.

Moreover, on May 16, 2003, five teams of suicide bombers (thirteen bombers total) targeted an old Jewish cemetery, a hotel frequented by Israelis, and a Jewish-owned Italian restaurant in Casablanca, killing more than forty Moroccans. The bombers belonged to the Salafiya Jihadiya, a local extremist group linked ideologically to al-Qaeda.

A Turkish al-Qaeda Connection?

Islamic terrorist organizations became active in Turkey during the 1990s, striving to establish a state ruled by Islamic law. These groups enjoyed wide Iranian support. Yet, Turkish Islamic terrorist groups have never attacked Western targets at home or abroad (although they do have some infrastructure in Europe). Neither have they perpetrated attacks of the magnitude of the latest bombings in Istanbul.

Of the possible groups that may have taken part in the bombings, IBDA-C, an extremely anti-Semitic and anti-Christian terrorist organization, has a history of taking responsibility for attacks by other organizations in order to enhance its own prestige. The group's leader, Salih Mirzabeyoglu, has been in prison since 1998, along with many of his cadres; only small remnants of the organization are still active.

Another theoretical suspect is the Turkish Hizballah, a Sunni terrorist organization not connected with the Lebanese Shi'i Hizballah (yet nevertheless supported by Iran). The organization is composed of different groups divided by ideological and leadership issues. Like IBDA-C, it was severely crippled by the decisive action of the Turkish government in the late 1990s.

The Union of Islamic Communities (UIC), a Germany-based organization whose goal is to establish a federal Islamic state in Anatolia, is the Turkish group most likely and able to cooperate with al-Qaeda. UIC was founded in 1983 by Cemalettin Kaplan, who once declared himself the "caliph" of all Muslims. Although most of the group's militants live in Germany, several hundred are active in Turkey. After Cemalettin's death, his son Metin replaced him, declaring jihad against Turkey in 1999. In March of that year, Metin was sentenced to four years in prison in Germany for incitement to murder.

According to intelligence officials in Turkey and Germany, UIC members met with bin Laden in Afghanistan in 1997 and later sent operatives there for training. In 2002, Turkey's interior minister declared that "Turkish names found in raids in bin Laden camps correspond with membership rolls of the Kaplan Group." In fact, Kaplan's followers were among a group of fourteen Turks detained as al-Qaeda fighters in Afghanistan. Moreover, three years before the September 11 attacks, UIC plotted to crash an airplane packed with explosives into Ataturk's mausoleum in Ankara while hundreds of political and military figures were present; Turkish authorities foiled the scheme. Currently, the group remains active in Germany under the name "Anatolia Federative Islamic State."

Conclusion

At this point, it seems that the suicide bombings in Istanbul may be the work of al-Qaeda -- an attempt to destabilize the secular regime in Ankara, shake Turkey's alliance with the West and Israel, and strike at the Turkish Jewish community (and, through it, Israel). One cannot exclude the possibility that Turks acting as proxies for al-Qaeda (or even Islamist Kurds connected to Ansar al-Islam, an al-Qaeda affiliate in northern Iraq) were involved in the attack. If one of the known Turkish Islamist groups did in fact perpetrate the latest attack, alone or in cooperation with al-Qaeda, then the implications for Turkey's domestic situation could be stark and significant.

Ely Karmon, a senior researcher for the International Policy Institute for Counter-Terrorism, was the 2002 Shari and Herb Rosen visiting fellow at The Washington Institute.