

Terrorist Attacks in Turkey

Why and How?

By Simon Roughneen | December 3, 2003

Why Turkey? Why now? Why twice? These are among the central questions arising from the 4 horrendous attacks on synagogues and British interests in Istanbul recently. Jewish places of worship outside of Israel have been targeted in various locations—such as Tunisia and Morocco—over the past 2 years. Britain hosted U.S. President George W. Bush on a controversial state visit the week the attacks occurred. So, within the mindset of the perpetrators, the targets in Istanbul make some sense—and the timing of the anti-British bombings had an obvious rationale.

But there are synagogues in cities across the Muslim world. Ditto British diplomatic missions. This makes Turkey seem an unlikely target. Didn't Turkey reverse its recent decision to send in 10,000 troops into Iraq? Had they not, the American military load would have been lightened by an army experienced in low-level counter-insurgency. The British in the south of Iraq have vast experience from years dealing with the IRA in Northern Ireland. The Turks fought the PKK in southern and eastern Turkey from 1984–1999. Military benefits aside, it would have been a significant diplomatic coup for an embattled neocon occupation.

Last spring, Turkey refused to allow the coalition use its territory or airspace to invade Iraq from the north, a stand made even more admirable given the carrot of \$24 billion in loans and aid promised had they complied. Surely all this, along with a 90% domestic opposition to the war and any Turkish participation, meant that Turkey should not have been a target of al Qaeda or domestic Islamist attack.

But Turkey, the former hub of the Ottoman Empire, the most potent Muslim state in history, has been a secular republic since its inception. The possessor of NATO's second-largest army sees its future westward across the Bosphorus rather than eastward over the Ararat Mountains. Potential EU membership is arguably the propelling principle of Turkish domestic politics these days—the military has assented to a reduced role in Turkey's politics, educational and broadcasting rights have been established for the Kurds, and greater transparency in general minority rights has been set in train.

Why Turkey?

Even a Turkey ruled by the Justice and Development Party, an Islamist party, retains these pro-western leanings and has not sought to alter the secular, military-dominated nature of the state. Turkey has a strategic relationship with an Israel, already reviled by many Islamists, which is in the midst of constructing a barrier across the West Bank and fanning the flames of the Intifada. The U.S. and

the UK patrolled the no-fly-zone in northern Iraq from the Turkish base at Inçirlik.

Perhaps most pointedly, Turkey, along with Russia, India, and Iran, was a supporter of the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan in its war with the Taliban—who of course sheltered al Qaeda prior to the U.S.-led removal of the Taliban after 9-11. It can only be assumed that Turkey retains influence in Kabul, given the predominance of the Northern Alliance in Hamid Karzai's administration. It cannot be coincidence that the Taliban (and, most likely, elements of al Qaeda) are now regaining control of much of eastern Afghanistan in opposition to the Turkish-backed Northern Alliance.

To al Qaeda, this is a long list of perfidies only exacerbated by an Islamist prime minister apparently betraying Islamist principles, domestically and internationally. Thus Turkey now pays for its sins, past, present, and projected, and no reticence in helping Washington in its Iraqi predicament can compensate. In hindsight, it is surprising that Turkey had not been targeted before.

Al Qaeda resurgent?

Timing? The answer to the second wave of bombings targeting British interests has clear logic in terms of its timing. The state visit of George W. Bush had been planned for 2 years. Odds are, then, that both attacks on Turkey had been planned for some time. Deflecting attention from the Bush visit required an audacity and bloodlust that a single attack may not have achieved. Successfully launching two series of attacks on diverse yet predictable targets in one week, in a pro-western Muslim state, in a cosmopolitan city, where security was generally assumed to be fairly tight, and al Qaeda or its sub-contractors were not assumed to be a threat, would not only steal headlines, kill infidels (and Muslim Turks), but ratchet up al Qaeda's war.

But surely the first bombings last Saturday should have prompted a draconian security clampdown sufficient to prevent a repeat so soon after. After the British-targeted

Foreign Policy In Focus (FPiF)



bombings of the UK consulate and the HSBC bank, Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan announced an investigation into how the bombings were replicated so soon. Most likely, the bombings were planned well in advance. The need to circumvent and overcome tightened security in the aftermath of the first was factored into the planning of the audacious repeat.

Al Qaeda has claimed responsibility for the attacks. Their presence—directly or even by proxy—in Istanbul has come as a surprise to most analysts. That their presence was sufficient to perpetrate last weeks' carnage is an even greater shock. But hindsight tells us that Turkey is but a surprisingly late addition to al Qaeda's list of targets. Perhaps all that has changed are the means of the organization to target places that were hitherto seen as exempt. Given the nature of Turkey's alliances and the secular constitution, perhaps al Qaeda was merely waiting for an attack to become feasible. The need for thorough planning tells us that this possibility arose some time ago.

The exact identity of the perpetrators remains unconfirmed—i.e., whether they were disgruntled Turkish militants acting in alliance with al Qaeda, or whether they were foreign infiltrators. If it emerges that Turkey was infiltrated by al Qaeda, then surely attention must turn to the border with Iraq—within which a coalition of former Ba'athists, disgruntled locals, and foreign infiltrators seem to be conducting the insurgency against the U.S.-led occupation. If it can be shown that such infiltration would be impossible, then attention must turn to other countries bordering Turkey—which to a neocon's delight, would have to include Syria. It may be fanciful to surmise that Islamic terrorists could have crossed into Turkey from Iraq via Syria—but Syria did hand over 22 Turkish nationals to the Turkish authorities in connection with the bombings, men who had clear links to the perpetrators who blew themselves up in Istanbul on November 15 and 20. Similarly, it was inconceivable before last week that Turkey could have suffered the attacks of last Saturday and Thursday, or that an organisation such as al Qaeda had a presence in a country such as Turkey.

The Perpetrators

Attention initially turned to a little known-group—the Kurdish Hezbollah (distinct from their better-known Lebanese namesake)—who subsume their Kurdish nationalism into an

Islamist profile that presumably allows them to act as local sub-contractors for al Qaeda and/or the Islamic International Front. Arrests made so far have been Turkish nationals—so the theory that these attacks are the work of local Islamic militants distinct from but generally sympathetic to al Qaeda (though the level of distinction and locally derived motives is unclear) is the best one available at the moment. A similar thesis is used in analysis of the Casablanca and Riyadh bombings earlier this year. On November 1, the Turkish government made a statement linking the attackers to al Qaeda. Other reports in Turkish newspapers suggest that two of the main suspects, Habib Ektas and Azad Ekinçi, both Turks, had contact with Ayman al-Zawahiri, widely regarded as Osama bin Laden's right-hand man.

Whatever precise information emerges over the coming days and weeks, what is clear is that attacks of this kind will likely recur. Whether they have any direct link to continuing anti-coalition attacks in Iraq remains to be seen. Coming in the week that preceded the deaths of 7 Spanish intelligence agents and not long after the deaths of 18 Italian military police and other personnel, all these attacks, in Iraq and outside, seem to have one thing in common. Warnings are being sent to American allies—and the ferocious nature of the warnings is intended to drive a wedge between these allies and Washington.

It remains to be seen whether a new marker has been set in al Qaeda's range. Perhaps Turkey was a likely target given its domestic and international policies. This said, al Qaeda has now left its mark on geographic Europe, in a country seeking EU membership. Given recent remarks attributed to Osama bin Laden—warning Japan, Australia, Britain, among others—perhaps it is not only Americans who need to worry. But a year ago, statements attributed to bin Laden included a threat to Norway, and this has not yet manifested itself in attacks on North Sea oilrigs or Norwegian aid workers in Afghanistan. However, such warnings carry extra resonance when they occur simultaneously to a double series of suicide bombings in one of Europe's largest cities.

(Simon Roughneen is an international affairs correspondent for Global Radio News (www.globalradionews.com). He has worked in Dublin, Brussels, and throughout west Africa. He wrote this for Foreign Policy in Focus (online at www.fpif.org.)

Foreign Policy In Focus

"A Think Tank Without Walls"

Recommended citation:

Simon Roughneen, "Terrorist Attacks in Turkey: Why and How?," (Silver City, NM & Washington, DC: Foreign Policy In Focus, December 3, 2003).

Web location:

<http://www.fpif.org/outside/commentary/2003/0312turkey.html>

p. 2

www.fpif.org

A Think Tank Without Walls

