Will Terrorist Attacks in Turkey Come to an End?

The January 12 suicide attack in Istanbul momentarily focused the world's attention on Istanbul and Turkey. In its aftermath though, questions concerning Turkey's policies towards the Islamic State, on the one hand, and towards the country's Kurdish minority and the PKK, on the other, remain.

Ever since Syria's not-so civil war erupted in early 2011, Turkey's leadership has apparently been directly involved in this armed effort to unseat the Damascus regime led by Bashar al-Assad. For the most part, the violence was not able to sweep across the borders into the lands governed by Tayyip Erdoğan's AKP (or Justice and Development Party). Still, there were a few notable exceptions; primarily the "shelling" of the small border town of Akçakale (in the province of Şanlıurfa) in October 2012 and the spectacular twin bomb attacks in Reyhanlı or "little Syria" (in the province Hatay) on 11 May 2013. The first spillover killed a "Turkish woman and her four children", while the later blasts felled at least 51 individuals and wounded many more. The government blamed both assaults on the Assad government, and in both cases issued threats in the direction of Damascus. But the Turkish hacker cooperative RedHack subsequently leaked documents which seemed to implicate members of the Turkish security forces with the Islamist terrorist faction Jabhat al-Nusra, at the time Syria's most formidable fighting force against Assad and the Syrian Arab Army (SAA). At the time, officially Ankara supported the so-called Free Syrian Army (FSA), even previously already facilitating the establishment of the Syrian National Council (SNC) in Istanbul (October 2011) and allowing the FSA to set up shop in a "military" refugee camp known in Turkish as Apaydın Kampı located in the vicinity of Reyhanlı (as reported by the BBC's John Simpson in late November 2011). There have been more skirmishes and upsets in the Turco-Syrian border region since then, but by and large Syria's not-so civil war remained just that, namely an armed insurrection in a foreign land.

Panic in the Land and in the City

In the aftermath of the jinxed June elections in Turkey, the Islamists fighting across the border apparently decided to become directly involved in Turkey's political stratagems and rivalries. Suicide bombers targeted the gatherings of AKP opponents in Suruç (20 July 2015) and in Ankara (10 October 2015), killing scores and scores of leftist and Kurdish supporters (backing the mainly Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party or HDP) at both events. The dynamic duo of Tayyip Erdoğan (aka the Prez) and Ahmed Davutoğlu (aka Wily) profited handsomely from these dual terror attacks, luring many more voters into the AKP fold than they'd ever expected and gaining a whopping 49.50% share of ballots cast. These Turkish voters opted for security and stability above all else, as the AKP proclaimed over and again to stand firm in the face or terror and crush any and all individuals willing and able to commit terrorist acts. And in all fairness, since late July last year the Ankara government has been waging relentless anti-terror operations in the south-east of the country, killing many active members of the PKK (or the Kurdish Workers' Party that has been striving for Kurdish rights since 1984) in the process and arguably quite a few innocent civilians as well.

These military operations have led some to argue that the present bloody conditions in south-eastern Anatolia might easily engulf the whole of Turkey soon, hinting at the possibility that civil war might be around the corner. The HDP
Kars MP Ayhan Bilgen is a case in point. On 10 January, he tweeted that the "bill" of the "all-out war" waged in the South-East could very well be served in Turkey's urban centres in the west of the country. Against this backdrop, Istanbul's lively yet tranquil district of Sultanahmet (sometimes called the Old City) was rocked by a loud and violent explosion on Tuesday, 12 January 2016. The area known as the Hippodrome is located at the heart of the city's tourist attractions, harbouring such eye-catching sights and monuments like an ancient obelisk, the so-called Blue Mosque as well as a 16th-century palace-turned-museum. A suicide bomber had joined an unsuspecting band of tourists when he detonated his deadly payload, killing ten individuals instantaneously and injuring 15 others. The guide leading the targeted group was Sibel Şatıroğlu and she afterwards told the press that a "thin 'click' sound" was heard among the group, as I was informing a group of around 20-25 tourists about the [Egyptian] Obelisk [brought to the city by Emperor Theodosius]. I realized that the sound was not normal so looked around. I saw a young man in modern clothes with a goatee, who looked just like an ordinary Turkish citizen, pulling the pin. I shouted 'run away' in German and we began to run. The bomb had already exploded." The guide's action clearly saved lives and makes clear that suicide bombers are also just people, looking like you and me. A little more than a year ago, for instance, an ordinary-looking young woman blew herself up near the a police station in the same historic Sultanahmet district, killing one police officer and wounding another (6 January 2015). This suicide bombing was subsequently claimed by the terror group DHKP-C (or Revolutionary People's Liberation Party-Front), a band of determined young people who seek to establish a "socialist state," and that is considered a terrorist organization by Turkey, the U.S. and the European Union. The same organization had the previous week unsuccessfully attempted a similar act, when a male member threw grenades and fired his weapon at police officers stationed in the vicinity of the PM's offices. Their most spectacular recent action, however, occurred some months later with the spectacular hostage crisis in the Çağlayan Justice Palace. The standoff culminated in the deaths of the two hostage-takers and their hapless victim on 31 March 2015.

**Kurds, Jihadists and Chomsky**

Still, following the deadly blast on the Hippodrome the wily PM quickly took to the airwaves and made a public declaration that left no doubt about the government's take on this terrorist attack: "We have determined that the perpetrator of the attack is a foreigner who is a member of Daesh [using the Arab acronym for ISIS or the IS]," And then, Davutoğlu explained in great detail that '[w]e will not take a step back in the fight that we are waging against Daesh . . . . In this framework, the most important source of the terrorism we face today is [to be found in] the internal strife [taking place] in Syria and in the resultant power vacuum. Turkey is the one that is most affected by this." In fact, Wily's boss the Prez joined in later on, stating that Turkey was the "top target for all terrorist groups in the region." In this way, Turkey's leadership succeeded quickly in averting any direct blame, apart from obvious failures in security and intelligence. Turkey's relentless campaign against the PKK and the varying dosages of collective punishment given to the local Kurds suddenly became yet another side-issue. Instead the dynamic duo of Erdoğan and Davutoğlu continued elaborating on their earlier declarations, as it apparently emerged that the “Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) suicide bomber has been identified as 28-year-old Nabil Fadli, a Syrian national born in Saudi Arabia who recently appealed to a district directorate of migration management to seek asylum in Turkey." In subsequent days, rumours started spreading that the suicide bomber had initially tried to target the police station in the Covered Bazaar, but unable to locate its spot decided to head for the already-bomb-tested Sultanahmet police station. Traders and salesmen in the Bazaar could be overhead relating this story, adding that the tourist troupe was nothing but an accidental victim to the explosive force carried by the perpetrator now identified as the "28-year-old Nabil Fadli."

And then, the media circus in Turkey turned its attention to the spat between the Prez and a number of academics, including the internationally renowned linguist-cum-critic Noam Chomsky. As posited by the New York Times: "more than 1,000 academics from 90 Turkish universities who signed a public statement, 'We Won't Be a Party to This Crime,' that urged the [AKP] government in Ankara . . . . to end the 'deliberate massacre' of Kurds caught in clashes between Turkish security forces and militants of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party, or P.K.K." In this way, having managed that public opinion would not somehow link the Hippodrome outrage to the military operations in the South-East, the futile petition signed by many hapless academics once again briefly turned public attention the AKP policy of collective punishment in the South-East. But Erdoğan quickly changed the narrative and rather that collective punishment or military overreach, public opinion started debating the pressing issues of freedom of expression and academic liberty. None other than Chomsky himself weighed in on the issue, casually throwing out the remark that “Turkey blamed ISIS [for the Hippodrome attack], which Erdogan has been aiding in many ways, while also supporting the al-Nusra Front, which is hardly different. He then launched a tirade against those who condemn his crimes against Kurds – who happen to be the main ground force opposing ISIS in both Syria and Iraq. Is there any need for further comment?” Still, the media buzz is not talking about Ankara's repressive policies in the
Islamist Blowback or Orchestrated Operation?!?

In light of Erdoğan, Davutoğlu and Chomsky’s above-quoted words, it is well-worth to note that “Isil [or ISIS/IS/ Daesh] did not claim responsibility for the bombing,” as articulated by the Telegraph’s James Rothwell, and Nick Allen. And, as it happened, just two days later, on 14 January, the Indonesian capital of Jakarta was rocked by an assault carried out by at “least five militants — some armed with suicide explosives, still others with handguns — [who] struck in front of the Sarinah mall, attacking a Starbucks and a police post before unleashing a running gun battle on one of Jakarta’s main thoroughfares,” as worded by TIME’s Southeast Asia bureau chief Hannah Beech. Afterwards it emerged that the death toll of the "Jan. 14 Jakarta assault" was eight, namely four civilians and four attackers. In the wake of this deadly attack, the Amaq News Agency, which supports the Caliph and his IS, reported on "its Telegram channel" that "Islamic State fighters carried out an armed attack this morning targeting foreign nationals and the security forces charged with protecting them in the Indonesian capital."

But, as yet no-one has claimed responsibility for the Jan. 12 Hippodrome attack. On the other hand, the IS has been utilizing its slick internet presence to directly threaten Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkey and even the city of Istanbul. The Caliph’s men have set up an online media enterprise known as Al Hayat Media Center, and the outfit also contains a Turkish-language branch. This last one has been issuing glossy online magazines carrying the name Konstantiyye (the Arabic name still given to the Turkish metropolis of Istanbul). The Turkish IS members writing pieces in this propaganda vehicle do not seem to comprehend that Turkey today is no longer a Kemalist nation striving to implement its own version of state-controlled religion and permissive attitudes generally referred to as Turkish Secularism. They instead openly refer to the Republic as the "idolatrous state of Turkey" that is trying to inflict "harm upon the Islamic State." In view of this assessment, the IS propaganda scribes add that “[w]e are observing all of your efforts and palpitations. You can exert as much effort as you want, we will nevertheless conquer Istanbul to the sounds of tekbir [or proclamations of Tawhid or the oneness of God] with Allah’s permission." This threat was issued in the fourth edition of the Turkish-language online periodical, published in Safar 1437, corresponding to the month between 14 November and 11 December 2015. These words are of course nothing but bluster and empty rants, but do indicate that the oft-presumed cooperation between AKP-led Turkey and the Islamic State does not appear to be part of the caliphal propaganda effort. In spite of the fact that the Prez and Wily have led Turkey down a post-Kemalist path, a path that has become a fast-moving highway lane since the constitutional referendum of 12 September 2010. In the past years, Turkey’s dynamic duo has succeeded in transforming Turkey beyond recognition and Islam is nowadays not just part and parcel of the country’s political discourse, but also a more than prominent feature in the social fabric of the country.

In the end, one can but wonder about the Hippodrome suicide bombing . . . was it the Caliph's first attempt to set foot in the city or was it rather an orchestrated false flag attack gone wrong?

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