The Ankara Blast: A Casus Belli Posing as a Terror Attack

Terror attacks have now become a recurring reality in Turkey. The recent deadly blast in Ankara took place against a backdrop of heightened military activity, on the domestic front as well as across the border in Syria.

The rationale behind the Justice and Development Party (or AKP) annulling the June elections and sweeping into renewed power in a veritable November Surprise was its promise to keep the nation safe and root out the evil of terrorism. Turkey's first popularly elected President Tayyip Erdoğan (aka the Prez) and its wily Prime Minister Ahmed Davutoğlu (aka Wily) thus really had their work cut out for them. Alas, the past months have seen a veritable swathe of terrorist attacks and concomitant state terror in the South East of the country, claiming the lives of numerous innocents and causing untold damage. And now that Ankara is apparently wrapping up its domestic military operations while at the same time inflicting cross-border damage on the Kurdish YPG/YPJ, the nation's capital was struck by a deadly attack.

The Ankara Blast

In the press, the terror attack is presented as follows: during rush hour on Wednesday, 17 February 2016, a large explosion erupted in the heart of the capital, in close vicinity of the parliament and various government ministries as well as local military headquarters. According to the Turkish daily Hürriyet, the direct target of the attack were shuttle buses transporting military personnel, a factoid confirmed by Ankara's governor Mehmet Kılıçlar. Up to 30 people have perished, while approximately 70 have been injured by the deadly blast. The scene of the attack rapidly turned into a large sea of fire, with many smaller fires caused by burning cars and gasoline engulfing the area as well. Furthermore, the press added that the "explosion was heard across Ankara," with "a large plume of smoke still visible above" the city afterwards. By way of precaution, a "broadcast ban [was] put in place on reporting non-official news of the bombing; however various news outlets have continued their coverage." In connection with these media bans and other forms of censorship, the Europe and Central Asia programme coordinator for the Committee to Protect Journalists, Nina Ognianova simply remarks that "[a]t every crisis, larger or smaller in scale, the Turkish government's knee-jerk reaction has been to gag the media," as if suppressing the news would somehow also limit the damage and casualties. However, the news that the wily PM cancelled his scheduled trip to Brussels in order to attend immediate security meetings was freely and appreciatively disseminated.

The Blame Game

In the immediate aftermath, the Turkish media started spreading rumours about possible culprits and their supposed aims. Traditionally, terror attacks in Turkey were customarily attributed to the PKK, but in light of the new constellation of terrorist shakers and movers in the region, some voices also started accusing the Islamic State (or ISIS/ISIL) of being responsible for the carnage in the capital. While others simply wondered aloud about the apparent failure displayed by the National Intelligence Organization (MİT) that had been granted such sweeping
In a press conference organized in parliament, the CHP MP Eren Erdem once again came to the fore, asking pertinent questions and ruffling feathers. Erdem claimed the occurrence of a clear "intelligence failure" in connection with the Ankara bomb blast, before elaborating that the "Command of the Air Force Academy in a report dated 20 January 2016 highlighted that the terror group DAESH [or ISIS/ISIL or IS] was in [preparations for] an attack on military points inside Turkey, [and that] terrorist elements belonging to the PYD [or the Kurdish Democratic Union Party in Syria] had also infiltrated in the name of just such an attack." Eren Erdem went a lot further, explaining that "[i]n the [quoted] report was [also] determined [that] it had been reported by MİT that there would be an undertaking for an assault on Turkey. That there would be an attack on foreign tourists in tourism areas." In conclusion, the member of the opposition pulled out all the stops and did not shy away from verbally attacking the AKP-led government and even directly accusing the Prez of hypocrisy. Erdem began by imploring the government: "They should not try to fool anybody, from listening to opposition parties, [and] keeping a close watch on the opposition, the intelligence organizations do not have an opportunity to protect this land [of ours]. An assault occurs, [and as a] first [measure] twitter is blocked, [whereas] you [should have] blocked the assault [beforehand]." But in the next instance, the CHP member went for the jugular, saying that in the aftermath of the Charlie Hebdo attack, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan asked the following question, "Why did you not track these people, doesn't your intelligence apparatus work?" and that he completely agrees with these words now.

**Wily Words and a Casus Belli**

The AKP-led government did not waste any time either and the next day the wily PM announced the following to the world: "The YPG [the People’s Protection Units, the military wing of the PYD] is a tool of the Syrian regime and the regime is directly responsible for this attack. The right to take all kinds of measures against the Syrian regime is reserved for us." Rather than focusing on the PYD as an ally of the PKK, the by now traditional enemy of the Turkish state, the wily Davutoğlu took the opportunity to directly accuse Bashar al-Assad in a manner that has become the norm over the past years. Ever since the bloody twin bomb attacks in Reyhanlı or “little Syria” (in the Turkish province of Hatay) on 11 May 2013, Ankara has been in the habit of accusing the Damascus regime of perpetrating terror attacks on Turkish soil. At the time in 2013, many people were concerned over a possible Turkish military intervention in Syria. Particularly given that then-PM Erdoğan flew to the U.S. a few days later to meet with U.S. President Barrack Obama (16 May 2013). Prior to boarding his States-bound flight the now-Prez even announced to the nation that upon his return things would be very different. In the U.S.. Tayyip Erdoğan appeared on national television for an interview with Ann Curry, an opportunity he took to enthusiastically endorse the idea of a “no-fly-zone” in Syria. Alas, it seems that counter to his expectations, Tayyip Erdoğan was not given a green light by the Leader of the Free World and thus, Turkey did not invade its neighbour Syria in 2013. . . and the search for a legitimate casus belli began in earnest. In fact, the Turkish government even seemed willing to stage false flag attacks across the border to enter the fray.

As appeared obvious from a "leaked conversation between [then-]Foreign Minister Davutoğlu and other prominent members of the Turkish government [that] focused on a possible staged attack on the Tomb of Suleiman Shah, Turkey's exclave on Syrian territory. The [then-]wily FM [Davutoğlu] had been publicly talking about Turkey's willingness to intervene militarily since March 14, [2014] when he stated, during the third Trilateral Meeting of Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Turkey, Azerbaijan and Iran held in the Turkish city of Van, that 'Turkey has the right to take any kind of measures for [the] security and stability [of the Suleiman Shah tomb].' As such, the [then-]FM was merely reiterating the [then-]PM [Tayyip Erdoğan]'s words, uttered on August 5, 2013, namely that the ‘tomb of Suleiman Shah [in Syria] and the land surrounding it is our territory. We cannot ignore any unfavorable act against that monument, as it would be an attack on our territory.' Turkey has thus been on the lookout for a casus belli that would force its government to commence hostilities beyond the country's borders on Syrian soil."

**PKK, PYD or IS**
The Suleiman Shah episode all but ended in a whimper early in 2015, when the Caliph and his IS troops started surrounding the structure and its grounds, threatening the territorial integrity of Turkey’s exclave on Syrian soil. Rather than seeing this as a potential act of war, AKP-led Ankara decided to play it safe, with Turkish soldiers effectively abducting the tomb and re-locating it to safer ground on a hillock in the vicinity of the village of Ashme, to the west of Kobani, safer ground that was coincidentally held by the now-hated PYD. At that stage, the AKP-initiated ‘Kurdish Overture’ was still moving along and a truce between the Turkish state and the PKK was still in place. But all that changed in the wake of the June elections and renewed hostilities between both parties. By the end of that month the Prez even started issuing hostile words in the direction of the Syrian PYD, as an "extension" of the terrorist PKK: “[w]e will never allow the formation of a [Kurdish] state in the north of Syria, to our south [i.e. Rojava]. Whatever the price may be we will continue our struggle on this point." And he even stated later on that "the PYD is the PKK."

And now, while Turkey is clearly at war on the domestic front, "cleansing" the South East of "terrorist elements," while also inflicting untold damage on civilian lives and property, AKP-led Ankara is also becoming active across the border. The country's leadership is now cunningly utilizing the Ankara blast to boost its own cross-border designs. The wily PM left no doubt about that: "Right now, the issue of the identity of the perpetrators behind this terror incident has been completely revealed. In light of the information we have obtained, it has been clearly determined that this attack was carried out by members of the terrorist organization inside Turkey [the PKK] together with an individual YPG member who crossed [the border] from Syria." In this way, both military fronts have been made one, and further military escalation in Syria appears to be in the offing. The AKP-led authorities are very fastidious in the building up of their case against the PYD and the YPG, providing elaborate details on the alleged cross-border infiltrant: a young man by the name of Salih Neccar (Turkish spelling or Saleh Najjar), who was born in 1992 in the hamlet of Amuda in northern Syria. And, on Thursday, 18 February, the Turkish military deployed Stinger and I-Hawk missile systems near the Syrian border in the province of Hatay: "Local sources said the military fired five missiles at YPG positions in western Syria late [in the day]". These missile launches came on top of five days of shelling. The Turkish military continued its offensive on Friday (19 February) as well. Meanwhile the PYD and the YPG have denied any involvement in the Ankara attack. The co-chairman of the PYD Salih Muslim went on the record as follows: "This is absolutely not true. Kurds have nothing to do with what happened in Ankara. What happened there is related to Turkey's fight with the Islamic State, whose members live in Turkey." While Cemil Bayık, a founding member of the PKK, has also publicly declared his ignorance regarding those responsible for the Ankara blast: "We don't know who did this. But it could be an act of retaliation," obviously referring to the military operations in south-eastern Anatolia.

**Domestic Agendas and Geopolitical Implications**

Whereas but a few years ago, Turkey's leadership was clearly beholden to Washington and its directives, at present AKP-led Ankara finds itself in a more than awkward spot, yet clearly unwilling to unquestioningly toe the line. The U.S. clearly regards Syria’s Kurds as valuable allies in their fight against the Islamic State. Last February, for instance, U.S. State Department spokesman John Kirby even told a daily press briefing that "[w]e do not recognize the PYD as a terrorist organization." Still, Turkey regards the PYD and the PKK as one and the same, and the PKK has been on the U.S. list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations since November 1997.

On the domestic front, the Prez and Wily are unperturbed in their desire and willingness to lead the country down a post-Kemalist path, effectively abolishing Atatürk's legacy and replacing its personality cult. The once ubiquitous portrait of Mustafa Kemal is now slowly but surely replaced by a picture of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, as the one who brought the Kemalist project to full fruition by means of re-inserting Islam into Turkey's body politic and public life. In this context, a special place is reserved for the country's Kurds, the nation state's only ethnic sub-group that has not been completely Turkified. As part of the AKP goal of turning Turkey into a nation of believers, the PKK is totally unsuitable as an interlocutor, as an organization with Marxist roots and adhering to leftist ideas and ideals. The AKP policy of Sunniﬁcation aims to transform the Turkish citizenry into a community of pious Sunni Muslims, including intransigent Kurds harbouring socialist ideals.

In a way, Syria's not-so civil war next door could also be understood in those terms. The Assad regime, though possessing an Alawite leadership, is steadfastly secular and vehemently opposed to the ideological tenets espoused by the Muslim Brotherhood, the regime's original and foremost enemy. Originally, Tayyip Erdoğan used to be on very friendly terms with Assad and his family. Previously, Tayyip Erdoğan's government had been actively looking for investment opportunities in Syria in the first part of the AKP rule in Turkey. President Assad at the time had been opening Syria’s state-led economy, arguably forming lucrative opportunities for Turkish companies. At the same time, the Assad regime had also floated assurances regarding the PKK, always a thorn in Turkey's side and
previously enjoying the support of his father, Hafez al-Assad who passed away in 2000. Syria’s leadership needed allies against the U.S. at the time and a more assertive Turkey was the ideal candidate to fill this role. Following the disastrous Bush years, the advent of Obama seemed to offer a new hope, but this proved all but illusory. U.S. foreign policy in the 21st century steadfastly remained the same, under Republican as well as Democrat guidance. And so Turkey was pulled into the anti-Assad nexus as well.

Now that the war to unseat Assad has been dragging on for nearly five years, the military constellation on the ground has drastically altered. First the appearance of the Islamic State (previously known as ISIS/ISIL), the subsequent entry of an U.S.-led coalition, and most recently, the direct Russian involvement bolstering Assad’s position as well as the gains made by the PYD and the YPG/YPJ, have turned this not-so civil war into a quagmire with no direct end in sight. As such, Turkey’s domestic policy is now clearly affecting its Syria policy as well. Will the Ankara blast now provide AKP-led Ankara with a legitimate casus belli that would allow for a deployment of Turkish troops on Syrian soil? And if so, will the Turkish military defeat the PYD and its military arms, thereby destroying the Kurdish enclave of Rojava? And thereby also indirectly dealing a deadly blow to the homegrown PKK? Or will these Turkish soldiers become just another warring faction in a seemingly endless conflict that might very well lead to a veritable World War III, given direct Russian and American involvement?

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