

Terror blasts in Istanbul: atrocities aid Bush's "war on terror"

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On Thursday, the Turkish capital of Istanbul with its 12 million inhabitants was rocked by violent explosions for the second time within the space of a few days.

Bombs exploded in front of the British consulate in the Istanbul district of Beyoglu and before a branch of the major Anglo-Asian bank HSBC, situated in the Levent district of the city. Initial reports speak of 27 dead and over 450 injured. The casualty figures will very likely increase. Amongst the dead is the British Consul General in Istanbul, Roger Short.

Witnesses spoke of a bloodbath. An employee of the German Goethe Institute, which has its offices just 100 metres from the British consulate, spoke to *Spiegel-Online* of "people covered in blood" on the streets. A delivery van drove into the British consulate, and there followed a "violent explosion." The bomb set off in front of the HSBC bank shook a nearby shopping centre that was packed with thousands of ordinary citizens, both Turks and tourists.

Two similar attacks were carried out last Saturday morning against the synagogues of Beth Israel and Neve Schalom. The latter is the largest synagogue in Istanbul. It is situated on a busy street that was filled with observers on the Sabbath, the Jewish day of rest.

The two bomb blasts took 24 lives. Most of those killed were Muslims, who were employed as security personnel in nearby mosques or worked in nearby shops. Over 300 were wounded in the explosions.

Turkish authorities and representatives of the Israeli, British and American governments immediately assigned responsibility for both series of bombings to Al Qaeda. On Thursday, British Foreign Minister Jack Straw made a press statement blaming Al Qaeda for that day's blasts before the dust had even settled on the sites of the explosions.

Later, an anonymous person called the Turkish news agency Anadolu to claim that Al Qaeda and the Turkish Islamist group IBDA-C (Warriors Front for an Islamic Great Middle East) were responsible for the bombings. The caller said the attacks on Thursday were the result of a "joint action" by the two groups. The group IBDA-C also claimed responsibility for the earlier synagogue attacks.

Some time later on Thursday, an Arabic newspaper received an email in which a group affiliated with Al Qaeda named "The Martyrs Brigade of Abu Hafs el Masri" also claimed responsibility for the attacks.

Turkish authorities assert that on the basis of genetic tests they have been able to definitively establish the identity of the two suicide bombers from last Saturday. They are alleged to be two Turkish men from the eastern city of Bingöl who have links to radical Islamist groups. The television channel NTV claims that one of the men had travelled to Iran on six occasions to receive training as an explosives expert.

However, the reports that have been issued up to now are full of contradictions. The Turkish interior minister, Abdulkadir Aksu, said that claims of responsibility by IBDA-C were not credible. He said no Turkish organisation was in a position to carry out attacks of such a magnitude.

This raises the question, however, how it was possible for foreigners to smuggle such large amounts of explosive into Turkey, and then situate and explode the bombs almost simultaneously at two different locations.

Some security experts have expressed doubts regarding the participation of Al Qaeda. The *Turkish Daily News* quoted the Israeli anti-terror expert Boaz Ganor, who said, "At this time (there is) no indication of Al Qaeda involvement."

Mustafa Alani from London's Royal United Services Institute told Reuters: "There is no history of Al Qaeda operating in Turkey. It's very hard to say Al Qaeda is involved in this attack. I think the activities of Al Qaeda now are concentrated on two states—Saudi Arabia and Iraq."

It remains unclear who is really responsible for the terror attacks in Istanbul. On the other hand, it is very clear that the attacks come at a highly opportune moment for both the American and British governments, as well as sections of the Turkish military.

Against a background of growing resistance to the occupation of Iraq, British Prime Minister Tony Blair and US President George Bush used the bloodbath in Istanbul to justify the terror they are carrying out against the Iraqi people. At a joint press conference on Thursday held only a few hours after the attack on the British consulate, President Bush vowed to "finish the job we have begun," and Blair stated: "I can assure you of one thing: that when something like this happens today, our response is not to flinch or give way or concede one inch. We stand absolutely firm until this job is done, done in Iraq, done elsewhere in the world."

The Turkish military are using the wave of terror to reassert their influence over the government. Immediately after the latest attack, soldiers appeared on the streets of Istanbul, blocking a motorway and providing security alongside Turkish police. A dozen soldiers

in helmets, wearing camouflage gear and armed with machine guns, were seen in the proximity of the explosion at the HSBC building.

The military have regarded the government of the moderate Islamist AKP (Justice and Development Party) with mistrust since its overwhelming election victory. Since then, there have been repeated rumours of a possible military putsch.

Tensions between the government and the military have grown considerably since the beginning of the Iraq war. The military campaigned vigorously for participation in the war, but in an initial parliamentary vote the majority of AKP deputies refused to allow the US to use Turkish territory as a second front in its war against Iraq. After the vote, and during a visit to Ankara, US Deputy Defence Secretary Paul Wolfowitz encouraged the Turkish military to take a “stronger leadership role” in relation to the elected government.

The IBDA-C, which has reportedly admitted responsibility for the attacks, is playing a very dubious role. The origins of the group go back to the 1970s. The group brought together Islamists with former Maoists and was characterised by extreme anti-Semitism and hostility to Christians. Significantly, however, the group displayed no sympathy for Iraq in its publications.

The group gained notoriety in the 1990s with a series of bombing attacks. In 1994 alone the group is alleged to have carried out 90 attacks. These were aimed principally against critical intellectuals and religious minorities rather than against the police, army or western targets.

Among its victims, the IBDA-C was said to have been responsible in 1993 for the murder of the reporter Ugur Mumcu, who had written articles on the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK), the growth of Islamic radicalism and drug rings. In 1994, the group was involved in the murder of the renowned film critic and writer Onat Kutlar. Other victims included members of the Jewish community.

There is much to indicate that the activities of the IBDA-C are manipulated by provocateurs from the Turkish intelligence forces. After the military putsch of 1980, the generals of the so-called “Turkish-Islamic Synthesis” called for an ideological amalgam of Islam and right-wing nationalism, aimed at bringing together fundamentalists and nationalists in a block against left-wing tendencies and Kurdish nationalist forces. Against this background, Islamist organisations were able to grow and flourish. Parliamentary investigations have since provided evidence of close collaboration between the Islamic Hezbollah and police special forces.

When it became clear in 1994 that Islam could develop into a potential political threat to the state, the security forces intensified repressive measures against Islamic organisations. By the time of the capitulation of the PKK to the Turkish state in 1999, these groups had been largely destroyed, with their leaders arrested or killed. Since then, no more attacks have been ascribed to these organisations.

In light of this situation, it is unlikely that the IBDA-C would be able on its own to assemble the resources and manage the logistics necessary to carry out the two series of terror attacks in Istanbul. Even if members of this group were involved in the bombings,

there could well have been others pulling the strings while remaining in the background.

As for the political beneficiaries of the bombings, virtually all of the commentaries in the Turkish press agree that the result of the attacks will be even closer collaboration between Turkey and the US and Israel. Turkey was already the only country in the region with a majority Muslim population to share close diplomatic and military links with Washington and Tel Aviv.

The commentary in the newspaper *Turkiye* is typical. It reads: “The message to Turkey and the world is as follows: ‘If you continue to cooperate with the US, you will suffer such misfortunes. You should adopt a clear stance against Israel and cease being interested in Iraq.’ If this is really the message, in Turkey it will actually have the opposite effect. As we can’t make concessions to terrorism, we can only align our policy with Washington’s that much more closely. In addition, this anti-Semitic attack—something unfamiliar and alien to Turkey—will cause a greater rapprochement with Israel.”

Hurriyet commented in similar fashion: “Thus, this terrorist action might include a warning for Turkey not to act alongside the US. However, these attacks might cause an opposite effect, because they could move Turkey further into the same axis as the US and Israel. Turkey will consider itself in the same boat as the US, which sees terrorism as its chief threat.”

The series of terror attacks in Istanbul are a reactionary provocation. It remains unclear who is really behind them, but even if there is no direct involvement by the Turkish secret service or Western intelligence services, in the final analysis, it is the policies of the US, Israel and Great Britain that are responsible for this catastrophe.

The military conquest and subordination of Iraq, together with the suppression of the Palestinians by the Israeli regime, have unleashed new ethnic tensions and encouraged reactionary forces across the globe. What the Bush and Sharon governments cynically refer to as the “war against terror” has led to an escalation of terror attacks throughout the Middle East.

This also affects members of the Jewish faith. Despite the fact that the majority of the Turkish population is Muslim, the country has never been regarded as anti-Semitic. Since the times of Sultan Beyazid II, who in 1492 accepted more than 100,000 Jews fleeing the Spanish Inquisition, the Jewish community has been able to live unhindered in the country. Jews fleeing pogroms in Eastern Europe and the Nazi terror were also able to take up residence in the country. Now the community has been plunged into insecurity and fear as a consequence of the Iraq war.



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