

Death toll in Istanbul airport attack rises to 41

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The death toll in Monday night's horrific terror attack by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) at Istanbul's Ataturk Airport rose yesterday to 41, with 239 injured. According to Istanbul authorities, 130 of the wounded were still hospitalized yesterday.

Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım stated that at least three heavily armed gunmen opened fire on the crowd at the entrance of the international terminal, triggering a gun battle with police surrounded by fleeing passengers, and then set off explosives that they were wearing. The powerful explosions left the airport terminal seriously damaged. Survivors of the attack told harrowing stories of fleeing the blasts and trying to hide with loved ones in rooms inside the airport.

Thirteen of the dead were foreign, including five Saudis, two Iraqis, a Tunisian, a Jordanian, a Ukrainian, and two people of Central Asian origin. CNN Türk identified one of the Central Asian victims as a “person of East Turkestan origin,” apparently a reference to the Xinjiang Autonomous Region in western China.

Turkey declared a day of mourning, with flags flying at half staff at the airport and around the country. The attack came shortly before the Eid festival that marks the end of Ramadan, the Muslim holy month.

The attack will devastate the Turkish economy, which is already suffering amid a 30 percent fall in tourist revenues. “With Eid coming up, business has just started to pick up again,” an Istanbul resident told the *Guardian* as he sat in front of a tourist agency and gestured at shops and hotels. “But now we are finished. All of these will have to close down. This morning our Eid reservations went down to 30 percent. People keep calling to cancel their holidays.”

While no one has claimed responsibility as of this writing, Yıldırım said Monday night that “the evidence points to Daesh,” the Arabic acronym for

ISIS. The Ataturk airport attack also reportedly followed attacks over the last several months by ISIS on Turkish forces at Kilis, a town near the Syrian-Turkish border.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan issued a statement that “strongly condemned” the attack and also blamed ISIS. “The attack, which took place during the holy month of Ramadan, shows that terrorism strikes with no regard for faith and values,” it declared. “We expect that a resolute stance against terrorist organizations should be adopted by the world and especially Western countries with their parliament, media and non-governmental organizations,” the statement continued.

The attack also drew bellicose statements from the front-running US presidential candidates, Republican Donald Trump and Democrat Hillary Clinton. Trump thuggishly called for Washington to “fight so viciously and violently” against terrorism, and embraced the use of torture: “Can you imagine them sitting around the table or wherever they're eating dinner, talking about the Americans don't do waterboarding and yet we chop off heads? ... You know, you have to fight fire with fire.”

Clinton declared, “Americans stand united with the people of Turkey against this campaign of hatred and violence. Today's attack in Istanbul only strengthens our resolve to defeat the forces of terrorism and radical jihadism around the world.”

In fact, the massacre in Istanbul is the tragic yet predictable outcome of the decision of all the NATO powers, including the US and Turkish governments, to back Al Qaeda-linked militias such as ISIS as proxy forces in NATO's reactionary five-year war for regime change in Syria.

Significant questions are raised about a possible role

in the attack of sections of the Turkish state itself, as well as of Turkey's NATO allies. According to Turkish media, the authorities have imposed a gag order on reporting of the attack.

In the early stages of the Syrian war, as Islamist militias sought to destabilize the regime and sow terror in Syrian cities, they repeatedly organized mass terror bombings like Monday's bombing in Istanbul. Later, after ISIS seized much of eastern Syria, sections of the Turkish state used ISIS to counterbalance Kurdish militias in Syria, whose advances they feared would encourage Kurdish separatists in Turkey itself. ISIS supplies and oil shipments were repeatedly reported and even photographed crossing the Syria-Turkey border.

Exploiting their ties to the CIA and other NATO intelligence agencies that were arming the Syrian "rebels," jihadist networks across Europe were able to escape surveillance and mount devastating terror attacks, including two deadly shooting sprees in Paris last year. The role of the ties between intelligence services and the jihadist forces emerged particularly clearly after the March 22 bombings in Brussels.

Turkish, Israeli and Russian intelligence agencies had all given advance warnings of the attacks to the Belgian authorities, identifying the terrorists as Islamist fighters and the Brussels airport and subway as targets. Nonetheless, the attackers were not stopped, nor was security stepped up at the targeted locations. Protocols were manifestly in place for the attackers, as members of Islamist networks playing a central role in NATO foreign policy, to travel unhindered.

Significantly, initial reports have emerged to suggest that Turkish officials also had forewarning of Monday's terror attacks in Istanbul. Yesterday, Do?an TV's Ankara representative, Hande Firat, reported: "Intelligence units sent a warning letter to the top of the state and all its institutions in early June, around 20 days ago, about Istanbul." The subject of the warning was ISIS, Firat indicated, and Ataturk Airport was mentioned as a possible target.

Turkish opposition politicians publicly questioned the role of the security services and of Erdo?an's Justice and Development Party (AKP) in the attacks. ?dris Baluken, deputy parliamentary group leader of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), said: "When bombs are going off in a place such as Atatürk Airport, we

wonder what this country's government, interior minister, intelligence and police are doing," he said.

The timing of the attacks also raises questions as to whether they are a message aimed by ISIS to top levels of the Turkish and NATO military and political leaderships.

The attacks came as the AKP was trying to carry out a broad shift in its foreign policy, setting it on course for a confrontation with ISIS, just as ISIS also faces serious setbacks in Iraq after the loss of Fallujah to Iraqi government forces. Until recently, Turkey was locked in a bitter confrontation with Russia, having recklessly shot down a Russian warplane last year over Syria, where Russian forces allied with the Syrian government were attacking jihadist militias. Moscow also accused Turkey of complicity with ISIS.

In recent weeks, however, Turkey has been moving closer to Russia and also trying to deepen its ties with Israel.

The day before the attack, Y?ld?r?m announced that a "normalization process had begun" with Russia, after Erdo?an wrote a letter to Russian President Vladimir Putin to apologize for the shooting down of the Russian jet. At the same time, Turkey was preparing initiatives to improve ties with both Israel and Egypt, whose military dictator Abdel Fattah al-Sisi came to power in a putsch that toppled a Muslim Brotherhood government allied to the AKP.

It appears likely that, with this latest bloody attack, ISIS was sending a signal to the Turkish regime that ISIS and its regional allies still can do considerable damage to Turkey, should the AKP government turn on them.



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