

Turkish officials claim to have identified shooter in Istanbul nightclub attack

Halil Celik**5 January 2017**

Speaking to the state-run Anadolu news agency on January 4, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu stated that authorities had identified the perpetrator of the New Year's Day massacre at the Reina nightclub in Istanbul. He did not give any further details, and the gunman is still at large.

Meanwhile, Turkish authorities issued photos of the alleged member of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), who reportedly entered Turkey from Syria and stayed in the Central Anatolian province of Konya with his wife and two children, where he rented a flat. His family members remain in custody.

Information about the attack remains unclear and unreliable. Previously, Turkish authorities circulated photos of a man thought to be the perpetrator, but it proved to be an innocent Kazakh. According to the media, a Kyrgyz site published an interview with a second Central Asian-looking man whose photo was also circulated as the likely assailant.

On January 4, five suspects linked to ISIS were detained in the Aegean city of Izmir after fleeing there in the wake of the Reina nightclub attack. At least 27 people, including two foreigners, have been detained in connection with the New Year massacre, as Turkish police forces continue their raids in districts of Istanbul that are largely inhabited by people from Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.

None of the information that has emerged sheds any light on the most remarkable question posed about how the massacre was carried out: How could an ISIS gunman evade detection by tens of thousands of police on high alert and carry out a massacre undisturbed at a nightclub located directly across the street from a police station? Authorities have simply continued to deny any responsibility for successive terror attacks in Turkey that have cost hundreds of lives.

The New Year massacre is part of a deep crisis of the international order that is shaking both Turkish-US and Turkish-Russian relations. Since August of last year, the Turkish army, along with its proxy forces within the Syrian opposition militias of the so-called Free Syrian Army (FSA), has been fighting ISIS in Syria.

Turkey launched its "Operation Euphrates Shield" after a suicide bombing at a wedding killed more than 50 people in the southeastern province of Gaziantep. Since then, according to Turkish officials, they have killed more than 1,270 militants. With Russian support, the Turkish army has now encircled al-Bab, a stronghold of ISIS in Syria, in an operation that apparently has received covert approval from the Syrian government.

Yesterday, Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim repeated Ankara's claim that "only Turkey" really fights ISIS, adding: "The others are engaged in a fake struggle. America isn't doing a damn thing, nor are the others."

Yildirim also blamed the US government for arming the Syrian Kurdish militia People's Protection Units (YPG), Washington's main ally in Syria.

On the same day, US-led coalition jets carried out maneuvers in support of Turkey's ongoing operation to take the Syrian city of al-Bab. However, they did not carry out any air strikes.

Meanwhile, just a day after the New Year massacre in Istanbul, some ten Syrian rebel groups announced that they had frozen their participation in peace negotiation talks in Syria. Accusing the Syrian government of violating the truce, they said in a joint statement that they "respected the ceasefire across the whole of Syria ... but the regime and its allies have not stopped shooting and have launched major and frequent violations."

Following the ceasefire deal between Damascus and the opposition brokered by Turkey and Russia, Ankara and Moscow called for a meeting in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan, on January 23, to establish a permanent cease-fire and political solution in Syria.

Speaking to Anadolu on Wednesday, Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu blamed “forces supporting the Syrian regime,” presumably the Lebanese Hezbollah militia, for violating the truce, which went into effect on December 30. “If we cannot stop the increasing violations, the Astana process could fail,” he said.

Cavusoglu also criticized the US-led coalition forces for failing to provide air support to opposition forces participating in Turkey’s Operation Euphrates Shield. He asked, “If you don’t support us in the most significant operation, then why are you based at the Incirlik Airbase?”

After this latest in a string of official Turkish comments harshly critical of Washington, he nevertheless added, “The US is an important ally; we have cooperation in almost every field. However, the truth is [that we have] a ‘confidence crisis’ with the US,” adding that Washington is “preferring terrorist organizations over its ally [Turkey].”

Addressing local officials yesterday, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan emphasized the importance of the ongoing efforts of Moscow and Ankara to establish a permanent cease-fire and political solution in Syria. “It is my greatest wish that this process will be completed successfully and the sufferings of our Syrian brothers will end soon,” he said.

Erdogan stated that they were “determined to clear out other regions where terrorist organizations have settled, particularly Manbij.”

As diplomatic talks and Turkish military offensives in northern Syria intensify, the political context and significance of the shooting at the Reina nightclub is becoming clearer. ISIS, which received support from Turkey earlier in the war and still has a considerable logistical presence there, is sending a signal that it can retaliate for attempts by Turkey and its allies to restructure the region in ways that would be too hostile to US interests.

Today, Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim is set to pay a two-day visit to Baghdad and Arbil in Iraq.

Deputy Prime Minister Numan Kurtulmus told reporters on Monday that Yildirim would meet Iraqi Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi in Baghdad, and then Massoud Barzani, the president of the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government, in Arbil.

One of the main issues in Yildirim’s talks with Iraqi and Kurdish authorities will be the Kurdistan Workers Party’s (PKK) military bases in northern Iraq.

Relations between Baghdad and Ankara have severely deteriorated due to the Iraqi reaction to Turkey’s establishment of a military training camp in Bashiqa, near Mosul, to train local Sunni groups, supposedly against IS.

For months, the Turkish military has deployed thousands of troops, backed by tanks, howitzers and armored vehicles to the Turkish Syrian and Iraqi border, as part of its preparation to invade the Kurdish enclave in northern Syria, as well as Iraq, in a fight against the PKK and its Syrian offshoot, the Democratic Union Party (PYD).



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