

**ISS Risk Assessment:
Istanbul's Ataturk Airport Terrorist Attack
30 June, 2016**

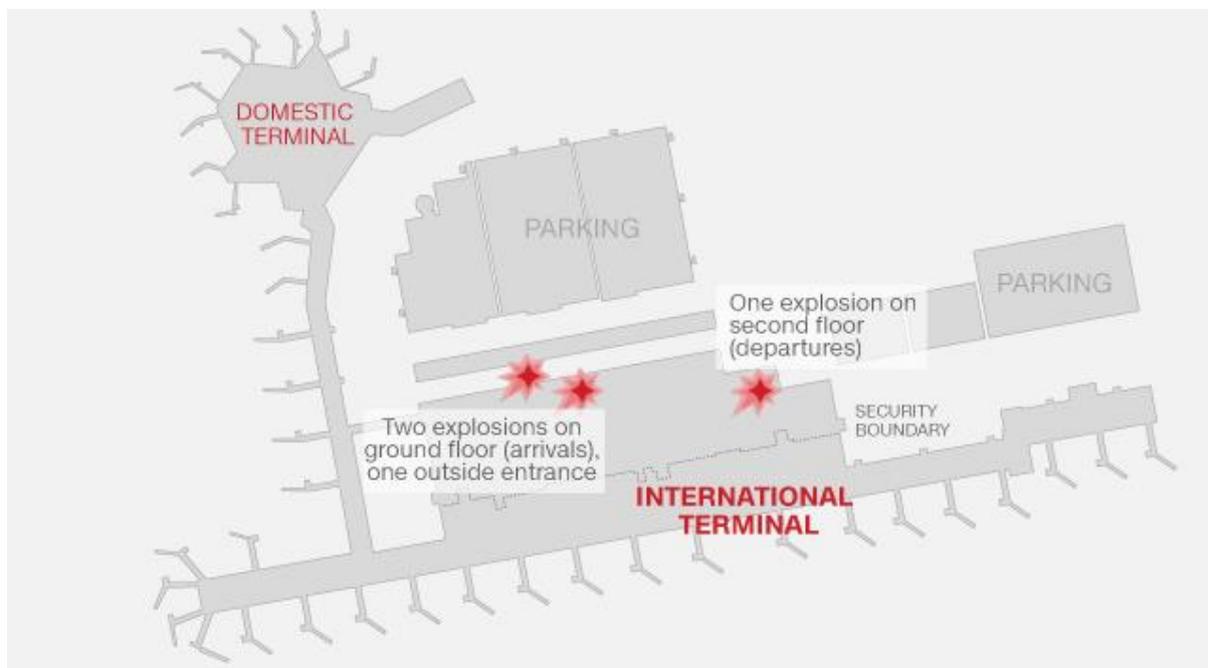


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At least 44 people have now been confirmed killed, including 13 foreign nationals, and more than 250 were injured following a terrorist attack at Istanbul's Ataturk International Airport during the evening of 28 June. The assailants arrived at the airport's international terminal by taxi, and caught the attention of airport security while undergoing security checks to enter the departures area. The attackers then opened fire on visitors and security personnel after shouting that a bomb was about to explode. One of the attackers got past the security guards and opened fire on people inside the terminal, before being shot by police and detonating a suicide vest improvised explosive device (SVIED). Another attacker detonated an explosive device at one of the entrances to the terminal as passengers rushed to exit. Lastly, a device was detonated in the parking area on the arrivals level of the terminal, where taxis pick up passengers.

No group has claimed responsibility for the attack thus far. Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim said that initial investigations indicated the involvement of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) terrorist group behind the attack. Other evidence from Turkish investigators have revealed that the three attackers were from Russia, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, part of a seven-member cell who had entered Turkey on 25 May from Syria, along with the suicide vests and weapons used in the attack.



The attackers had rented an apartment at the Fatih district of Istanbul, where the passport of one of the attackers was found. Turkish officials also have strong evidence to suggest that the attackers came to Turkey directly from the ISIS stronghold of Raqqa in Syria and that

ISIS' leadership was involved in the planning of the attack. Following the attack, the Turkish security agencies carried out simultaneous raids in 16 locations across Istanbul, detaining 13 people, including three foreign nationals, in connection with the attack.

Media reports are indicating that the Turkish intelligence agencies had sent a warning letter to relevant state authorities in the second week of June about a potential ISIS attack in Istanbul. The intelligence also included Ataturk Airport as a potential target. The US Embassy in Ankara, on 27 June, issued a travel warning about increased threats from terrorist groups throughout Turkey.

The Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) terrorist group has denied any involvement in the Ataturk Airport attack, following blames from certain Turkish government quarters that PKK might be behind the incident.

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The involvement of Russian and Central Asian terrorists makes it almost certain that ISIS was behind this attack at Ataturk Airport. This observation or rather fact, in turn, introduces a whole new paradigm when it comes to making an assessment of the terrorism and security risks in Turkey in general and Istanbul in particular. And there are two aspects of it – one in terms of tactical capabilities of ISIS and the other with regards to their overall strategy vis-à-vis Turkey.

Increasing ISIS tactical capabilities:

The terror attack at Ataturk Airport was an act of sophisticated urban guerrilla warfare, requiring close coordination and planning. It was not an act of a dumb terrorist blowing himself up in a crowded place. On being blocked at the security perimeter of the facility, the attackers used diversionary fire to lure the security personnel from one area inside the facility to another, where they were able to ambush them more effectively. This also created a breach in the security perimeter, allowing the terrorists to enter the main facility, where they could carry out their attacks with greater lethality. Historically speaking, terrorists armed with SVIED have blown their suicide vests at the first instance of getting confronted by security personnel, explaining why many such attacks happen on the outer security perimeter of intended targets. That was not the case at Ataturk Airport on the night of 28 June.

Media reports and CCTV footages revealed that, when shot, one of the attackers remained

on the ground and waited for security personnel to approach him, then he blew himself up like a human booby-trap. Booby-traps are a common means in urban warfare, they wait silently until the enemy comes closer and take them by surprise. Such rational thinking even a few seconds before his death demonstrates the advanced level of military training and determination the attackers had gone through. Moreover, it also indicates the meticulous tactical planning done by the planners of the attack. In summary, this attack is a case of paradigm shift in ISIS sponsored attacks on foreign soils, from relatively improvised suicide attacks to proper urban guerrilla warfare against civilians. The group is learning and improvising.

The attack also indicates that ISIS-linked Islamist extremists have increasing capabilities in Turkey in general and Istanbul in particular. The fact that seven members of the attack cell were able to stay in Istanbul for more than a month, carry weapons and explosives with them from Syria, conduct surveillance and eventually carry out the attack – they all point towards significant support base for the group in Istanbul. Furthermore, if seven people were part of the core operations of the cell, then, historical precedents suggest that another 25 – 35 people should have been involved in different other support activities – bringing the overall strength of the cell to around 32 – 42. Since, the seven core members of the cell came from Syria, then it is most likely that the remaining members potentially comprised a number of Turkish nationals, possibly from Istanbul and neighbouring regions. The 13 arrests made by Turkish authorities, thus far, vindicate that hypotheses and highlights the worrying local support base of ISIS in Istanbul. In light of the limited number of arrests, just as in the Paris attacks in 2015, then the prospects for a fairly sizeable element of the cell to be at large should be considered a serious threat.

The attackers had access to weapons previously thought to be unavailable to ISIS cells outside the country's south-east. Previous attacks and police raids on ISIS cells in western Turkey suggested that they did not have access to assault rifles as used in the attack. The explosives used by the attackers are likely to be peroxide-based home-made improvised explosive devices (IEDs), similar to those used in the previous ISIS-linked terrorist attacks in Istanbul in January and March.

The incident also reveals deficiencies in state protection services and intelligence gathering. Unlike lone-wolf attacks, multiple shooter attacks using explosives offer more opportunities for intelligence services to learn about the attack in advance. Moreover, the concentration of casualties around the airport's entrances and exits points to flaws in existing protection measures.

ISIS' strategy for Turkey:

Including the recent attack at Ataturk Airport, ISIS has been blamed for as many as eight major terrorist attacks inside Turkey over the last 12 months:

- **5 June, 2015:** Two successive explosions hit an opposition rally in Diyarbakir killing 2 and injuring 100 others. Though no one claimed responsibility for the attack, the blame was put on ISIS.
- **20 July, 2015:** A suicide attack targeting activists at Suruc, Sanliurfa province killed 32 while injuring 100. Though no one claimed responsibility for the attack, the blame was put on ISIS.
- **10 October, 2015:** Two blasts during a rally organised by several leftist groups in Ankara killed 95 people and injured 200. ISIS was the prime suspect.
- **12 January, 2016:** A suicide bomber blew himself up at a popular tourist destination near Sultanahmet in Istanbul killing 10 and injuring 15. ISIS was blamed for the attack.
- **20 March, 2016:** A suicide bomber hit a shopping district at Istiklal Street in Istanbul, killing 5 and injuring 6. ISIS was blamed for the attack.
- **1 May, 2016:** A vehicle blew up near Gaziantep's main police station killing 2 and injuring 12. ISIS was blamed for the attack.
- **19 May, 2016:** A suspected ISIS member blew himself up near a police station in Gaziantep.
- **28 June, 2016:** An attack near Ataturk Airport in Istanbul killed 36 and injured over 140. ISIS was blamed for attack.

However, ISIS has never formally claimed responsibility for any of these attacks inside Turkey. Whereas in other parts of the world, it has been forthright in taking credits for attacks, even when it was not directly involved, e.g. the recent night club shooting in Orlando, Florida. While officials blamed it for the attack on Ataturk Airport, the group's daily news bulletins for 28 and 29 June made no mention of the bombing. Its main English-language channel on the Telegram encrypted messaging app instead posted a photo essay of fighters in fatigues posing with automatic weapons on a hill in Deir al-Zour, Syria. Clearly, for ISIS, the situation in Turkey is very different then it's other areas of operations and as such, requires special measures or selective claims of responsibility.

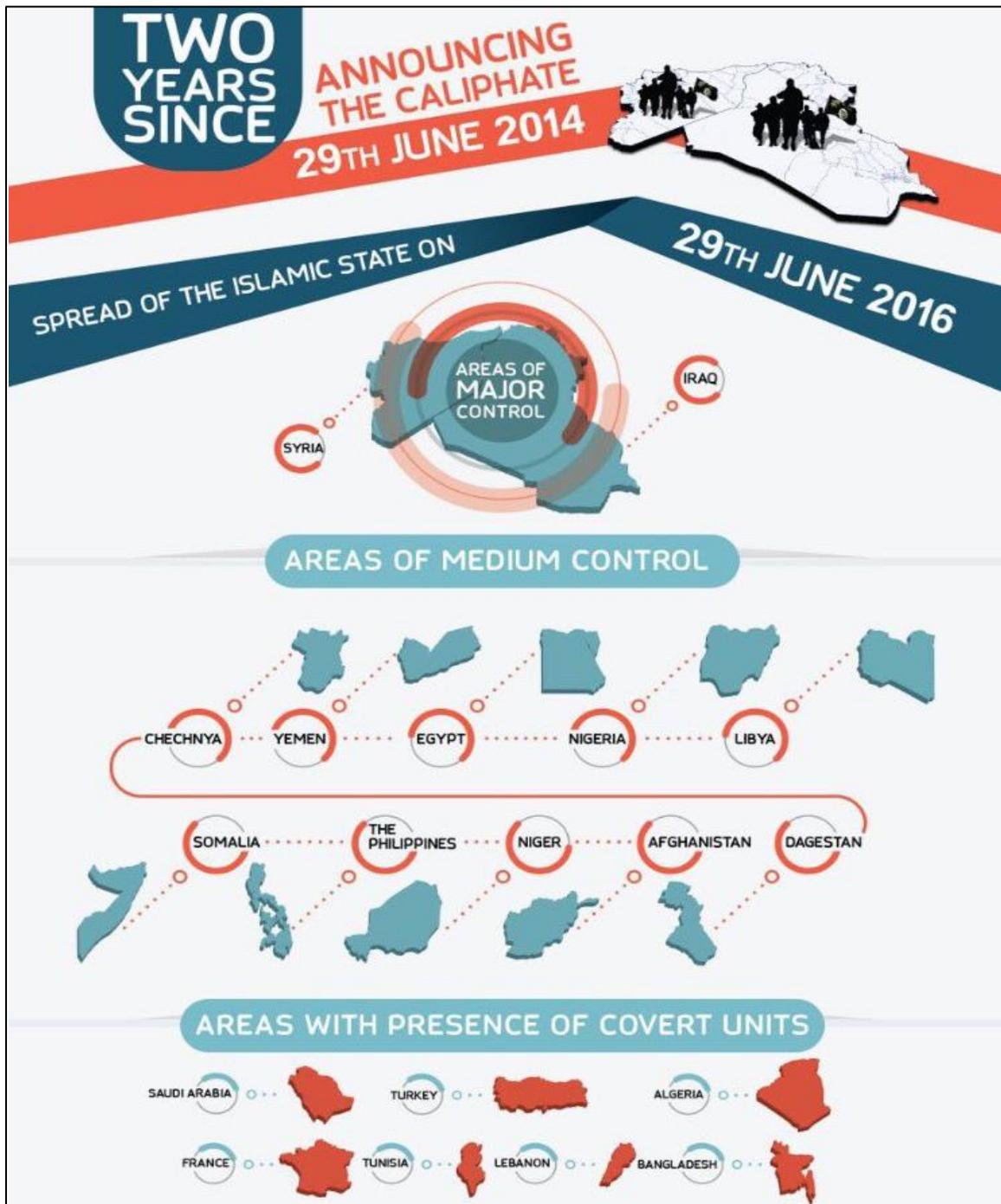
Turkey is strategically important for ISIS as the most important transit hub for the supply of fighters, weapons, ammunition and other goods needed by the group in its core territory in Iraq and Syria. For a long time Turkish authorities have been blamed for closing their eyes to this ISIS logistical pipeline that flows through their nation. While, Turkey ended its open-border policy with Syria in 2014, by that time, its southern borders had become a porous transit point for smuggling of cheap oil, weapons, foreign fighters and pillaged antiquities to and from Syria. Finally in February 2016, Turkey began tightening its borders with ISIS-held territories in Syria. But, Turkey is yet to adopt a comprehensive legal framework to deal with militants who come back to Turkey after joining ISIS in Syria. So, even if Turkish authorities apprehend ISIS militants crossing into Turkey; the prosecutors are unable to keep them detained for long due to unclear legal definition of ISIS in Turkey. Consequently, ISIS has been successful in establishing well entrenched networks and support bases in Turkey, particularly in Istanbul, Ankara, Konya, Adana, Izmir, Sanliurfa, and Gaziantep, which are likely to be the most developed outside its core territory in Iraq and Syria. The Turkish governments' conflict in its handling of the conflict in Syria and its resurging aspirations for the region have and are creating an Achilles heel for the administration, this terrorist schizophrenia will continue to allow ISIS the opportunity to strike within the country.

If ISIS were to accept responsibility for its attacks inside Turkey, the resulting public pressure on the Turkish government would force the government to take actions against ISIS networks inside Turkey, something which ISIS doesn't want at this stage. By stopping short of claiming responsibility for the attack, ISIS has eventually sent a message to Turkey about the consequences of being part of an anti-ISIS international coalition. At the same time, it is trying to undermine the public confidence in the Erdogan government (when Prime Minister Yildirim visited a hospital to meet the people injured in the airport attack, some of the people reportedly shouted at the Prime Minister saying that they have turned Turkey into Syria). All this is being done without drawing the ire of the Turkish government, which has traditionally considered Kurdish insurgents as the prime threat to Turkish national security. The 'no claim, no blame' tactic to date indicates ISIS doesn't want to change that perception of Ankara.

Furthermore, ISIS clearly enjoys some degree of support among radicalised Turks, who as Turkish nationalists, support ISIS activities inside Iraq and Syria, but not in Turkey. It is this Turkish support base which helps ISIS find recruits in Turkey, raise funds there,

and smuggle men and material across the border. ISIS doesn't want to risk that by claiming responsibility.

At the moment, ISIS seems happy to have a covert presence in Turkey and continue to take benefit of Turkey as its most important transit hub. The propaganda image, shown at the end of this section, circulated by ISIS to celebrate two years of its caliphate also highlights that role of ISIS.



Evidently, ISIS is walking a very fine line in terms of its strategy towards Turkey, where it punishes Turkey for going against ISIS interests, but at the same time exploiting Turkish Islamic sentiment and geopolitical posturing that leaves enough room so that Ankara doesn't feel compelled to come after ISIS with full force. How Ankara reacts against ISIS in the coming days will decide whether ISIS' current strategy is working or not. However, if initial reactions are anything to go by, where President Erdogan talked about maintaining national unity and the un-Islamic nature of the attacks, without any direct reference to retaliation against the perpetrators of the attack (in case of attacks by Kurdish insurgents, Erdogan has been quite vocal in the use of force to bring the perpetrators to justice); it might seem that ISIS' strategy is working for the time being. Can Turkey really afford to get dragged into the quagmire that is the Syrian civil war, ISIS home turf, the geopolitical struggle being fought between the west and Russia and still maintain their 'Islamic reorientation? As stated, a question to be answered in the delivery of their response to the group seen to be behind this incident.

We anticipate that ISIS will continue to carry out high-profile attacks across major Turkish urban centres, particularly in Istanbul and Ankara, from time to time. And any increase in Turkish actions against ISIS will result in more ISIS sponsored attacks against Turkish targets. In other words, the situation can only get worse from here.