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Striking the Heart of Europe

Turkey's Failed Anti-Extremism Strategy

1/15/2016

This week's terrorist strike on a group of German travelers in Istanbul was an attack on Turkish stability and the West's confidence. Is President Erdogan capable of stopping the Islamic State -- and does he even want to? ***By SPIEGEL Staff***

Minutes after the explosion, when Robert H. came to, he only had one thought: Get out of here! His ears were ringing and his head was throbbing. But he briefly stopped to think. Where was his wife? He looked around and saw body parts lying around: disembodied legs, a head. People were screaming for help. Anke H. was lying on the ground, bleeding. She stammered: I can't breathe. Robert H. bound up the wound on her leg with a piece of cloth.

On Wednesday morning, the day after the bombing in a district of Istanbul frequented by tourists, the two were lying in their hospital room in the Capa Clinic. Robert H., an early retiree from Bavaria, is 61 years old and his wife Anke is 53. He has abrasions on his face, a bandage on his leg and a head full of images that he can't get rid of. "The place was a battlefield," he says.

Ten Germans died in the attack in Istanbul and eight others were injured, some of them seriously. Among the dead are a 75-year-old from Dresden and his son, a 73-year-old real-estate consultant from Bad Kreuznach and an entrepreneur, 67, from the state of Hesse. Also among the dead is a married couple, 71 and 73, from Falkensee in the state of Brandenburg. "Traveling was their passion," says their daughter-in-law, adding that they enjoyed visiting Muslim countries, even after the attacks in Tunisia and Egypt. A 70-year-old elementary school teacher from Leipzig

also lost her life. After the Paris attacks, she posted a picture of herself on Facebook in the colors of the French flag. She also loved to travel and posted images of her trip to America. In most of the pictures, she could be seen smiling into the camera.

A Triple Blow to Turkey

Almost all the people who lost their lives were retirees who came from all corners of Germany: 33 people traveling with the tour operator Lebenslust. They were people who wanted to experience the Orient on a 10-day trip including stops in Istanbul, Dubai and Abu Dhabi. And then came the bomb, which exploded at 10:20 a.m. between the Hagia Sophia and the Blue Mosque, in the heart of the old-city quarter of Sultanahmet. It is where Europe and Asia meet, where Christianity butts up against Islam, where Turkey's past meets tourist modernity. It is where millions of visitors to the city go to take selfies in front of Istanbul's most famous sites. It is hard to find a more symbolic place.

The attack is a triple blow to Turkey. It disgraces an almost omnipotent state apparatus, which once again has proven itself unable to prevent a bloodbath in the center of a large Turkish city. It damages the country's tourism industry, which is one of Turkey's most important economic sectors. And it hits Istanbul, this mega-metropolis with 14 million inhabitants and 10 million visitors every year. Ankara may be the political capital of Turkey, but Istanbul is the cultural, economic and societal heart of the country. And it is proof that Islam and modernity can coexist.

"This day will change our country," says Ayse Danisoglu, a parliamentarian with the Republican People's Party (CHP). The attack, he says, is "ground zero" for Turkey's anti-terror policies.

It is far from the first time the country has been the target of a terrorist assault. Just last year, there were two of them: On July 20, 2015, a bomb attack killed 34 people in Suruc; and on Oct. 10, 2015, two suicide bombers killed 102 people in Ankara. There were no claims of responsibility for either attack, but the Islamic State (IS) is suspected in both. Then came the bloody day of Jan. 12. There were fewer victims this time, but the shock will likely linger. For the message of the terrorists is clear: We can attack anywhere at any time.

It is still unclear if IS was behind the Istanbul attack, but the way it was carried out as well as the attacker's alleged origins point to the group's involvement. Nabil Fadli is thought to be the name of the suicide bomber who carried out the attack. He was born in 1988 in Saudi Arabia and was registered as a refugee on Jan. 5 in Istanbul, according to Turkish officials. Fadli was allegedly identified by his fingerprints, but the claim has been impossible to confirm because Turkish officials have refused to supply additional information on their investigation. "Thus far, there is a lack of solid evidence" reads an internal analysis of the attacks by authorities.

The police protocol notes that the Turkish tour guide heard "a clicking sound" shortly before the blast. She spotted a man wearing Western clothes and a goatee in the middle of the group who didn't belong. The police report says she thought he was a Turkish man. She screamed in German: "Run away!" -- and then the bomb went off.

Were Germans Deliberate Targets?

Perhaps greater clarity isn't necessary to send out the disturbing message: that no country, no place where Europeans go on vacation, is safe. That it doesn't matter who is hit, because everyone is an enemy -- and thus, a target -- for the terrorists. Even retirees from Germany.

It is thus far unclear whether the attack was specifically intended to target Germans as a response to the country's military involvement in the airstrikes being carried out against Islamic State in Syria. It was only a few days ago that German Tornado reconnaissance planes began taking off for Syria from the Turkish military base in Incirlik.

German Interior Minister Thomas de Maizière quickly sought to dismiss such concerns. "I don't see any reason to avoid traveling to Turkey," he said. But German security officials have a different view. "Those who say there are no indications that Germans were the target of the attack should also be honest enough to say that there are no indications that they weren't," says one high-ranking government official.

De Maizière's words are thus better interpreted as an attempt to reassure the Germans and as a courtesy to the Turks. Berlin, after all, is more dependent than ever on goodwill from Ankara, particularly when it comes to solving the refugee crisis. The European Union recently promised Ankara €3 billion and the easing of visa requirements if Turkey makes an effort to prevent refugees from embarking on the journey to Europe. In addition, the Chancellery has for weeks refrained from criticism when it comes to authoritarian tendencies exhibited by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Ankara's aggressive policies toward the Kurds and the country's approach to fighting terrorism.

Berlin is now hoping that the shock from the attack will help heal the growing split in Turkish society. And that Erdogan will finally focus his attentions on IS now that it's not just Kurds who are dying, but also German tourists. Perhaps, though, that is a bit too much to hope for. This week, at least, there was little evidence that introspection was on the agenda.

Turkey Long Underestimated Extremist Threat

The government has presented the attack in Istanbul as a conspiracy, with Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu saying that "secret powers" had used IS as a "subcontractor." The tabloid *Star*, which is closely linked to the state, accused Russia of having orchestrated the attack. Just as it did following the attack in Ankara, the Turkish government is attempting to use conspiracy theories to distract from its own failures.

Turkey, after all, long underestimated the danger presented by Islamist extremists and thus helped their ascent. When the insurgency in Syria began, Erdogan hoped to finally be able to topple Bashar Assad with the help of Syrian fundamentalists. He ignored -- or perhaps simply accepted -- who exactly he was supporting in the effort. And he ignored the fact that IS was becoming ever stronger.

Whereas Jordan's security services prevented foreigners from traveling onward to Syria, making it unattractive for jihadists, Turkey basically welcomed them. Jihadists from Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, the Caucasus and Western Europe were neither intercepted nor prevented from traveling

onward to the warzone. And they weren't difficult to spot: At the airport of Hatay, a city in southern Turkey, bearded men would check in for their flights home wearing battle fatigues and with mud on their shoes.

For years, IS was able to maintain apartments, warehouses and even military training camps in Turkey. The group was also able to organize supplies of weapons, munitions, food and medicines via Turkey. Islamic State sent its fighters to Turkish hospitals near the Syrian border for treatment. Dubious companies issued certificates of employment so that foreign jihadists were able to get year-long residency permits with no trouble at all.

Islamic State was also able to recruit new followers with virtually no fear of interference -- and officials simply ignored information provided by Turkish parents whose children had joined the extremists. As recently as 2014, IS was able to openly recruit new followers in Istanbul, Ankara and other cities. Young men and women from around the world only had to visit the teahouses neighboring certain mosques to join the group, while shops openly sold IS souvenirs, such as banners, stickers and flags.

Concern Came Too Late

This laissez-faire approach was slowly replaced by concern in 2014, but by then it was too late. So many IS supporters and fighters were active in Turkey that they had become a danger to the country's security. Yet instead of doing something about it, the decision was apparently made to avoid putting pressure on them in the hopes that Turkey wouldn't become a target as well.

An unofficial member of the Turkish secret service MIT said in mid-2014 that he had never seen officials so nervous. "They are really afraid of IS because they know that their cells are everywhere in the country and could perpetrate attacks," he said. Initially, though, the jihadists refrained from carrying out attacks so as not to endanger their bridgeheads elsewhere in the world.

That changed last summer with the attack on Suruc, which is thought to have been carried out by IS, likely to fan the flames of Turkey's conflict with the Kurds. The Kurds, after all, are Islamic State's largest and most powerful enemy in both Syria and Iraq.

The shock over the 34 people killed in the attack -- in addition to added pressure from the US and Europe and the negative headlines about their lax approach to IS -- moved Turkey to finally intensify its pursuit of the jihadists. Checks at borders and airports were increased and suspects were arrested -- more than 400 of them in 2015, according to the think tank Crisis Group.

After initial hesitation, Ankara joined the international coalition against the terror militia and provided the Americans with access to military bases. At least since then, Islamic State has seen Turkey as an enemy. In an IS propaganda video, Erdogan was cursed as the "devil" and calls were made for the "conquer of Istanbul."

Recently, IS issued warnings in Turkish-language videos of an impending attack. The Turkish daily *Hürriyet* also reported on two tips that Turkey's MIT intelligence service allegedly passed

along on Dec. 17 and Jan. 4. In its tips, the intelligence service reportedly warned that suicide attackers in Ankara and Istanbul were awaiting deployment. On New Year's Eve, two Turks were arrested who had allegedly admitted a short time before they intended to carry out an attack in the capital city.

A Shift in IS' Strategy

Whereas previous attacks had targeted Kurds, Washington-based terrorism expert Aaron Stein argues the latest attack indicates a shift in IS strategy, showing it now seeks to inflict damage on the Turkish economy by attacking tourists.

Terrorism researcher Peter Neumann of King's College in London believes the Istanbul attacker was part of IS and that he was not acting alone. Neumann says he is unaware of any case in which someone has built a suicide belt of their own accord and then successfully deployed it. In addition, IS supporters cheered the attack in social media and the group still has an excellent infrastructure in Turkey.

Even if Turkey has stepped up its fight against IS, the terror militia is still active in the country. Only a short time ago, IS murdered two Syrian journalists in Sanliurfa, a city in southeastern Turkey. And just to the west, in Gaziantep, a Syrian documentary filmmaker was shot dead in front of a shopping center.

Plus, figures circulated by the Turkish government claiming 3,000 arrests in connection with anti-IS operations should also be viewed critically, warns a German intelligence source. Few of those arrested remain in detention, the source says, with the majority getting released quickly afterward.

Turkey's MIT secret service plays a particularly ambivalent role in anti-terror efforts. There are some indications suggesting MIT may have worked together with IS -- at least in the past. A weapons delivery in 2014 also raised suspicions that MIT may have been providing Syrian extremists with direct support.

At the time, an informant alerted Turkish security forces about a weapons delivery heading for Syria and a public prosecutor had the transport -- which was being accompanied by MIT agents -- searched. The Turkish government banned any news coverage and spoke of an "aid delivery" to Turkmen in the northwest of Syria. Video recordings, however, suggest they were carrying munitions. Government critics claim they were being sent to IS, but there is no evidence to prove that.

Can Turkey Be Trusted?

This puts Western intelligence services in a difficult position: Can the Turks be trusted?

Still, European diplomats in Turkey take information provided by MIT about potential IS terrorists seriously. For example, MIT has provided concrete information about possible terrorist attackers who are making their way to Europe or are already there. One diplomat, an expert on

security issues, notes that Turkey maintains a "network of informants in Syria and Iraq that should not be underestimated." Few other intelligence agencies have such good sources in the region. The source says the Turkish government has in fact "perceptibly increased" its efforts to combat IS during the last six months. Still, the source adds, doubts persist when it comes to Ankara's political agenda.

"There's always a residual risk about whether Ankara is truly interested in fighting IS, or if it actually has secret sympathies -- either because it wants to use it as a means to weaken Assad or because, they feel closer to their fellow believers for religious reasons (as predominantly Sunni Muslims)," the source says.

Other experts draw a less flattering comparison to Pakistan's ISI intelligence service. With ISI, too, they say, you never know which side it is actually on -- whether it is combatting or supporting the Taliban or doing both at the same time.

European diplomats also find it problematic that MIT was given additional responsibilities in 2014 such that it can now be used as a "domestic policy instrument." The secret service now has much greater access to data from companies, banks and their customers. "It is making life difficult for all people who are unpopular with the government," the diplomat says. He says this has also resulted in further incursions into press freedoms. Journalists who report on the intelligence agency's activities can now be subject to prosecution and stiff prison sentences because it can be claimed that they threaten security.

A Country with Ubiquitous Challenges

On top of all this is the fact that Turkey is simply overwhelmed. In southeastern Turkey, the army is fighting what is essentially a civil war against members of the Kurdish opposition and the banned Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which has attacked and killed security forces multiple times. The country has taken in millions of refugees from Syria. It is participating in the international alliance against IS. It has a 900-kilometer (559-mile) long border to Syria it has to guard. Add to all this the fact that it has to observe hundreds and perhaps even thousands of jihadists inside its own borders. If it didn't sound so cynical, one could almost say: What has happened was inevitable. And those who wanted to could have seen it coming long ago.

A little over a year ago, political scientist Behlül Özkan of Istanbul's Marmara University predicted rather precisely what might happen in the event of an attack. "A few tourists die and that's the end of tourism, one of the most important pillars of our economy," he said. At the time, he was warning of the possibility of a single bombing attack at a hotel along the Mediterranean coast. Now, in winter, it appears that Istanbul's historical center made a more suitable place for targeting foreign tourists.

Turkey is dependent on tourism. Last year, the industry had just under $31 billion in revenues, with the greatest numbers of visitors coming from Russia and Germany. If vacationers were to avoid the country in the future, in addition to harming the tourism industry, it could also create tumult for a Turkish economy that is already experiencing difficulties.

Which helps explain why the country is now doing all it can to demonstrate strength. The army has begun shelling dozens of IS positions in Syria and Iraq with tanks and artillery, and it has arrested 74 suspected Islamic State members in Turkey. But swift success against the terrorist militia is unlikely. Security forces carried out raids against IS supporters right after the attack in Ankara as well. The state succeeded in disrupting the group's operations, but it didn't manage to destroy its structures. "After years in which IS was able to build up a network in Turkey unhindered, the confrontation now will be protracted and difficult," predicts Turkey expert Stein.

Political Consequences for Germany

The attack in Istanbul could also impact refugee policy and, as such, have enormous political consequences for Germany. Just a few days ago, Ankara announced it would issue work visas to some of the 2.2 million Syrian refugees who have entered into the country since 2011. It's a step that would improve living conditions for refugees in Turkey and presumably help stem the flow to Germany. Now, some politicians in the Turkish government are questioning whether the step should be reversed.

But restrictions and animosity towards refugees in Turkey might intensify the exodus to Europe. And the Turkish government might be even less inclined to try to stop them from making the crossing to Greece. Against that backdrop, the German government will have to cooperate even more closely with Erdogan in the future, closing its eyes or looking the other way when it comes to critical questions about democracy, rule of law and the free press.

More than a hundred civilians have again perished in southeastern Turkey in recent weeks, curfews have been imposed in many cities and tens of thousands of Kurds have been expelled. The renewed escalation in the decades-long conflict has intensified polarization, opening a window of opportunity for the jihadists to play different ethnic groups off against each other and to exploit the anger of the oppressed and the marginalized.

Unfortunately, it looks as though Erdogan is going to grant them exactly the favor they would like to see. Following Tuesday's attack in Istanbul, the president gave a speech to Turkish diplomats. He thundered for a half an hour over an open letter signed by academics calling for peace in southeast Turkey -- and arrested several of the signatories on Friday -- and he lashed out against the PKK and the political opposition. And Erdogan also spoke about what happened in Istanbul. But just briefly. He only spent a little less than a minute talking about the attack. Apparently that's all he thought it was worth.