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A Week of Bombings

By Patrick Cockburn
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It has been a week of bombings across the world, most of them carried out by Islamic State (Isis). Some were highly publicised because they took place in the centre of large cities and involved foreigners, such as the suicide bombing on 12 January close to the Blue Mosque and Hagia Sophia in Istanbul which killed 10 people, nine of them German tourists. Two days later gunmen and bombers claiming allegiance to Isis killed two people in Jakarta in an attack that topped the international news agenda because it appeared to show that Isis has a frightening

global reach. Furthermore, it took place in a city of 10 million people which is a media hub, ensuring that there were plenty of television cameras to record events.

The reverse is true of a double bombing in Muqdadiyah, a town in the Iraqi province of Diyala, north-east of Baghdad, which took place the day before the Istanbul attack. Though the casualty figures of 46 killed and 55 wounded were far worse than in Turkey and Indonesia combined, the slaughter was scarcely noticed by the Iraqi or international media. Isis had first exploded a bomb outside a coffee shop, allegedly frequented by Shia militiamen belonging to the Hashd al-Shaabi movement, and followed this up soon after with a second explosion that killed people who had gathered to see what was happening or to help the injured.

The attack provoked, as Isis probably intended, retaliatory attacks on Sunni by Shia militia who killed 15 people, burned seven Sunni mosques and at least 36 shops. Diyala is a mixed Sunni-Shia province, famous for fruit growing when I first visited in the 1990s but notorious over the last 12 years for sectarian warfare. Even within Iraq there was little publicity for the killings last week, because people in Baghdad are used to this happening in Diyala, the Shia-dominated government and Shia militias were not keen to publicise it, and the risks of doing so were demonstrated when two journalists from Sharqiya television channel were killed.

The publicity generated by a "terrorist" attack may exaggerate or understate its political significance. In Indonesia, it was in the interests of Isis, the Indonesian government and the perpetrators of the attack to emphasise that it was similar in method and intent to the massacre in Paris on 13 November.

Isis wants to show it can operate anywhere in the world, and the Indonesian government that it can largely thwart such evil intentions. In fact, Isis does not seem to have had much to do with it, but the extreme Islamist faction that carried it out knows that it can instantly generate vast global interest and news coverage by labelling itself as the Isis branch in Indonesia. The Isis attack in Istanbul is important because it shows that the movement now considers itself to be at war with the Turkish state that between 2011 and early 2015 showed a tolerance for IS movements in and out of Turkey that were central to the growth of the movement. Ankara was sympathetic to all jihadi movements trying to bring down President Bashar al-Assad and saw Isis as a counter-balance to the growing strength of the Syrian Kurds.

Turkish policy towards Syria has been one miscalculation after another since the Syrian uprising began five years ago. Assad did not fall, and Isis became much stronger than the Turks expected. Worst of all, not only did Isis fighters fail to beat the Syrian Kurds in the four-and-a-half month siege for the city of Kobani on the Turkish border, but the Kurds allied themselves with the United States and have been advancing with the help of thousands of US airstrikes. The 25,000 Kurdish soldiers of the People's Protection Units (YPG) are not on their own the most powerful military force in Syria, but backed by the largest air force in the world they are of crucial significance.

Turkey is deeply alarmed by the rise of a militarily strong Kurdish quasi-state running along its southern flank in de facto alliance with the US and Russia. It has discovered to its cost that Isis is not the answer to the Kurds, but it is not clear what is. Five years ago there were not wholly

unrealistic dreams in Ankara of Turkey being a model for the new Middle East, and spreading its influence through Iraq and Syria. Instead, it is now in danger of being excluded from the region after allying itself to Saudi Arabia and Qatar and supporting or turning a blind eye to the activities of extreme jihadi groups such as Isis, the al-Qaeda affiliate, the al-Nusra Front and the ideologically similar Ahrar al-Sham.

The problem for Turkey and the Sunni powers is that they now have to raise their stakes in Syria if they want to stay in the game. They did this earlier in the year by backing an anti-Assad offensive that made gains on the ground, but sparked a Russian and Iranian counter-intervention in September that enabled Assad and the Syrian army to go over to the attack. Turkey is getting close to the point where it has to become militarily engaged in the war for northern Syria or become a marginal player. The sealing of the Turkish border by Syrian Kurds and a Russian-backed Syrian army would be a body blow to all the other anti-Assad forces in Syria from which it would be difficult for them to recover.

The Syrian army has not won any decisive victories since the Russians intervened, but its soldiers are advancing rather than pulling back. The armed opposition as a whole is on the retreat. This is one of several reasons why the Syrian peace talks that begin in Vienna on 25 January are unlikely to succeed. Assad and the combination of powers behind him – Russia, Iran and Hezbollah – feel that they are getting stronger rather than weaker so there is less reason for them to compromise.

The Russians evidently enjoy interacting with the US in a way that recalls the super-power bargaining of the Cold War. But a former Arab diplomat points out that "Syria has two separate alliances with Russia and Iran and, of these, the Iranian one is the most important." A defeat in Syria has always been a far more devastating prospect for Iran than Russia. The Iranians are the leaders of the region-wide Shia axis that is one of the guarantees of Assad's survival and they have also, hitherto, provided badly needed money to Damascus which the Russians have not. This limits Russia's capacity to put pressure on Assad on Vienna even if it wanted to.

The other problem facing negotiations in Vienna is that the armed opposition groups which are doing most of the shooting will not be present. The most important of these are Isis and al-Nusra, while Ahrar al-Sham is ambivalent towards Saudi Arabia's attempt to unite the opposition. There is little point in having local ceasefires, unless al-Nusra and the other extreme fundamentalists agree to them and get something in return.

Guerrilla forces tend to disintegrate if they are not fighting an enemy. It is difficult to see why the war should not go on.