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The Istanbul airport bombing: Blowback from the war in Syria

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The death toll in the June 28 terrorist attack against Istanbul's Ataturk international airport rose to 43 Thursday with the death of a critically wounded three-year-old Palestinian boy. The child's mother was among those killed in the attack, which wounded 239 others.

The worldwide horror over the triple suicide bombing in one of the world's busiest airports has been mixed with growing anger among the the people of Turkey, who blame not only the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the apparent author of the terrorist act, but also this group's principal patron and facilitator, the government of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

The *New York Times* Thursday published an article titled "Ending Free Rein for ISIS, Turkey Learns Its Wrath," that was strikingly blunt in its admission of the role played by the Turkish government.

"From the start of the Islamic State's rise through the chaos of the Syrian war, Turkey has played a central, if complicated, role in the group's story. For years, it served as a rear base, transit hub and shopping bazaar for the Islamic State ... The group's long honeymoon with Turkey started with the country's aid to rebel groups that were fighting the government of Bashar al-Assad of Syria, often with the blessing of Western intelligence agencies ... Because so many of the group's foreign fighters passed through Istanbul's Ataturk Airport, the destination itself became synonymous with intent to join ISIS."

These so-called foreign fighters, the article acknowledges, enjoyed free movement into Turkey and on to Syria, as well as back again through Turkey and into Europe, where they have been responsible for similar terrorist atrocities.

In other words, Washington's NATO ally and key regional partner has been principally responsible for sustaining the terrorist organization that is ostensibly the target of US imperialism's renewed war in the Middle East.

With the reference to "the blessing of Western intelligence agencies," the *Times* delicately skirts the reality that the US Central Intelligence Agency collaborated directly with the Erdoğan government in funneling both foreign fighters and hundreds of tons of weapons into the bloodbath in Syria to further the shared objective of regime-change: the ousting of Assad and the imposition of a more pliant Western puppet.

The main beneficiaries of the operations carried out by US intelligence have been ISIS and Al Qaeda's Syrian affiliate, the Al Nusra Front. The main victims have been the hundreds of thousands killed and millions turned into refugees in Iraq and Syria, along with those killed and maimed in the growing number of terrorist attacks from Paris to Brussels and now Istanbul.

Friction between the US and Turkey has emerged over Washington's attempt to utilize Kurdish separatist forces in both Syria and Iraq as proxy troops in an effort to curb ISIS's advance, even as Turkey is waging a civil war against its own Kurdish minority and fears the creation of Kurdish enclaves on its border. While launching limited strikes against ISIS positions in Syria, Turkey has turned its overwhelming firepower against Kurdish positions in both Iraq and Syria.

The *Times* article suggests that the attack at Ataturk airport may be the response of ISIS to the limited Turkish attacks on its forces in Syria as well as a spate of prosecutions of ISIS members in connection with previous terrorist attacks.

The degree to which the organization still operates with relative impunity inside Turkey, however, was made clear in the immediate aftermath of the bombing, when Turkish security forces launched a series of raids hitting 16 separate addresses in Istanbul as well as other locations in the Aegean coastal city of Izmir. The whereabouts of ISIS operatives was no secret to the Turkish state.

Details that have emerged about those who carried out the attack, however, point to another possible motive. The three suicide bombers are now said by Turkish authorities to have been from the Russian republic of Dagestan and the former Soviet republics of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.

It has further been reported that the organizer of the attack was one Akmed Chatayev, an Islamist veteran of the Chechen wars, who was granted asylum in Austria and then found refuge in Georgia, where he established ties to the security services of the US-backed government. He has reportedly been active in recruiting and training anti-Russian Chechen fighters from Georgia's Pankisi Gorge region and sending them to fight in Syria.

Virulently anti-Russian fighters from the same region have played an increasingly prominent role in both the leadership and the ranks of ISIS in Syria. Tarkhan Batirashvili, a former Georgian army sergeant who was described as a “star pupil” of US special forces trainers and then fought in the 2008 war against Russia, became a top ISIS commander.

Given the background of those who planned and staged the Istanbul airport bombings, it can hardly be taken as mere coincidence that the attack was executed in the immediate wake of the Erdoğan government’s issuance of an apology for last November’s shootdown of a Russian Sukhoi Su-24 jet as it was carrying out bombing runs against Turkish-backed and Al Qaeda-linked forces on the Syrian-Turkish border. The incident raised the specter of the war for regime-change in Syria turning into an armed clash between NATO and Russia with the potential of escalating into a nuclear war.

The apology is part of Ankara’s attempt at rapprochement with Russia aimed at removing sanctions that have hit Turkey’s tourism, agricultural, construction and trade sectors.

For the anti-Russian forces fighting in Syria, who have likewise been deployed in support of the US-backed regime in Ukraine, the turn to Moscow may well have been taken as a betrayal of previous understandings and commitments, with violent retribution against their erstwhile patron the response. This is a familiar pattern, seen in the evolution of Al Qaeda, which was nurtured by the CIA and then abandoned after Soviet troops withdrew from Afghanistan. The end result was September 11, 2001 and the deaths of 3,000 Americans.

US imperialism and its allies have created a multi-headed Frankenstein’s monster in Syria. In addition to the fighters from Russia and the former Soviet republics, who are believed to number roughly 10,000, several thousand ethnic Uighur Islamist militants have been brought into the country from the Xinjiang region of northwestern China via Turkey. Their presence has been credited with much of the advances made by Al Nusra, the Syrian branch of Al Qaeda, in northwestern Idlib province.

These forces have been brought into Syria not only for use as cannon fodder in the Western-backed war for regime-change, but also to be bloodied in combat in preparation for far more dangerous and potentially world-catastrophic wars against both Russia and China.

The slaughter at the Istanbul airport, like the Paris attacks of last November and the bombings in Brussels in March, serves as a warning of the immense dangers posed by these imperialist conspiracies to working people all over the planet.