

# Bombing in Istanbul's Residential Area

## 27 July 2008

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### The Incident

Two bombs, planted in trash cans, exploded within ten minutes of each other, in the Gungoren neighborhood on the city's European bank<sup>1</sup>, at about 2200 hrs local time (1900 GMT)<sup>2</sup>. The first bomb was a minor one, and caused relatively little damage but attracted scores of onlookers who were trying to figure out what the source of the commotion was. They fell victim to second blast, and were attacked by flying shrapnel and debris. The second blast occurred about 20 yards away from the first one. 16 people were killed, and 154 were injured<sup>3</sup>.

### Location



<sup>1</sup>Death toll in Istanbul bombing rises to 16", *AFP*, 27 July 2008,

[http://afp.google.com/article/ALeqM5hk0gPlgpcXqwNVX8aLGtTyF\\_ZmPg](http://afp.google.com/article/ALeqM5hk0gPlgpcXqwNVX8aLGtTyF_ZmPg)

<sup>2</sup>"Istanbul rocked by twin bombings", *BBC*, 28 July 2008, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/7527977.stm>

<sup>3</sup>"Istanbul Bombs Kill 16 in Crowded Neighborhood", *New York Times*, 28 July 2008

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/28/world/europe/28turkey.html?ref=europe>

## Modus Operandi

Muammer Guler, Governor of Istanbul, said that the police believed that the blast were not a suicide attack but were activated either by a remote or a timer<sup>4</sup>. The bombs were planted in rubbish bins in a residential area. The first bomb was a minor one, its purpose being to attract onlookers, and thus ensure maximum damage from the second detonation.

The device used in the second blast has been identified as a fragmentation bomb which used RDX, which has been used by the P.K.K in previous attacks<sup>5</sup>.

## Pictures from the blast site



## Who may be responsible

While no official responsibility has been claimed, the Turkish government suspects that the bombing has links to the PKK, the Kurdish Worker's Party, which has been fighting for self-rule in south-eastern Turkey since 1984 and has carried out bombings in Istanbul in the past<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup>"Istanbul rocked by twin bombings", *BBC*, 28 July 2008, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/7527977.stm>

<sup>5</sup>After bombing, Turkish Leader Urges Unity", *The New York Times*, 29 July 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/29/world/europe/29turkey.html?hp>

<sup>6</sup>"Turkish police detain 9 in Istanbul bombing probe", *VOA News*, 20 July 2008, <http://www.voanews.com/english/2008-07-30-voa44.cfm>

Intelligence reports had suggested that the rebels were planning an attack on Turkish cities<sup>7</sup>. The Turkish military, on Sunday, had announced that fighter jets had hit 12 P.K.K targets inside northern Iraq. "Of course there are links with the separatist organization. We hope to catch the assailants as soon as possible. Right now, we are thoroughly filtering the footage from shops' security cameras and the public surveillance camera network"<sup>8</sup>, Mr. Guler added.

The PKK has denied attacks in the past only to claim them later, such as the attack in Diyarbakir early this year that left five people dead. Additionally, the police believe that the bombings bore the hallmark of the PKK The second bomb contained RDX; an explosive which has been used by the PKK in the past. Placing explosive laden trash cans in residential areas is also a PKK tactic<sup>9</sup>.

As proof of their innocence, the PKK have pointed to German intelligence. Germany's Federal Intelligence Service's Chief, Ernst Uhrlau, in a recent interview with Germany's Bild daily, expressed the opinion that the attack in Güngören was the work of either al-Qaeda or Turkey's "deep state."<sup>10</sup>

Eight people, allegedly belonging to the P.K.K were arrested on charges of being perpetrators of this attack. One of these was identified by witnesses as being at the scene of the bombing when the explosions occurred. Milliyet daily reported that the suspect identified by the witnesses came from northern Iraq three months ago to commit a series of bombings. The daily said the suspect confessed to the crime after being shown video recordings of the explosion, and claimed that he had been told that the death toll would not be excessively high. Reportedly he saw the ensuing carnage after the explosion. The lawyers for the suspect told the pro-PKK Firat news agency that the police had detained the wrong person<sup>11</sup>.

These bombings could also have been the work of a leftist or Islamist groups; Turkey's cities have come under attack by such parties before<sup>12</sup>.

Alternatively, the attacks could have been perpetrated by an ultra-nationalist network known as Ergenekon. Ergenekon allegedly planned assassinations and bomb blasts to throw the country into

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<sup>7</sup> "Bombs strike in Istanbul neighborhood, killing 16", *Washington Post*, 28 July 2008, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/07/27/AR2008072701308.html?hpid=moreheadlines>

<sup>8</sup> "After bombing, Turkish Leader Urges Unity", *The New York Times*, 29 July 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/29/world/europe/29turkey.html?hp>

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

<sup>10</sup> "PKK rejects Gungoren link, points to German intelligence", *Today's Zaman*, 05 August 2008, <http://www.todayszaman.com/tz-web/detaylar.do?load=detay&link=149430&bolum=100>

<sup>11</sup> "Confession pins bombing on PKK", *Turkish Daily News*, 4 August 2008, <http://www.turkishdailynews.com.tr/article.php?enewsid=111549>

<sup>12</sup> "Death toll in Istanbul bombing rises to 16", *AFP*, 27 July 2008, [http://afp.google.com/article/ALeqM5hk0gPlgpcXqwNVX8aLGtTyF\\_ZmPg](http://afp.google.com/article/ALeqM5hk0gPlgpcXqwNVX8aLGtTyF_ZmPg)

chaos, which it hoped would lead to a military coup and the removal of the ruling Islamist Justice and Development (AK) Party<sup>13</sup>. About 80 conspirators from this network have already been arrested<sup>14</sup>.

Nine people suspected of having links with the bombers have been detained by the authorities<sup>15</sup>. Their identities and group affiliations have not been revealed.

## Analysis

The reasons for the attacks have so far seemed unclear.

The attack's came amid high political tensions in Turkey as it's constitutional court began deliberations on whether or not the ruling AK Party, inclusive of the current Prime Minister and President, should be banned from politics for the next five years, on charges of undermining secularism. The political environment is tense as the ruling party has been insensitive towards the worries of secularists that the government is pushing its Islamist agenda, and is therefore is currently locked in a power struggle against the military and judiciary. It is not clear, however, if the bombings were linked to the case<sup>16</sup>.

The attacks, if carried out by the PKK could have been in retaliation to the operations carried out by Turkey in Iraq on Sunday, but more broadly may be part of an effort to ease pressure on the PKK in Iraq. For much of the past year the Turkish military has been conducting operations against the PKK inside Kurdish areas of Iraq. Reports seem to indicate that the air, artillery, and large scale land incursion, have severely damaged the PKK. With the PKK appearing to be unable to launch a conventional response to these operations, it forces the PKK to launch terrorist attacks, particularly in high visibility locations, in order to demonstrate to the state, and their own supporters, that the PKK is not a spent force.

## Implications

Given the tense political situation in Turkey the attack could have wider implications. First, the government, needing a policy statement that demonstrates their commitment to a secular Turkey, may allow the military and security services wider latitude in dealing with the PKK. The AK party may be perceived as being sympathetic to the Kurds, granting greater linguistic and cultural freedoms, as part of

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<sup>13</sup> "Death toll in Istanbul bombing rises to 16", *AFP*, 27 July 2008, [http://afp.google.com/article/ALeqM5hk0gPlgpcXqwNVX8aLGtTyF\\_ZmPg](http://afp.google.com/article/ALeqM5hk0gPlgpcXqwNVX8aLGtTyF_ZmPg)

<sup>14</sup> "A narrow scrape for democracy", *The Economist*, 31 July 2008, [http://www.economist.com/world/europe/displaystory.cfm?story\\_id=11849246](http://www.economist.com/world/europe/displaystory.cfm?story_id=11849246)

<sup>15</sup> "9 held in Istanbul bombings", *USA Today*, 31 July 2008, [http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2008-07-30-turkey\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2008-07-30-turkey_N.htm)

<sup>16</sup> "Bombs strike in Istanbul neighborhood, killing 16", *Washington Post*, 28 July 2008, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/07/27/AR2008072701308.html?hpid=moreheadlines>

the AK's broader political agenda. The AK may need to shore up its position with the secular forces, without alienating its core Islamists support. Cracking down on the Kurds is a convenient way to achieve both goals.

Second, while it is possible that Al-Qaeda, or the vague "Deep State" plotters could be behind the attack, it seems unlikely. AQ has been able to conduct larger attacks in Turkey and while they are interested in operations there, they have tended to target foreign interests in Turkey and not Turks themselves. Even if one accepts that the "Deep State" exists, the attacks that are attributed to them have not been indiscriminate terrorist attacks, but more targeted violence. Thus, while it is possible that the plotters are trying to retaliate against the AK for the crackdown, it seems counterproductive to launch an terrorist campaign which would offer the government the pretext for a wider security sweep.

Thus it seems far more likely that the PKK is the group responsible. For the PKK, it is clearly an effort to demonstrate that they are not spent. They clearly have access to and the capability of using military grade explosives. This is well known, they have been restrained in inflicting mass casualties, but if that restraint is not removed, Turkey could be in for a long and bloody few months.

The critical question is what will the wider Kurdish population do? They have received many cultural concessions, and the Kurdish areas of Turkey are undergoing a substantial economic development program that will potentially end their economic marginalization. An increase in violence could undermine, if not reverse, those gains. Additionally, will the powerful Diaspora community support the apparent change in tactics, or will they finally move towards ending the violence? The answer to these questions will determine the future trajectory of the PKK and Turkey.