

Double Bomb Blasts Strike Istanbul

Summary

Several people were killed and dozens injured in two bomb blasts in a residential neighborhood of Istanbul on 27 July, 9:45 pm local time. Turkish authorities say the blasts were terrorist attacks, but have yet to identify the group responsible.¹ Both Kurdish separatists and al-Qaeda-linked Islamists have carried out acts of terrorism in Turkey in recent years.

Media outlets gave conflicting reports on the number of casualties. Some sources reported that 14 people had been killed, while others reported 15 or 16.² Estimations on the number injured range from 140-154 individuals.³ The attack is Turkey's worst since an al-Qaeda-linked group killed over 60 people in four attacks in 2003.

The Attack

The explosives were placed in trash cans and detonated within 12 minutes of one another. The first device was placed near a telephone booth, turning the glass from the booth into shrapnel which caused a number of injuries.⁴ The first device attracted a crowd of onlookers to the scene, and a larger device 20 meters away was detonated near the crowd.⁵

The tactic of drawing a crowd with one device and attacking it with a second has been popular among various terrorists, including Palestinian organizations, Iraqi al-Qaeda, and lone wolf American terrorist Eric Robert Rudolph. Kurdish separatist groups, notably the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) and its affiliated groups, have concealed explosives in trash cans in prior attacks.

The Targets

It appears that Istanbul residents were the primary targets of this attack. Previous attacks in and around Istanbul have targeted foreign tourists and businesses or government and military personnel. These bombs were placed in the residential neighborhood of Gungoren, in a pedestrian square where local people gather at night.⁶

¹ Tait, Robert. "15 Killed and Scores Injured as Bomb Blasts Hit Istanbul Square," *The Guardian*, 28 July 2008. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/jul/28/turkey1>

² Ibid. Also: Sezer, Seda. "Istanbul Hit by Bomb Blasts; At Least 14 Killed, 140 Injured," *Bloomberg.com*, 28 July 2008. http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=20601087&sid=aJQq_u2Rx_qw&refer=home
Ant, C. Onur. "Bombs Strike Istanbul Neighborhood, Killing 16," *Associated Press*, 28 July 2008. <http://ap.google.com/article/ALeqM5iD6sZ-hsAvkcb5p3WEiut5OZI9pOD926ILU00>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Tait, 28 July 2008.

⁵ Arsu, Sebnem. "Bombs Kill 16 in a Crowded Istanbul Neighborhood," *New York Times*, 28 July 2008. <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/28/world/europe/28turkey.html?ref=europe>

⁶ Ant, 28 July 2008.

The Suspects

The PKK or associated Kurdish organizations: The attacks came at a time when the Turkish military is intensifying operations against PKK targets. Earlier on the day of the attack, Turkish forces carried out aerial raids on PKK bases in the Mt. Qandil region of northern Iraq.⁷ The PKK has previously threatened severe retaliation for Turkish military operations in southeastern Turkey and northern Iraq.⁸

During the spring/summer tourist season of 2006, a PKK-linked terrorist group known as the Kurdish Freedom Falcons carried out a string of small bombings in Istanbul and in coastal resort areas. However, the terrorists associated with this recent attack selected an area where tourists are rarely found, choosing it over neighborhoods like Sultanahmet and Beyoğlu which are flush with foreigners during this time of year.

Turkish Islamists: The attack came the day before a constitutional court began deliberations on a case against Turkey's main Islamist party, the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). Prosecutors are claiming that the AKP violates Turkey's constitutionally-sanctioned secular nature and should be banned.⁹ Islamists in Turkey are upset by the possibility of a ban. The AKP has never supported violence to achieve its objectives, but not all of its supporters necessarily agree with this stance.

Al-Qaeda-linked Jihadists: In November 2003, terrorists inspired and possibly supported by al-Qaeda carried out four attacks within one week of one another against Jewish and British targets in Istanbul. Two synagogues catering to Istanbul's 20,000 strong Jewish population, a branch of the British bank HSBC, and the British consulate were attacked. Al-Qaeda linked terrorists are also suspected in a recent attack on the US Consulate in Istanbul which killed three Turkish policemen.¹⁰

Militant Secularists: While the least likely suspects, militant secularists cannot yet be ruled out. The attack came just two days after the indictment of 86 secularists accused of plotting to overthrow the current AKP-led government in a violent coup.¹¹ However, militant secularists have not been known to carry out terrorist attacks in Turkey in recent years.

⁷ Tait, 28 July 2008.

⁸ AFP, "PKK Threatens to Retaliate against Turkey," 28 March 2008.

<http://afp.google.com/article/ALeqM5hui-mg5T0mzAVdJ6Yf7JdEI7Zyog>

⁹ Bloomberg, 28 July 2008.

¹⁰ CBS News, "Al Qaeda Suspected in US Embassy Attack," 9 July 2008.

<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2008/07/09/world/main4243450.shtml>

¹¹ Bloomberg, 28 July 2008.