

On 19 December, Turkish authorities announced that they had seized a key suspect in connection with a series of suicide bombings over the previous month. On the morning of Saturday 15 November 2003, two pick-up trucks driven by Islamist suicide bombers exploded within 15 minutes of each other outside two Istanbul synagogues, while 20 November saw Istanbul hit by two more suicide truck bombs, which exploded outside the British Consulate-General and the Turkish headquarters of the London-based HSBC bank. Some 62 people died in the blasts, including the four suicide bombers, and over 750 suffered injuries. Three British diplomats, including the Consul-General Roger Short, and six Turkish Jews lost their lives. The rest of the dead, and the vast majority of the wounded, were Turkish Muslims. The bombers' choice of targets indicates that their primary purpose was to kill Jews and attack symbols of British political and economic power, rather than strike at Turkey itself; although it is likely that Turkey's secular system and pro-Western foreign policy made it an acceptable location for the inevitable collateral damage inflicted by the massive bombs.

As *Strategic Comments* went to press in late-December 2003, the Turkish authorities had detained 94 people – and formally charged 31 – in connection with the bombings. Most of the charges related to membership of a terrorist organisation rather than direct involvement in the bombings. Nevertheless, initial indications are that the attacks were carried out by Turks, at least some of whom had received religious instruction and military training in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Although the background of those involved, the targeting, planning and timing of the attacks all suggest a connection with al-Qaeda – and while a claim of responsibility was emailed to the London-based *al-Quds al-Arabi* newspaper by the Abu Hafz al-Masri Brigades, an al-Qaeda affiliate – there is no firm evidence that it was behind the bombings. But neither do the two leading militant Turkish Islamist groups appear to have either the technical or financial resources to prepare or carry out such closely coordinated, large-scale attacks. On balance, it appears that the bombings were carried out by a cell of Turkish militants, probably established for this specific purpose, whose leaders had undergone training outside the country and probably also received funding from abroad.

IBDA-C and Turkish Hezbollah

During the 1990s, a number of Islamist groups staged assassinations and bombings in Turkey, almost all against domestic

targets. Most of the groups were small and short-lived. By the time of the Istanbul bombings just two appeared to have retained cell networks, albeit with severely reduced operational capabilities. They were: the Turkish Islamic Raiders of the Greater East-Front (IBDA-C); and the Ilim Group, which is popularly referred to in Turkey as Hezbollah, although it has no connection with the Lebanese organisation of the same name.

After the synagogue bombings, a fax purporting to come from the IBDA-C was sent to a Turkish newspaper, claiming responsibility. This was surprising. In the late 1990s, most of the IBDA-C's leadership was captured and its cell network crippled by a series of police raids – it has since been unable to stage any major operations. Indeed, even before these raids, the IBDA-C had not demonstrated any significant operational sophistication. It was involved in a handful of assassinations, but most of its energy appeared to be directed towards fire-bombing shops selling alcohol, desecrating non-Muslim graves and destroying statues of Kemal Ataturk, who in 1926 enshrined the principle of secularism in the Turkish constitution.

Turkish Hezbollah was both much larger and deadlier. It was founded in the 1980s by Huseyin Velioglu in the predominantly Kurdish southeastern city of Diyarbakir. Initially, Turkish Hezbollah concentrated primarily on assassinating members and sympathisers of the Kurdish-separatist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which in 1984 had launched an armed campaign for Kurdish independence and was ostensibly Marxist (and thus atheistic). There is considerable evidence to suggest that during the early 1990s members of the Turkish security forces tolerated Turkish Hezbollah propaganda activities in predominantly Kurdish areas and, at a low level at least, colluded with the organisation by supplying it with small arms and lists of targets for assassination.

As the PKK insurgency began to falter in the late 1990s, Turkish Hezbollah moved into western Turkey, where it began to assassinate and extort money from moderate Islamists. In January 2000,

the police killed Velioglu during a raid on a safe house in Istanbul, in which they found a computer database containing details of over 20,000 of the organisation's members and sympathisers – around 5,000 of whom were subsequently captured. In recent years, Turkish Hezbollah has retained a skeletal cell structure, but with nearly all of its leadership either dead or in prison, it has been unable to stage any major operations. Yet there is little doubt that Turkish Hezbollah's propaganda activities in southeastern Turkey during the 1990s swelled an already growing pool of radicalised young Islamist militants who had no affiliation to a specific local organisation. Many went abroad – their travel arrangements usually handled by Turkish Islamist 'charities' and support groups – for further religious instruction in Iran or Pakistan. This was often followed by time spent in military and terrorist training in camps in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Many subsequently fought for Islamist causes in the Balkans, the Caucasus or alongside the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. A report submitted to the Turkish National Security Council (NSC) on 21 November 2001 stated that the Turkish security forces had identified 1,000 Turkish citizens who had fought for radical Islamist causes outside the country over the previous decade, although the number who received military training in radical Islamist camps is believed to be much higher.

Nonetheless, little attempt appears to have been made to monitor the activities of these militants when they eventually returned to Turkey (as most did). One of the reasons is that Turkish intelligence-gathering is primarily focused on organisations that are believed to pose an immediate threat to Turkish national security; the militants had fought in conflicts in which Turkey was not directly involved. But intelligence operations against domestic terrorist groups have often also been hobbled by institutional rivalries, which in the case of Islamist groups have been exacerbated by suspicions and distrust both between the civilian and military intelligence agencies – and even between the Turkish General Staff (TGS) and the government.



20 November 2003 A suicide truck-bomb devastates the HSBC building in Istanbul. Photo © AP

Terror in Turkey

The problem of intelligence-gathering

Turkey's intelligence-gathering apparatus

There are four main Turkish intelligence organisations involved in counter-terrorism operations:

- The National Intelligence Organisation (MIT), which reports to the prime minister's office, and whose remit covers all domestic and foreign threats.
- The Security Directorate (SD), which includes the police force and is responsible for countering all criminal activity in urban areas. The SD is organised on a national level and reports to the Interior Ministry.
- The Gendarmerie Intelligence Organisation (JITEM). In theory, the Gendarmerie, which is responsible for policing in rural areas, is accountable to the Interior Ministry in peacetime; in practice, it works more closely with the TGS.
- Military Intelligence, which reports directly to the TGS.

There have long been tensions between MIT and the SD, which believes that it should be responsible for all domestic security under a division of labour similar to that in the US between the FBI and CIA. For its part, MIT regards the SD – whose higher echelons are usually filled by political appointees – as being too heavily politicised and reluctant to act against members or associates of whichever political party happens to be in power at the time.

The military worked closely with MIT – which had traditionally been headed by a retired general – until 1992, when the position was taken over by a civilian. This fuelled suspicions in the TGS that the organisation was vulnerable to political manipulation. As evidence, military sources claim that over the last decade the quality of intelligence they have been receiving has deteriorated. However, the TGS's perception of itself as the guardian of the country has meant that it has tended to view intelligence gathering with other agencies as a one-way street, in which it is a recipient but under no obligation to be a provider. Despite tensions and even moments of low farce (such as instances of two or occasionally even three agencies tapping the same telephone line), the intelligence agencies have proved highly effective in penetrating both Kurdish nationalist and militant leftist organisations. Operations against Islamist groups have been much less successful.

Distrust and denial

During the 1990s the TGS often complained that operations against Islamist groups were hindered by Islamist

sympathisers in the SD. Privately, military officials blamed Abdulkadir Aksu, who was interior minister between 1987–91, for filling the ranks of the police with religious sympathisers, who tended either to refuse to believe that pious Muslims could be involved in terrorism or that attacks blamed on 'Islamists' were 'provocations' staged by others to defame Islam. Though the military's accusations contain an element of truth, there is also no doubt that for several years Turkish Hezbollah was able to stage assassinations with virtual impunity in areas that were under Gendarmerie control.

Non-violent Islamist political parties have always seen the TGS as an obstacle to their taking, and remaining in, power. When the Islamist Welfare Party (WP) formed a government in 1996, the SD maintained informers within the TGS. The military stepped up its penetration efforts against the WP, eventually forcing it from office in 1997. After the moderate Islamist Justice and Development Party (JDP), a successor to the WP, won the November 2002 elections, Aksu was again appointed interior minister. Meanwhile, leading members of the JDP, including current Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan, publicly refused to accept the concept of Islamist terrorism. This was probably partly due to linguistic problems, as Turkish does not have separate words for 'Islamic' and 'Islamist'. But more alarming were private claims by JDP officials, including some very high-ranking members of the government, that anti-Islamic forces were manipulating organisations such as al-Qaeda to malign Islam. In summer 2003 JDP MPs successfully lobbied for some imprisoned Turkish Hezbollah militants to be included in a general amnesty. The result has been a deepening of the distrust felt by the TGS towards both the government and the institutions, such as the SD, which it controls. The JDP has now become the main penetration target for Military Intelligence. Mutual suspicions have already had an impact on investigations into the Istanbul bombings. In late November the failure of the SD and Gendarmerie to coordinate operations enabled several suspected ringleaders of the attacks to slip across the border into Syria.

The same tensions and suspicions which have hampered domestic intelligence-gathering have also overshadowed intelligence cooperation on the international level. All of the elements in the Turkish security apparatus

are resentful of foreign intelligence operations on Turkish territory; which they regard as, at best, an insult or, at worst, a self-serving infringement of national sovereignty. This bitterness has been compounded by what they see as the contrast between Western countries' demands for action against terrorists who are targeting the West and their alleged passivity in the face of organisations which threaten Turkey. An instance often cited is the EU's failure to suppress Kurdish nationalist and violent leftist militants and support groups in Europe; and the US's refusal to move against PKK camps in northern Iraq. As a result, the exchange of intelligence appears to have been mainly one-way, with Western countries supplying Turkey with information on Islamist groups and individuals on Turkish territory, but receiving very little of value in return.

Mixed prospects

At the NSC meeting of 21 November 2003, the government proposed that all Turkish intelligence gathering should be overseen by MIT. This is unlikely to happen: not only will the SD oppose surrendering its claim to ultimate control over domestic intelligence gathering, but the military will resist subordination to any other institution – especially to one it believes is vulnerable to manipulation by a political party it despises and distrusts. If anything, the intelligence failings exposed by the Istanbul bombings are likely to intensify rather than reduce suspicions both between Turkish intelligence agencies, the military and the government, and between Turkish officials and their foreign counterparts.

However, the domestic and international public pressure to produce results and bring the perpetrators of the Istanbul bombings to justice will force the Turkish security apparatus to intensify its operations against radical Islamists. Even if these operations are poorly coordinated and result in the capture of militants close to – rather than actively involved with – those who planned and carried out the attacks, they will nevertheless circumscribe the operational capabilities of any groups planning further attacks by forcing them onto the defensive. Still, this disruption will reduce rather than remove the possibility of Turkey being a venue for further attacks. There is a distinct possibility of further bombings. 