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Issue Brief

New Year Attack in Istanbul: Predictable and Preventable!

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S*ummary*

Turkey's position as the main transit node for entering and exiting the ISIS territories is now of paramount importance, given the probable neutralisation of the group's territorial hold in Syria and Iraq, and possible large scale migration of Islamist fighters towards Europe and the Af-Pak region.

Year 2017 had a bloody start in Turkey. A lone gunman, armed with Kalashnikov, entered Istanbul's exclusive Reina nightclub, in the upmarket Ortakoy District, and indiscriminately fired at the New Year revellers, killing 39 and injuring around 70, including many foreign nationals. Located right on the banks of the Bosphorus, the sprawling club was very popular with expatriates, diplomats and the Turkish elite.

The gunman first shot dead a 22-year-old police officer, Burak Yildiz, and a chauffeur for a tourism company, Ayhan Arik, on the street just outside the club. He then entered the club with impunity, shouting *Allahu Akbar*, and began to fire at a 600-plus strong crowd, which led to stampede as people ran helter-skelter looking for the exits, with some managing to hide under those lying injured or dead and some simply jumping into the freezing waters of the Bosphorus.¹

The Perpetrator

Eyewitnesses reported that the gunman spoke broken Turkish and accented Arabic, and that he was a trained assassin as his marksmanship was excellent. Moreover, he had several small explosives on him, which he threw at the crowd to distract them every time he reloaded his Kalashnikov.² Forensic analysis of the spent bullets shows that the last bullet in the magazines was a tracer round, giving him notice to reload. This is a fairly advanced military technique now used by the terrorists in Syria/Iraq. The attacker reportedly managed to reload his weapon three times, without being prevented by any security personnel or the general public, and was able to fire a total of 120 rounds in a span of about seven minutes.

Of the 39 people dead, 38 were killed in firing and one in the ensuing stampede. The victims included twelve Turks, seven Saudi Arabians, three Iraqis, three Jordanians, three Lebanese, two Tunisians, two Moroccans and one each from Canada, Syria, Kuwait, Russia and Israel. India too lost two of its nationals- Abas Rizvi, a film maker from Mumbai, and Khushi Shah, a fashion designer from Vadodara, Gujarat.³

After indiscriminately firing at the New Year revellers, the killer went into a toilet for about 13 minutes as per the closed-circuit television (CCTV) footage, where he removed his cap and coat and left his long barrelled gun behind, and thereafter came out and merged with the crowd and escaped. In haste, he left a wallet with 500 Turkish lira in his coat, which, along with the CCTV footage, and fingerprints on the gun, gave the Turkish investigators valuable leads on him.

The assailant, identified as Abdulgadir Masharipov of Uzbek origin, was finally apprehended after a massive manhunt on January 16. The Istanbul Governor Vasip Sahin stated that Masharipov was arrested from an apartment in Esenyurt

¹ Jamie Grierson, Haroon Siddique, Graham Russell and Nicola Slawson, "Istanbul attack: Manhunt for attacker who killed 39 in nightclub – as it happened", *The Guardian*, January 01, 2017.

² Humeyra Pamuk and Daren Butler, "Gunman in Istanbul nightclub attack may have trained in Syria", *Reuters*, January 04, 2017.

³ "Two Indian nationals killed in Istanbul nightclub attack: Sushma Swaraj", *Business Standard*, January 01, 2017.

District, a suburb in Istanbul, about 30 km from the Reina nightclub, along with an Iraqi man and three women, all of whom were affiliated with the ISIS. Pistols, two drones, mobile phone SIM cards, and \$197,000 in cash were also seized. According to Sahin, Masharipov was born in 1983, was well educated, knew four languages, and had received training in Afghanistan.⁴

Analysis of the previous CCTV data revealed that he had visited the Reina Club about a week before on a stake out, which means he was very familiar with its layout. Suspicions have been raised as to how Masharipov was able to carry on his assault without intervention from the club's security team, as the owner had earlier asked for police protection. It is now learnt that the killer used one of the three exits, which were being monitored by the Turkish police after the incident, and took a taxi from there.⁵ The terrorist also made a call from the taxi driver's phone, but the number had been unavailable for three months. The local police is of the opinion that it may have been used as a decoy. The assailant took the taxi to Zeytinburnu, 15 kms from Ortakoy District, where he went to an ethnic Uighur restaurant to get cash to pay for the taxi. This move led to rounding up of around 29 people, along with two others from the Ataturk Airport. Those arrested were Uighurs from China, Dagestanis from Russia, and Kyrgyz and Uzbeks.

The arrests had yielded information that the assailant was part of a well organised sleeper cell of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). He was reportedly infiltrated into Turkey by a handler codenamed 'Teacher Yousuf'. The assailant himself had been codenamed 'Abu Muhammed Horasani' by the *Amn al-Kharji*, the espionage wing of the group. In November 2016, 'Teacher Yusuf' had reportedly installed the killer and his family, comprising a wife and two children, in an apartment block in the town of Konya, where three other families related to the ISIS cadres were living. Turkish police conducted raids at their residences in Konya, and found a mobile phone with a selfie of the gunman taken at the Taksim Square in Istanbul, giving a clear frontal image of his face, which was quickly circulated to the airports, railway stations, etc.

The other families, thought to be part of the ISIS cell, left Konya after the incident, but were traced along with their 20 children by the police in the Bornova and Buca districts of the coastal Turkish town of Izmir, 350 kms from Konya, on January 04. Forty-one passports from multiple countries were found with them, most of which were forgeries, as well as 15 fake identity cards. Also 13 mobile phones, one tablet, one military jacket, one GPS unit, and sniper sights and night vision binoculars were seized. The handler is yet to be traced.⁶ In a related incident, a car bomb detonated outside a courthouse in Izmir, followed by a gun battle between police

⁴ Daren Butler, "Turkey says captures nightclub attacker who acted for Islamic State", *Reuters*, January 17, 2017.

⁵ "Turkey Detains 20 Suspects In Istanbul Massacre, Most of Them From Central Asian Countries", *ThereAreNoSunglasses*, January 04, 2017.

⁶ Jake Wallis Simons, "Istanbul nightclub killer 'was sneaked into Turkey by sophisticated ISIS network under a secret codename and hidden in a safe house' before carrying out Turkish massacre", *Daily Mail*, January 04, 2017.

and the suspected terrorists, killing a police officer and a bystander, and injuring around 10 people. Two of the terrorists were also killed, and one escaped.⁷

The large quantity of cash, mobile phones, SIM cards, communication equipment, arsenal, etc., that have been seized from Masharipov and his associates make it clear that the terrorist cell was well funded, and was working in coordination with the ISIS headquarters in Raqqa. The ISIS had sent a message via *al-Amaq*, a propaganda media outlet affiliated to the group, on January 02, 2017, that a “heroic soldier of the caliphate attacked the nightclub where Christians were celebrating their pagan feast”. The message added that the ‘soldier’, who was not named, fired an automatic rifle and exploded hand grenades in “revenge for God’s religion and in response to the orders” of ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.⁸

Message posted online by al-Amaq⁹



مقاتل من الدولة الإسلامية نفذ هجوم اسطنبول

أعماق الإخبارية
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صورة رمزية

اسطنبول - وكالة أعماق: قال مصدر أمني لأعماق أن مقاتلا من الدولة الإسلامية نفذ هجوم اسطنبول الذي حصل في ملهى ليلي يقام فيه احتفال بليلة رأس السنة أول أمس السبت.

وطبقا للمصدر ذاته، فإن نحو 150 من المحتفلين النصارى -بينهم غربيون من رعايا دول التحالف الدولي- قد قتلوا وجرحوا نتيجة اقتحام الملهى بالقنابل اليدوية وسلاح رشاش، وذكر المصدر أن بعض المصابين ألقوا أنفسهم بمياه مضيق البوسفور عقب إطلاق النار عليهم.

يذكر أن الدولة الإسلامية دعت مقاتليها وأنصارها إلى شن هجمات ضد تركيا التي دخلت في دائرة الصراع مع الدولة الإسلامية.

02 يناير 2017

⁷ Lizzie Dearden and Bethan McKernan, “Izmir explosion: Two 'terrorists' shot dead after car bomb and gunfire outside courthouse in Turkey”, *The Independent*, January 05, 2017.

⁸ “ISIS claims responsibility for Turkey attack”, *Al Arabiya*, January 02, 2017.

⁹ <https://pbs.twimg.com/media/C1KMQ3bXAAUwZs.jpg>

The ISIS message claiming responsibility for the Istanbul attack was different from the ones issued after attacks in Orlando (June 12, 2016), where 49 people were killed; in Nice (July 14, 2016), where 86 people were killed; and in Berlin (December 19, 2016), where 12 people were killed, which were described as lone-wolf attacks. It was also different from the assassination of the Russian Ambassador to Turkey, Andrei Karlov, on December 19, 2016, by Mevlut Mert Altintas, an officer in Ankara's riot police squad. The Turkish authorities claimed that he had been self-radicalised and had no associates. Symptomatic red flags had shot up, as it indicated the prevalence of radicalisation in the Turkish armed/security services, apart from serious security lapses.

Parallels, however, can be drawn with the June 2016 attack at Ataturk Airport, perpetrated by an assailant of Central Asian origin, belonging to the ISIS sleeper cell comprising Rakim Bulgarov and Vadim Osmanov, and directed by a senior Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) fighter from the Pankisi Gorge, named Akhmet Chatayev. Parallels can also be drawn with the July 01, 2016 attack at Holey Artisan Bakery in Bangladesh, killing 29 people including several foreigners, which too was a venue popular with foreigners/diplomats in the affluent Gulshan area of capital Dhaka.

Warnings of an imminent attack were there in the November 2015 issue of the ISIS propaganda magazine *Dabiq*, which was dedicated to the "Revival of Jihad in Bangladesh". It was stated therein that the ISIS Bangladesh was headed by one Tamim Ahmed Chowdhury, also known as Sheikh Abu Ibrahim al-Hanif, a Bangladeshi with a Canadian passport. He later turned out to be one of the main architects of the July 2016 bakery attack in Dhaka, and was subsequently killed by the Bangladeshi forces in Narayanganj.

Warnings from ISIS

Similarly, adequate warning had been given in the case of the Reina club attack as well. On November 02, 2016, al-Baghdadi had given a 30-minute audio message, titled, "This is What God and His Messenger Promised Us", a reference to the 22nd verse of Koran's Surah al-Ahzab. It referred to the coalition of the Quraysh and various tribes who lost to Prophet Muhammad in the battle of Badr, implying that the anti-ISIS coalition would similarly lose to the 'caliphate'. He also mourned the death of the senior ISIS spokesperson Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, who was killed in Syria earlier in August, and called for attacks against Saudi Arabia and Turkey.¹⁰ The ISIS ire against Turkey developed after latter's détente with Russia. It further sharpened as Ankara activated the Bashiqa Camp on the outskirts of the Mosul city in Iraq, which targeted the fleeing ISIS cadres.

Later, on December 22, 2016, the ISIS put out a 19-minute video on the *al-Furqan* channel, titled, 'The Cross Shield', castigating Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan for his inconsistent stand towards Syria/Iraq war, particularly in view of his rapprochement with Russian President Vladimir Putin, dialogue with Israeli

¹⁰ Graeme Wood, "The 'Caliph' Speaks", *The Atlantic*, November 04, 2016.

Premier Benjamin Netanyahu, talks with US President Barack Obama, etc. all of which enables the continuance of President Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria. Significantly, the video also carried pictures of the above mentioned as well as some other leaders meeting the Turkish leadership, including that of Prime Minister Narendra Modi with President Erdogan, depicting them as world leaders working against Islamic interests.¹¹

Screenshot of President Erdogan meeting Pope Francis and various world leaders including Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in the ISIS Video 'The Cross Shield'



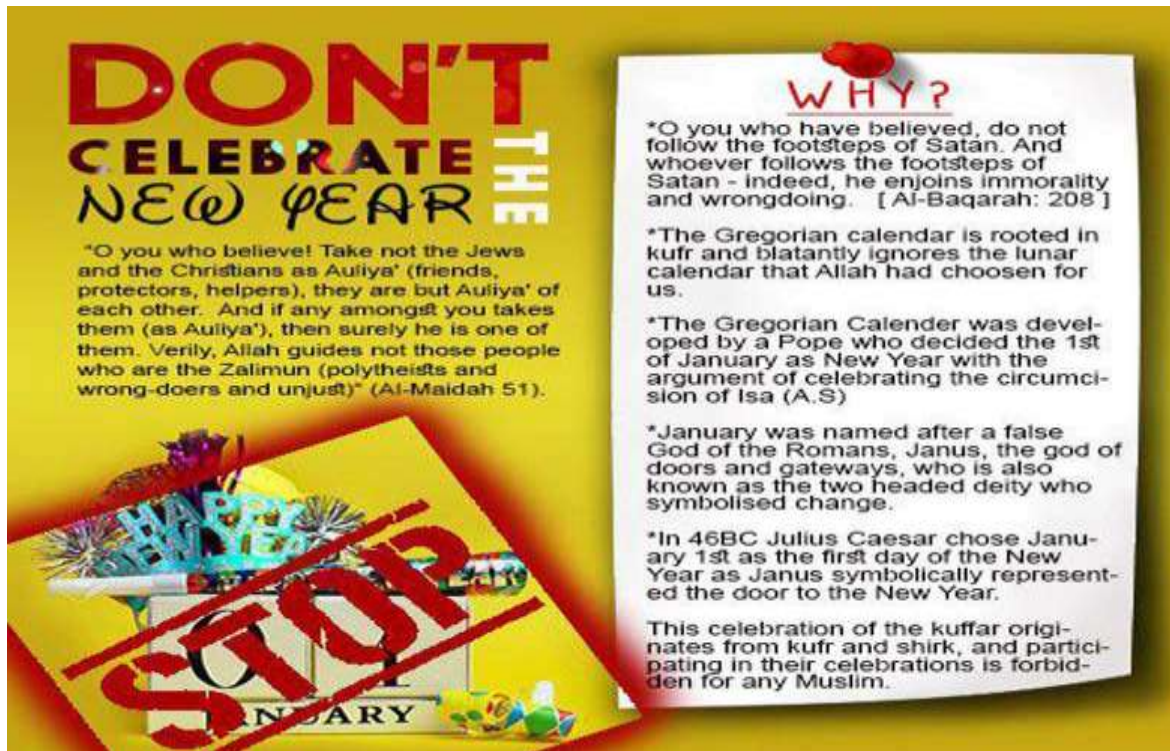
Source: Rezaul Hasan Laskar, *Twitter Post*, January 02, 2017, 05:51 a.m.

The gory video also carried footage of bombings in al-Bab in Syria, where the Turkish air force is involved, and Aleppo, which has witnessed massive civilian casualties. There is also a graphic recording of the live burning of two Turkish soldiers captured by the ISIS in al-Bab, which was put out as a warning to Ankara to restrict its activities in the war. President Erdogan had banned YouTube, Facebook and Twitter in Turkey after this, but the footage indicated the shift in relationship between the ISIS and Turkey, from that of an uneasy coexistence to an all-out war.¹²

¹¹ Rezaul Hasan Laskar, "IS video claims Modi, Obama, Turkey's Erdogan working against Muslims' interests", *Hindustan Times*, January 03, 2017.

¹² Gareth Davies, "Sick ISIS savages film themselves burning two Turkish soldiers alive in disturbing new execution video after capturing them in Aleppo", *Daily Mail*, December 22, 2016; "ISIS burns 2 Turkish servicemen alive, releases gruesome video", *Russia Today*, December 23, 2016 and "ISIL video shows 'Turkish soldiers burned alive'", *Al Jazeera*, December 23, 2016.

Finally, a message against celebrating the New Year eve was sent by the ISIS on December 26, on its *al-Furqan* channel, quoting the Quran: “O you who believe! Take not the Jews and the Christians as Auliya’ (friends, protectors, helpers), they are but Auliya’ of each other. And if any amongst you takes them (as Auliya’), then surely he is one of them. Verily, Allah guides not those people who are the Zalimun (polytheists and wrong-doers and unjust)” (5:51).¹³ While, the majority of Turks would distance themselves from any connection/adherence to the ISIS, the meme below has reportedly been in circulation in Turkey.



The mood in Turkey today is disquieting. Since the July 2016 coup attempt, President Erdogan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP in Turkish), which is based on the ideology of the Ikhwanul Muslimeen (Muslim Brotherhood), have been publically voicing displeasure overconsumption of alcohol, which is now heavily taxed in Turkey. Several restrictions have been placed on bar licenses and vendors. The ruling AKP also disapproves of ‘Western concepts’ such as dancing parties and night clubs, and even commemorating/celebrating Christian festivals.

On December 26, 2016, a group of young people had staged a mock execution of Santa Claus in front of a shopping mall in Istanbul, warning people against celebrating Western festivals. Dion Nissenbaum, a *Wall Street Journal* reporter, was strip-searched and placed in solitary confinement for publishing images from the ISIS video ‘The Cross Shield’, and a well-known fashion designer was beaten up at the Istanbul Airport by Ikhwanul Muslimeen activists, for his social media

¹³ Robert Spencer, “Islamic State: ‘To celebrate New Year’s Eve with the kuffar is to embrace their idolatry’”, *Jihad Watch*, January 03, 2017 and Vicky Nanjappa, “Celebrating New Years amounts to practising idolatry says Islamic State”, *OneIndia*, January 01, 2017.

posts calling for moderation.¹⁴ In a pointed twitter feed, Prof. Howard Eissenstat, an expert on Turkey at St. Lawrence University, New York, tweeted on January 01, 2017: “Disturbing + not very difficult line to draw between official Turkish anti New Years campaign + tonight’s violence. Rhetoric has consequences.”¹⁵

Rhetoric certainly has its consequences, and Turkey today is a deeply polarised country. The alleged coup attempt in July 2016, said to have been masterminded by the US-based moderate cleric Fethullah Gulen, has resulted in massive erosion of government authority in the army, police, judiciary, education and administration. It is said that over 30 per cent of the work force was targeted by the government in its effort to fully quell the coup. This has led to schism within the Turkish state institutions.

Differences with the US and other North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) countries too have been escalating. President Erdogan has blamed the Obama administration for a host of Turkey’s problems, including fight against the ISIS. In December 2015, Erdogan had publicly criticised the US diktat restricting Turkish forces from going further than 20 kilometres into Syria while conducting cross-border operations against the ISIS fighters. Apart from alleging that the US had obliquely supported Gulen in his coup attempt, Turkey’s presidential spokesman Ibrahim Kalin had further claimed that Washington is supporting the Democratic Union Party of Kurdistan (PYD), fighting for a free Kurdish nation, and helping the Kurdish group to establish a corridor between Afrin in south Turkey and Manbij in Syria, which is against Turkey’s national interest.¹⁶

Even though the perpetrator of the Reina club attack has been apprehended, Turkey’s Deputy Prime Minister Numan Kurtulmus, in a provocative statement, voiced suspicion that “the Reina attack is not just a terrorist organisation’s act, but there was also an intelligence organisation involved.” He added, “It was an extremely planned and organised act.”¹⁷

Turkey’s differences with the US, European Union (EU) and the NATO have impacted its internal security, by causing serious schisms within the country, which continues to have a large secular segment. It is paying a heavy price for its tolerance of *Takfiri* activists and their communication networks in the southern part of the country. Erdogan’s quiescence on possible continuation of Assad regime in Syria, and growing understanding with Russia, has exposed his regime to the ire of these self-same extremists, who have already established their presence within the country, enabling them to hit at the Turkish state with comparative ease. Turkey’s position as the main transit node for entering and exiting the ISIS *Dawla* (state), is now of paramount importance, given the probable neutralisation of the

¹⁴ Tim Arango, “In Turkey, U.S. Hand Is Seen in Nearly Every Crisis”, *The New York Times*, January 04, 2017.

¹⁵ Tim Arango, “Nightclub Massacre in Istanbul Exposes Turkey’s Deepening Fault Lines”, *The New York Times*, January 05, 2017.

¹⁶ “Turkey was told not to go further than 20 kms into Syria: Erdoğan”, *Hurriyet Daily News*, December 05, 2016.

¹⁷ “Reina nightclub attacker captured by security forces in Istanbul”, *Russia Today*, January 16, 2017.

group's territorial hold in Syria and Iraq, and possible large scale migration of Islamist fighters towards Europe and the Af-Pak region.

India on ISIS Radar

From the Indian perspective, there are some takeaways from the Reina club attack that need to be considered. The ISIS is certainly promoting attacks outside their main battle areas, be it lone-wolf attacks or coordinated actions conceptualised in Raqqa/Mosul. Reference to Prime Minister Modi's meeting with Turkish leadership in the ISIS video, issued on December 22, is a cause for concern. Also, the statements made by Mohammad Masiuddin *alias* Musa, arrested from Burdwan railway station by the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) on July 04, 2016, on charges of radicalising youth for recruiting them into the ISIS, that he was linked to Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), and had agreed to take up an assignment from a JMB leader, Abu Suleiman, to target foreigners and the US nationals in India, need to be taken very seriously.¹⁸

Musa in his interrogation had also claimed that the JMB and ISIS have sizeable support in West Bengal. Burgeoning radicalism in the porous eastern border regions has serious security implications for the country, as does the growing influence of Salafism in India's southern states. Containing these home-grown elements need initiatives beyond traditional policing. It requires close and real-time interaction with community leaders and a comprehensive and sustained counter narrative to mitigate the toxic narrative of radical Islamic groups.

Last year, in 2016, scores of ISIS sympathisers were arrested by the Intelligence Bureau (IB) and the National Investigation Agency (NIA). Around 450 individuals, who are considered as potential threat, are said to be under watch.¹⁹ IB has also set up a cell to monitor online radicalisation, codenamed *Operation Chakravyuh*, and has reportedly been able to neutralise a number of threats.

While the efforts of the security agencies are wholly praiseworthy, their tasks in view of emerging challenges remain indubitably herculean. Lapses of security, as seen in the case of New Year club attack in Istanbul, of not having adequate perimeter coverage, and real time alerts from CCTV feeds to the security network, need to be factored into India's urban security landscape.

Terrorists are now adopting innovative and indigenously encrypted communication systems, making the task of cyber security agencies quantifiably more difficult. A system for meta-data analysis is urgently required. With the announcement of 'caliphate' by the ISIS in June 2014, terrorism has morphed into newer forms. India's security blueprint therefore needs to keep pace.

¹⁸ Pooja Mehta, "Kolkata: FBI team arrives to interrogate Islamic State operative Musa", *Daily News & Analysis (DNA)*, December 08, 2016.

¹⁹ Vicky Nanjappa, "Year 2017: Agencies would be busy with IS recruits", *OneIndia News*, January 02, 2017.

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