

Rally bombings in Ankara



First it was 9/11 in New York; then it was 11-M in Madrid, followed by 7/7 in London. Now it is 10/10 in Ankara, says **Tony Moore**, who describes how suicide bombers killed 102 people at a rally

People were assembling outside the main railway station in Ankara, Turkey, to take part in a peace rally organised by the Confederation of Public Sector Trades' Union (KESK), the Confederation of Progressive Trade Unions of Turkey (DISK), the Turkish Medical Association (TTB) and the Union of Chambers of Turkish Engineers and Architects (TMMOB), collectively known as the Labour Platform, and the Peace and Democracy Party (HDP), on October 10, when two suicide bombers detonated explosives killing 102 people and injuring hundreds of others.

The attack took place amid heightened external threats to Turkey as a result of the fighting in Syria, the use of the Incirlik airbase by coalition forces to launch attacks on the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL), increasing attacks by Turkish fighter planes on Kurdish bases in northern Iraq and Syria and the start of Russia's participation in the war in Syria. Internally, in June, a parliamentary election, in which the pro-Kurdish HDP won 80 seats for the first time, left Turkey without a one-party government for the first time in 13 years.

Immediately following the election, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which had ceased operations for two years while negotiations for a final peace settlement took place, resumed its attacks, striking military and law enforcement targets.

In the six months previous to the Ankara attack, three operations by ISIL had targeted HDP buildings or rallies. In May, two bombs

Two suicide bombers killed 102 people and injured hundreds of others when they attacked a peace rally in Ankara

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– one hidden in a cargo parcel, the other in a gift-wrapped flowerpot – exploded outside the HDP offices in Adana and Mersin, injuring four people and damaging buildings. Two days before the parliamentary elections in June, four people died when a bomb exploded at an HDP rally held in Diyarbakir. In July, a suicide bomb attack in the border town of Suruç killed 34 people.

On June 22 and July 3, the National Intelligence Organisation (MIT) informed security forces that seven militants from ISIL had entered Turkey illegally, planning attacks. A document seen by newspapers in Turkey stated: "DEAŞ (an acronym often used in Turkey for ISIL) has decided to stage a big attack against our country that will hit the headlines internationally. The people who ISIL has decided will carry out this attack are already undergoing training in a camp located in the Syrian city of Deir ez-Zor."

On September 17, the General Directorate of Police warned units across the country to take strict precautions at public events because ISIL was planning to carry out a large scale attack in Turkey.

The original target for the Ankara attack was the headquarters of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP). But when they learned of the peace rally, the plans were changed.

The two suicide bombers are believed to have crossed the border into Turkey from Syria on the evening of October 9, with the help of Halil İbrahim Durgan, a former member of al-Nusra, a jihadist militia fighting against Syrian Government forces and regarded by some as the Syrian branch of Al-Qaeda, but now a member of ISIL. Given that the Turkish/Syrian border is nearly 900km in length, this was unlikely to have been difficult.

The two suicide bombers were taken to a safe house in Turkey's south-eastern province of Gaziantep, where they were fitted with suicide vests before setting out for Ankara, a distance of just over 500km, in two cars. The first was driven by Yakup Şahin, ►

► another former member of al-Nusra and a current member of ISIL, while the two suicide bombers were in the second car, driven by Durgun. Şahin left 20 minutes before the second vehicle and was stopped by traffic police at a checkpoint on the Adana-Pozanti Highway, but was allowed to continue; he sent a pre-arranged message to Durgun to warn him of the checkpoint. It appears that Durgun either avoided the checkpoint or simply was not stopped.

Reports later revealed that the intelligence unit of the Gaziantep Police Department had been physically and electronically tailing Şahin but, in what was perhaps the first security lapse, lost him two days before the attack. Nevertheless, mobile phone signals revealed that he was in Gaziantep on October 9, and in the vicinity of Ankara on the day of the attack. The second probable security lapse is that it would appear that neither the MIT nor the Ankara Police Department were told. In any event, shortly after reaching Ankara, Şahin and Durgun destroyed the phones they had used to send messages to one another.

Security lapses

Durgun left the two suicide bombers in southern Ankara near the Konya Boulevard, from where they took a taxi to the main railway station. Security camera footage shows them arriving in the taxi, wearing large coats to hide the suicide vests. It took them a mere four minutes to walk from where the taxi dropped them off to the location where the demonstrators were gathering before walking to Sıhhiye Square, where the rally was to be held. Herein lay the third security lapse. The police had set up checkpoints around Sıhhiye Square, but no such checkpoints were in evidence around the assembly point.

Almost immediately upon arrival the bombers detonated their devices. One consisted of four kilograms of TNT; the other of five kilograms of TNT. Steel pellets were used to increase the destructive power of the explosives. Both bombers each carried a grenade.

It is known that Şahin returned to Gaziantep after the bombing, where he was arrested. At the time of writing, Durgun is still at large.

Following the attacks there were widespread claims of a serious lapse in security. This was denied by the Prime Minister, the Minister of the Interior and the Minister of Justice. However, in his first statement after the atrocity, President Erdogan indicated there had obviously been some security shortcomings, but the dimensions would emerge later. In addition to the normal investigation by the Ankara Senior Public Prosecutor, he ordered the State Supervisory Council (DDK), an inspection body attached to the presidency, to undertake a "special investigation" to look at the attack from a different perspective.

Nevertheless, two days after the attack, a statement by the Ministry of Interior disclosed that the chief of the Ankara Police Department, along with the heads of both its intelligence and security units, had been removed from their posts. The announcement claimed they had been removed "to allow for a healthy investigation".

The Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu initially speculated that ISIL and the PKK, along with two leftist organisations, the Revolutionary People's Liberation Party-Front (DHKP-C) and the Marxist-Leninist Communist Party (MLKP) as being the most likely source of the attack.

But at the time of writing, no organisation had yet claimed responsibility. This led to additional speculative statements, particularly by the Prime Minister. On October 14, he had narrowed this down to ISIL and the PKK, claiming that there was evidence that the bombers had links with both groups. However, the day after the

attack, security sources said the attack bore striking similarities to the suicide attack in Suruç, which had been attributed to ISIL. Despite comments by the President and Prime Minister to the contrary, the investigation was therefore focused on ISIL from the beginning.

Two days after the attack, it was announced that both suicide bombers had been identified. The first was Yunus Emre Alagöz, the brother of the suicide bomber who attacked the rally at Suruç. Subsequent to the attack in Suruç, the Chief Prosecutor in Adıyaman issued a warrant for the arrest of Alagöz. Both were members of the 'Dokumacılar' Group, formed from around 60 or 70 Turkish militants, principally from Adıyaman Province, and which was linked to ISIL.

The second one was identified as Omer Deniz Dunder, whose name was on a list of 21 possible suicide bombers held by the security services, as was the name of Alagöz. Dunder's father later claimed he had warned the police after his son had twice been to Syria since 2013. Dunder was arrested after the first visit and was released. However, it was subsequently revealed that the DNA of the second bomber did not match with Dunder and, at the time of writing, the identity of the second bomber has not yet been disclosed.

On October 21 it was announced that the Ankara Chief Prosecutor's Office had asked the National Intelligence Agency (MIT) to investigate the possibility that a foreign intelligence agency was involved. It was also announced that the investigation had revealed the identity of the person who ordered and arranged the attack. At the time he was believed to be still in Turkey.

Two days later, the President claimed that the Ankara bombing was: "A collective terrorist act in which Daesh (ISIL), the PKK, the Mukhabarat (Syrian Intelligence) and the PYD (Democratic Union Party) in northern Syria each played a role."

But is such an amalgam likely? ISIL, the PKK and the PYD are opposed to the al-Assad regime. In addition, ISIL and the PYD are opposed to each other; indeed Northern Syria has, for some time, been a war zone between ISIL and the PYD. But Turkey views the PYD and its military wing, the People's Protection Unit (YPG), as an extension of the PKK.

The United States, on the other hand, has been using the YPG as a ground force against ISIL and has provided this organisation with weapons, some of which have, according to Turkish Government officials, found their way into PKK hands. Such a coming together of four different parties – with such different agendas – is extremely unlikely.

Despite the President's claim, on October 28, the Ankara prosecutor's office issued a written statement claiming that the: "Group in Gaziantep took orders directly from the Daesh (ISIL) terror group in Syria," and digital evidence indicated that the attack had been launched: "To undermine political stability and delay a parliamentary election set for November 1." It added that there was strong evidence that ISIL had carried out attacks on the HDP buildings in Mersin and Adana, the bombings in Diyarbakir Suruç, and all attacks that had been aimed at the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP).

The security forces launched raids following the bombings. It was reported that the vehicle used in the Ankara bombing, 2,500 kilograms of ammonium nitrate (used in the making of explosives), ten suicide bombers vests, a sewing machine to make suicide bomb vests, hand grenades, rifles, bullets, detonators, and a variety of materials used to make explosives were seized in houses, work places and depots thought to have been used as cell houses in Gaziantep.

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