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Issue Brief

The Terrorist Attack on Ataturk Airport – Portents and Pointers

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S*ummary*

The June 28 attack on Ataturk airport, as also the Zaventem attack in Brussels, have highlighted the security lacunae in all airports, which do not monitor the arrival terminals, permitting terrorists to use combinations of AK 47s, IEDs and suicide vests to advantage. More policed security perimeters around airports, a multiplicity of check-in points, with escalated staff/security, and reduced waiting time, are now absolute necessities. Another urgent requirement is more sophisticated equipment to detect newer forms of explosives like Triacetone Triperoxide – TATP, which is currently not detected by security checks.

The June 28, 2016 terrorist attack on Istanbul's Ataturk Airport, which left 44 dead, including 18 foreigners, mainly Saudis, Iranians and Ukrainians, and over 230 injured, was especially significant, as it was carried out on the eve of the second anniversary of the declaration of the Caliphate in Mosul by Abu Bakr al Baghdadi. Ataturk Airport, which was said to be one of the best-guarded airports in the world handling over 63 million passengers a year, was breached with comparative ease by a triad of terrorists, using methods tried and tested over several airport attacks. According to the Turkish interior ministry, the fault line was the external security perimeter, which had been recently expanded, and had inadequate checks to the departure terminal. This was accentuated by round-the-clock heavy traffic close to the arrival and departure terminals. After scanning CCTV inputs, officials zeroed in on three terrorists who came to the entrance of the international terminal at around 2045 hours in a taxi, with heavy winter jackets (which should have raised alarm bells), and black suitcases. After separating, one targeted the nearby parking lot of the international terminal while the second moved towards the security checkpoint at the terminal entrance. They opened indiscriminate fire, lobbed grenades and finally detonated themselves using suicide vests. And the third waited at the entrance and targeted the public streaming out of the Airport in panic.¹

The incident, which had been meticulously planned, lasted a little more than three minutes. The attackers struck an hour after *iftar*, and so reportedly caught the security staff unawares.² According to inputs, Turkey's National Intelligence Agency, MIT, had warned about a possible suicide attack a few weeks earlier,³ although specific details were not available. The incident in Ataturk Airport was an almost mirror image of the attack on Zaventem Airport, Brussels (March 22 2016), which highlighted the possibility that it was an ISIS-sponsored attack, and re-emphasised the vulnerability of European airports. Turkey, which considers Ataturk Airport to be a national symbol, and the gateway to its tourist revenue, has seen an immediate sharp decline in tourist footfalls, which, European countries in general, can ill afford in the present climate of economic slowdown.

The perpetrators of the attack were identified within 36 hours; a testimony to the efficiency and reach of Turkish Intelligence and local police. Two persons, holding Russian travel documents, have been identified – Rakim Bulgarov and Vadim Osmanov, according to Turkey's state news agency Anadolu (June 30). The MIT located a flat rented by Osmanov in the Aksaray neighbourhood, Fatih district, Istanbul, where he had to give his passport copy, which foreign nationals are required to furnish, for security vetting. Anadolu, quoting police sources, said that information about the flat had been obtained through a laptop the bombers threw

1 Jane Onyanga-Omara, "Official: Turkey bombers from Russia Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan," *USA Today*, June 29, 2016, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2016/06/30/islamic-state-suspects-arrested-after-istanbul-airport-attack/86543080/>

2 <http://thesourceworldbeat.com/intelligence-feeds/global-intelligence-feed-syria/>, June 30, 2016.

3 Mete Yazar, "Flying Blind: Why Turkey's Intelligence Agency Can't Prevent Terror Attacks," July 3, 2016, <http://sputniknews.com/middleeast/20160703/1042355826/turkey-intelligence-agency-terrorism.html>

away before leaving for the airport.⁴ The police, apart from positively identifying Osmanov from his passport, were also able to seize digital data and documents linked to the ISIS in the flat,⁵ and learnt that Vadim Osmanov had attended a Salafi mosque in Makhachkala in Dagestan, Russia, which is known to have radicalized a number of Caucasian Jihadis.⁶

The Aksaray neighbourhood has become a hub for Syrian and Iraqi nationals who have moved to Turkey following unrest in their countries and set up scores of small shops, restaurants, real estate agencies and import-export businesses. It also houses a network of North Caucasian migrants, many of whom are battle-hardened from their experience in either the Chechen wars or Afghanistan, and are vulnerable to radicalization and recruitment by transnational jihadi groupings. The Aksaray region can be compared to Molenbeek in Belgium, the home of some terrorists connected to the Paris and Brussels attacks. As in the case of Saleh Abdelsalam, the terrorist involved in Paris and Brussels, who moved in from Syria and sheltered in Molenbeek, Vadim Osmanov entered Turkey from Syria on his Russian passport about a month ago. Police further said that he had entered Turkey from Raqqa (Syria), the capital of the ISIS, at least once before in 2015 and is suspected to have had links to jihadi cells inside Turkey.⁷ The third bomber has not yet been named, but initial reports suggested that he was from Uzbekistan. Meanwhile, Turkish police carried out several raids against suspected Islamic State cells in Istanbul, the Aegean coastal city of Izmir, and the border town of Gaziantep (June 30-July3), and have arrested around 44 individuals, including 17 foreigners.⁸

Some reports have suggested that the mastermind of the Ataturk attack was Ahmed Rajapovich Chatayev, a senior member of the Kavkaz Emirate, a grouping active in Syria, which is now affiliated with the ISIS. While the Turkish government mouth piece, *Yeni Safak*,⁹ has written that he was the prime mover of the attack, the Turkish Government has not yet made an official statement. However, Rep. Michael McCaul, chairman of the U.S. House Committee on Homeland Security, has stated that Chatayev was probably behind the three suicide bombers who carried out the attack on Istanbul airport. There are also differing reports about his arrest, with NSBC International reporting on July 1 that Turkish authorities had arrested Chatayev,

4 Umar Farooq, "Turkish officials identify two of three suicide bombers in attack at Istanbul airport that killed 44," *Los Angeles Times*, July 1, 2016, <http://www.latimes.com/world/europe/la-fg-istanbul-attackers-20160701-snap-story.html>

5 Faith Karimi and Steve Almasy, "Istanbul airport attack: Planner, 2 bombers identified, report says," *CNN*, July 2, 2016, <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/07/01/europe/turkey-istanbul-ataturk-airport-attack/>

6 "Suspect in terrorist attack at Istanbul airport attended a Salafi mosque in Dagestan," July 5, 2016, <http://www.interfax-religion.com/?act=news&div=13074>

7 "Turkish government does not confirm Akhmed Chatayev's participation in Ataturk Airport attack," June 30, 2016, <http://www.interpressnews.ge/en/world/79472-turkish-government-does-not-confirm-akhmed-chatayevs-participation-in-ataturk-airport-attack.html?ar=A>

8 Julian Barnes, Thomas Grove and Richard Bordeax, "U.S. Suspects Chechen Was Behind Istanbul Airport Attack," *Wall Street Journal*, July 3, 2016, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-suspects-chechen-was-behind-istanbul-airport-attack-1467458810>

9 Note 7.

but CNN stating that his whereabouts were still unknown. Chatayev's involvement has also been claimed by the Russian media as well as by social networking sites associated with the Turkish Government.

Ahmed Chatayev's possible connection in the incident presages a dangerous portent, given his jihadi profile. He has been on Russia's watch list for his involvement in the second Chechen war (1999-2000), where he lost an arm, earning him the sobriquet of the one-armed jihadi. He was closely associated with Doku Umarov, the Chechen leader, who decided to go beyond Chechen nationalism by anointing himself as the self-proclaimed Emir of the entire North Caucasus region of Russia and declaring it a putative Islamic State of the Kavkaz Emirate (2003). Till his death through poisoning in 2013, Umarov had been the top terrorist leader in Russia, and taken responsibility for several attacks on civilian targets since 2009, including the 2010 Moscow Metro bombings and significantly, the 2011 Domodedovo International Airport bombing, which has a marked similarity to the Ataturk Airport attack. While his attempts to prevent the holding of the Sochi 2014 Olympics was unsuccessful, he succeeded in radicalizing not only a large number of North Caucasians, but also got the Bashkirs and Tatars into the terrorist net.¹⁰

Due to his links with Doku Umarov, Ahmed Chatayev was on the wanted list in Russia since 2003 for sponsoring terrorism, recruiting extremists and membership in a terrorist group. Chatayev escaped to Europe and claimed asylum on the grounds that he was a victim of torture, was being persecuted by Russian authorities, and was subsequently granted asylum in Austria. He was arrested in the Swedish town of Trelleborg in 2008 and was detained with some Chechen nationals as police found Kalashnikov assault rifles, explosives and ammunition in his car, and he consequently spent more than a year in a Swedish prison. Chatayev was again arrested in 2010 in Ukraine and blue prints of IEDs and data regarding Chechen terrorists in Russia and Middle East were found on his mobile. Russia's request for his extradition on terrorism-related charges was rejected, as Chatayev filed a case in the European Court for Human Rights, which ordered Ukraine not to hand him over to Russia, and Amnesty International sent out a statement that his extradition could cause a miscarriage of justice as he could face torture and ill treatment.¹¹

A year later, Chatayev was once again detained as he was crossing the border between Turkey and Bulgaria. And once again he avoided extradition because of Amnesty International, which stressed that Chatayev had a refugee status in Austria and thus cannot be sent to Russia. Between 2012 and 2015, Chatayev reportedly lived in Georgia, where he established a strong presence of the Kavkaz Emirate. Since mid-2014, he has recruited large numbers of fighters from the North and South Caucasus to join the ranks of the Islamic State. Largely because of his role, the Pankisi Gorge in Georgia has become a major transit route for jihadists travelling to

10 For more details about Umarov, see the various reports listed at topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/u/doku_k_umarov/index.html

11 "Ukraine: Chechen Risks Torture if Returned to Russia," *Amnesty International*, January 11, 2010, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur50/001/2010/en/>

Syria to fight on behalf of the Caliphate.¹² He cooperated closely with Omar Shishani (Tarhan Tayumurazovich Batirashvi), a Georgian, who headed the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan's (IMU) contingent in Syria/ Iraq and was the Military Commander of the ISIS in Raqqa till his death (March 16 2016).¹³

Chatayev had left Georgia in February 2015 for Syria, where he joined ISIS militants. He is said to be the commander of the Yarmouk Battalion, a Chechen faction of the ISIS. According to the United Nations Security Council, Chatayev now controls 130 ISIS militants whom he uses for terrorist activities in Syria around Aleppo, and other areas adjacent to southern Turkey. He has considerable clout in the ISIS, due to his work in the Pankisi Gorge area, from where he is reported to have brought in over 1000 jihadis into Syria/Iraq. Chatayev is said to have set up a branch of the Kavkaz Emirate in Turkey, and since 2015 has focussed on recruiting young men from immigrant families who hold European Union passports. In January 2016, the Russian paper, Kommersant, warned that Chatayev was "training executors for acts of terror not only in Russia but also in Western Europe."¹⁴ Later, Andrey Przhezdonsky, the advisor to the chairman of the Russian National Anti-Terrorism Committee, claimed the Chatayev was the head of a special ISIS unit now in charge of arranging blasts in Russia and Europe. Significantly, Russian claims about Chatayev have been endorsed after the interrogation of two North Caucasian ISIS cadres, Yakub Ibragimov and Abdulla Abdullaev, in Turkey last year, who confessed that they recruited young Caucasians via social media, provided them with fake passports, and took them to ISIS camps where they underwent training organised by Chatayev's team.¹⁵

Russians have maintained that Chatayev was not extradited, despite overwhelming evidence against him, due to the intervention of the Security Service of Ukraine's (SBU) chief, Valentin Nalyvaychenko, and protests by the Ukrainian nationalist organization, the Tryzub. The Russians further claim that the "Dzokhar Dudayev" battalion (named after the first rebel Chechen leader who tried to declare independence from Russia) was formed by the nationalist Right Sector, a Ukrainian militia, to participate in the military conflict in the Donbass region, on the side of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. The Battalion has been split into the Sheikh Mansur battalion (named after an 18th century Chechen warrior) and has incorporated illegal armed formations and terror groups mainly from the North Caucasus, some of whom have migrated to the Syria/Iraq theatre after earning their jihadi credentials on the

12 Mark Kramer, "The Return of Islamic State Fighters: The Impact on the Caucasus and Central Asia," *PonarsEurasia Policy Memo 381*, August 2015, <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/return-islamic-state-fighters-impact-caucasus-and-central-asia>

13 "ISIL commander Omar the Chechen confirmed dead," *Al Jazeera*, March 16, 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/03/senior-isil-commander-reportedly-alive-160316072246258.html>

14 Will Stewart, "Was one-armed Chechen warlord behind Istanbul airport attack? Bearded 'terror mastermind' fled Russia 12 years ago before settling in Turkey as ISIS recruiter, security services say," *MailOnline*, June 30, 2016, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3667783/Was-one-armed-Chechen-warlord-Istanbul-airport-attack-Bearded-terror-mastermind-fled-Russia-12-years-ago-settling-Turkey-ISIS-recruiter-security-services-say.html>

15 Ibid.

Ukrainian frontline.¹⁶ The Dudayev and Sheik Mansur Battalions also cooperate closely with the Kavkaz Emirate (CE), and Chatayev has been the representative of Doku Umarov and CE in Europe since he got asylum in Austria. Russian media has pointed out that, had expeditious and legal action been taken against Chatayev, the Istanbul blast could have perhaps been prevented.¹⁷

Security officials have opined that the group's motive in the high voltage attack, which was Turkey's first suicide attack in an Airport, could have been to intimidate Ankara because of recent attempts at rapprochement with Russia.¹⁸ On June 27, Erdogan sent a letter of apology to Russian President Vladimir Putin seeking to bury the hatchet over Turkey's shooting down of a Russian fighter jet on November 24, 2015. Putin and Erdogan spoke by phone the day after the terrorist attack at Ataturk Airport, when the former ordered the Russian government to launch the process of restoring cooperation with Turkey, including tourist traffic, and enhance cooperation to contain terrorism.¹⁹ Recent conciliatory moves towards Moscow is a matter of real disquiet for the ISIS mujahedeen, especially the IMU and Kavkaz Emirate cadres, as they had been using communication routes through Turkey, and had set up an extensive network there. For them, Turkish cooperation with Russia could be an existential threat.

The involvement of Chechen mujahideen in Europe is a disturbing phenomenon. The Istanbul attack was the first instance of Caucasian mujahideen with the ISIS involving themselves in a terror attack outside Syria/Iraq. The incident is indicative of not only the network that the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and Kavkaz Emirate have set up in Turkey, but also the fact that European intelligence has failed to keep track of identified dangerous elements within the EU. According to the Federal Security Services of Russia (FSB), around 3,400 Russian citizens had gone to fight alongside ISIS/Jabhat ul Nusra in Syria and other parts of the Middle East and North Africa, and around 2,500 Islamic State fighters have gone from other Central Asian countries. Given the current migration crisis in Europe, a number of terrorists could slip into the EU via Turkey on fake passports and documents. One of the alleged suicide bombers in the Istanbul attack, Osman Vadinov, also slipped into Turkey on a Russian passport and fake visa. Apart from the networks that the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and Kavkaz Emirate have set up in Turkey, Bashkirs and Tatars, who are ethnically Turkish and have joined the Kavkaz Emirate from Russia and Ukraine, had been getting covert support from Turkey, and are now present in sizeable numbers in Syria. Turkey, which has a porous frontier with Syria, has been an easy passage for all sorts of Salafi opposition groups under the combined

16 Andrew E. Kramer, "Islamic Battalions, Stocked With Chechens, Aid Ukraine in War With Rebels," *New York Times*, July 7, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/08/world/europe/islamic-battalions-stocked-with-chechens-aid-ukraine-in-war-with-rebels.html>

17 Alex Gladki, "Circumstantially proves that these jihadis are being promoted by the west," *Niqnaq*, June 30 2016, <https://Niqnaq.wordpress.com/2016/07/01>

18 Catherine Putz, "The Turkish-Russian Rapprochement," *The Diplomat*, June 30, 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/06/the-turkish-russian-rapprochement/>

19 "Putin Instructs Gov't to Start Talks With Turkey on Restoring Ties," June 29, 2016, <http://sputniknews.com/politics/20160629/1042144327/putin-erdogan-talks-trade.html>

umbrellas of Ankara, Riyadh and Qatar. It is unsurprising therefore that ISIS has many sleeper cells in Turkey. The Turkish security agencies, especially the MIT, have lowered their threat perception from these Salafi groups well below that of the Kurdish insurgent groups, and have instead focussed on giving clandestine support to anti-Bashar al-Assad opposition groups, notwithstanding their allegiance to al Qaeda or ISIS, and permitted a jihadi corridor through Turkish border towns.²⁰

The ISIS attacks are definitely a blowback of Turkey's role in Syria, and the group has perpetrated four other major attacks in Istanbul this year – notably in the Sultanahmet district on January 12 and in Taksim Square on March 19, both targeting popular tourist spots and foreign civilians with an intent to attract international attention.²¹ President Erdogan, who resisted terming ISIS a terrorist group till 2016, used the international coalition against terrorism to put down threats Ankara perceives from the militant wing of the Kurdistan Workers Party, the PKK, and its ally the Democratic Union Party (PYD). In August 2015, the Peoples Protection Group – YPG, had been able to wrest the strategic towns of Kobani and Gire Spi, and was poised to seize Jarablus, the last ISIS held town on the Turkish border that the so-called Caliphate had been using to resupply its capital in Raqqa with weapons, materials, and recruits. At that juncture, Erdogan made a public announcement that Jarablus was a “red line” and that if the Kurds moved ahead the Turkish army would intervene militarily. So Jarablus, one of the main towns on the arterial road required by ISIS, remains in terrorist hands.²² Erdogan stated on June 29 (and there is undeniable public pressure on him to do so) that he would escalate the war against ISIS. If his statement would result in choking Raqqa from getting logistic supplies and finances through purchases of contraband oil, it would quantifiably hasten the ultimate degradation of ISIS. In the meanwhile, analysts are of the opinion that with the ISIS under tremendous pressure, especially after the loss of Fallujah in Iraq and Manbij in Syria, it would try to showcase its continuing strength and relevance. Hence lone wolf and wolf pack attacks are to be expected, not just in Turkey, but in the rest of Europe as well.²³

An interesting point that needs to be noted is the similarity between the Istanbul attack and the attack on Zaventem Airport Brussels (March 22), which gives rise to the premise that this incident, like the previous ones in Brussels and Paris, were planned in Raqqa. An ISIS defector, Abu Khaled, who took asylum in Paris, stated during his interrogation that the planning of external terrorist actions in areas outside of ISIS's core territory is done through the Amn al-Kharji, a wing of ISIS's bureaucracy responsible for selecting and training operatives and for planning

20 Note 18.

21 Natasha Bertrand, “Why it's unlikely that ISIS will claim responsibility for the Istanbul airport attack,” *BusinessInsiderIndia*, June 29, 2016, <http://www.businessinsider.in/Why-its-unlikely-that-ISIS-will-claim-responsibility-for-the-Istanbul-airport-attack/articleshow/52974698.cms>

22 David Graeber, “Turkey could cut off Islamic State's supply lines. So why doesn't it?,” *The Guardian*, November 18, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/nov/18/turkey-cut-islamic-state-supply-lines-erdogan-isis>

23 Eric Schmitt, “As ISIS Loses Land, It Gains Ground in Overseas Terror,” *New York Times*, July 3, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/04/world/middleeast/isis-terrorism.html>

terrorist attacks in Europe.²⁴ According to Abu Khaled, the Amn al-Kharji was one of four agencies that fall under ISIS's Amniyat, or security apparatus. The other three agencies are: the Amn al-Dawla, which is responsible for internal security within ISIS's territory; the Amn al-Dakhili, the interior ministry; and the Amn al-Askari, the military intelligence wing. The Amn al-Kharji was responsible for conducting and monitoring espionage and terrorist attacks, and it had developed considerable expertise in infiltration and casing of suitable targets. According to Abu Khaled, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, ISIS's chief spokesman, was the operational commander of the Amn al-Kharji,²⁵ and that detailed operational planning was done by one Abu Sulayman al-Faransi. Incidentally, Al-Faransi's name surfaced in investigations into the Brussels attacks, when Belgian authorities went through the hard disk of a computer owned by Ibrahim El Bakraoui, one of the two suicide bombers who struck the Zaventem airport, and concluded that Bakraoui had been in contact with him. Al-Faransi has a number of theatre commanders responsible for planning operations in various regions that ISIS wants to target, who serve as a bridge between strategic planners and tactical operators. The possibility that Ahmed Chatayev, given his profile in the ISIS, is one of the 'theatre commanders' of the ISIS cannot be dismissed. Inputs from the testimony of Abu Khaled, when seen in tandem with the established infiltration routes and networks in Turkey, portend continuing danger from terrorism in EU.

The June 28 attack on Ataturk airport, as also the Zaventem attack in Brussels, have highlighted the security lacunae in all airports, which do not monitor the arrival terminals, permitting terrorists to use combinations of AK 47s, IEDs and suicide vests to advantage. More policed security perimeters around airports, a multiplicity of check-in points, with escalated staff/security, and reduced waiting time, are now absolute necessities. Another urgent requirement is more sophisticated equipment to detect newer forms of explosives like Triacetone Triperoxide – TATP, which is currently not detected by security checks. TATP uses easily available precursors like Acetone and Hydrogen Peroxide, which do not draw attention, as do nitrate/ fertiliser based explosives, and was used by ISIS cadres in both Paris and Belgium. Training is being given by the group in Syria/Iraq in the innovative use and manufacture of explosives, as also in its online magazines.

Here, attention needs to be drawn to the latest arrests made by the National Investigation Agency in Hyderabad,²⁶ which has busted a terrorist module allegedly affiliated to the ISIS. Among those detained were Mohammed Ibrahim Yajdhani, a young software engineer, and his brother Mohammed Iliyas Yajdhani, a computer applications graduate. According to NIA officials, the module had gathered considerable material to prepare explosives and secured arms. Officers found

24 Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Nathaniel Barr, "Recent Attacks Illuminate the Islamic State's Europe Attack," *The Jamestown Foundation*, April 27, 2016, http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=45362&no_cache=1#.V39INIR97cs

25 Ibid.

26 "Hyderabad: Suspected ISIS terror module busted by NIA after midnight raids," *Indian Express*, June 29, 2016, <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/islamic-state-terror-module-busted-in-hyderabad-nia-raid/>

ammonium nitrate and hydrogen peroxide stored in the residence of these youths. The presence of Peroxide needs to ring warning bells, as it may indicate attempts to home manufacture TATP, as was done in Molenbeek, Belgium, before March 22, 2016. Hence, while the numbers of Indians involved with the ISIS is miniscule, our vulnerabilities are myriad and adequate preparations to counter, contain and control terrorist activities needs to be the sine qua non of our security architecture.

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