

Police Raids Uncover al-Qaeda's Parallel World in Turkey

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Al-Qaeda is taking roots in Turkey, as indicated by recent police crackdowns and the discovery of a parallel jihadi society in Istanbul. In a two-day operation, Turkish police forces arrested 43 alleged members of al-Qaeda. On April 1, police forces launched four simultaneous raids in four different provinces—Istanbul, Hatay, Gaziantep and Konya. The operation resulted in the arrest of 35 individuals, including the leader of al-Qaeda in Turkey (Sabah, April 2). One day later, 300 security forces, including police forces and Special Forces, launched another raid which resulted in the arrest of 18 individuals. This latter cell had been under surveillance for eight months (Today's Zaman, April 2). Twenty-four suspects have been indicted by a Turkish court on charges of planning bombings and belonging to a terrorist organization (Southeast European Times, April 8).

During the raids, police forces also seized jihadi material, such as documents and CDs giving instructions for military training, encoded conversations with jihadi groups abroad, attack plans and material related to bomb-making. The cell dismantled on April 2 was specialized in explosives, according to the police (Today's Zaman, April 2).

The most shocking discovery, however, was not found in the computers of the alleged terrorists, but in the organization's structure. Indeed, after several months of tight surveillance, the Turkish intelligence uncovered the existence of a parallel jihadi society. First, they discovered an entire underground educational system, developed by Turkish members of al-Qaeda who do not recognize the regime and its secular school

system. Children of jihadi militants were not allowed to frequent public schools and received, instead, private Islamic education. Teachers even issued report cards to the children. Second, Turkish forces also discovered a network of clandestine mosques in the Bayrampasa and Bagcilar districts of Istanbul, which were used for jihadi training. Finally, the Istanbul cell also appeared to reject Turkey's legal system and had therefore established its own Islamic legal system (Today's Zaman, April 4).

The existence of well-developed educational, legal and religious networks seems to indicate a resurgence of al-Qaeda in Turkey. Indeed, according to the police, al-Qaeda cells that perpetrated the infamous 2003 bombings have been reconstituted. On November 15, 2003, two trucks exploded close to two synagogues in Istanbul, killing 27 people. Five days later, two more trucks targeted a HSBC bank and the British consulate, killing 30. In both cases, most victims were Muslim Turks.

The discovery of a parallel jihadi society also sheds some light on the indoctrination and socialization strategies used by al-Qaeda. This underscores the growing threat of home-grown jihadi terrorism within Turkey.

Although al-Qaeda has taken roots in Turkey, it is still largely influenced by "foreigners." Many of the Turkish members of al-Qaeda received their jihadi training in so-called "jihadi regions," which include Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iraq. After receiving their training in jihadi camps, terrorists head back to Turkey in order to carry out their mission or raise financial support. Stories of Turkish individuals joining the fight in Iraq are also not rare (AP, June 27, 2007). This mix of home-grown terrorism with foreign influence—which ranges from training, to radicalization, and eventually to attack-planning—is very similar to what is observed in Western Europe.

On April 3, Pakistani forces arrested four Turks in Balochistan. "They are between the age of 30 and 35 and were carrying identity cards showing them as Afghan refugees," said a Turkish intelligence official. Explosives, some 1,400 rounds of ammunition, and a laptop containing jihadi material were found on the suspects (Arab Times [Kuwait], April 4; Reuters, April 5). Similar arrests have been made in the past; in June 2006, four Turks were arrested while crossing from Balochistan to Waziristan and accused of ties to the Taliban and/or al-Qaeda (Pajhwok Afghan News, June 23, 2006).

The two-day operation launched by Turkish police earlier this month was the second large-scale crackdown on al-Qaeda in Turkey this year. In January, Turkish forces arrested 25 members of al-Qaeda in Gaziantep and Kahramanmaras. Four militants and one policeman died during the clashes. The group was suspected of plotting "sensational" attacks against Turkish "strategic interests" and also against U.S. and Israeli interests (see Terrorism Focus, February 5). It is believed that other al-Qaeda terrorists were planning attacks to avenge the death of their fellows in the January raids (Sabah, April 2).

The arrests earlier this month are related to the April 2-4 NATO summit in Bucharest. Turkish intelligence feared that al-Qaeda could plot an attack in the event of a Turkish decision to expand their International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) contingent in Afghanistan. However, during the NATO summit Turkey did not commit to sending any further troops, despite U.S. pressure to do so. Although it is probable that the government was aware of the terrorist threat, it is not possible to say with certainty whether this knowledge had any impact on Turkey's decision. Most likely, the decision was motivated by other factors. Diplomatically, Ankara wanted to send a message of dissatisfaction to the United States regarding some of the latest NATO developments, such as the missile shield which leaves Turkey unprotected. Militarily, the priority is the struggle against PKK activities in the southeastern part of the country.

Currently, Turkey has approximately 750 soldiers in Afghanistan. For NATO, the presence of Turkish troops is essential given that it is the only Muslim country within the alliance. Turkey offers the legitimacy needed by NATO to avoid the criticism of organizing a "Christian crusade." However, Turkey recently expressed its discontent toward NATO after a request for Ankara to send its troops to the more dangerous southern regions of Afghanistan became public (Milliyet, March 20). If Ankara is not willing to send more troops, it could still increase its commitment in Afghanistan. For instance, a dozen military advisers are currently participating in the Operational Mentor and Liaison Team (OMLT) program, and there are plans to increase this contribution (Turkish Daily News, April 2). The OMLT program aims to develop the Afghan National Army (ANA). OMLTs are embedded in ANA battalions providing training and mentoring to support ANA units' operational deployments.

Like most European countries, Turkey recognizes the strategic importance of Afghanistan and Pakistan in the so-called "war on terror." As mentioned previously, most Turkish jihadi terrorists receive their training either in Pakistan or Afghanistan. Therefore, Turkey's security depends upon the evolution of the situation within these countries. Yet, like European countries, Ankara refuses to send more troops.

The difference between European countries and Turkey, however, is that the Turkish government does not seem to see al-Qaeda as the main threat to its security (see Terrorism Focus, January 15). The Turkish government considers itself fully part of the "global war on terror," but it identifies the PKK as the main threat to its domestic security. Indeed, contrary to the reactions after the London or the Madrid bombings, most Turks interpreted the Istanbul bombings as attacks against Israel and Great Britain, not as attacks against Turkey. Moreover, at a time of strong criticism from the moderate Muslim majority concerning growing Islamization of the country, the Islamic ruling party of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan is likely to voluntarily diminish the threat of Islamism.

The threat of home-grown jihadi terrorism is growing in Turkey. Nevertheless, despite the two recent police operations, the government seems unwilling to take a strong stance against Islamist terrorism for political, diplomatic and military reasons. This could be a strategic mistake. If al-Qaeda takes roots in Turkey, it could not only affect Turkey's security, but also endanger Ankara's candidacy to the European Union.