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TERROR IN TURKEY: NOTHING NEW UNDER THE SUN

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The suicide bombings in Turkey that took the lives of fifty-five people and wounded hundreds of others have been portrayed in world media as part of a new and surprising wave of terrorism. The natural shock produced by this indiscriminate killing has revived old fears about the world's inability to prevent terrorists from striking anywhere at any time. In fact, both the portrayal of what happened in Turkey as something new and the assumption of impotence in the face of that kind of terror need to be reexamined.

First of all, the perpetrators of the attacks in Turkey are not new. According to preliminary reports in the media based on evidence at the scene of the attacks and on leaflets claiming responsibility for them, the perpetrators seemed to be part of the "global jihad" network, either al-Qaeda or a local organization affiliated with it. True, attention was initially focused on the Turkish terrorist organization IBDA-G, which rushed to claim credit for both waves of attacks. But there is considerable doubt about the credibility of those claims and about the capability of this organization, which had hitherto carried out only small-scale operations, to launch two such well-planned and well-timed attacks with such large amounts of explosive materials carried

by suicide bombers (which IBDA-G had never before used). The additional claim of responsibility by the "Abu Hafez al-Masri Brigades" (named after the al-Qaeda military commander killed in Afghanistan in November 2001) sounds more authentic and indicates a desire by those who sent the bombers to attribute the attacks to al-Qaeda. Both waves of attacks had well-known al-Qaeda fingerprints, including the nature of the targets, their national identity, the simultaneity of the operations, and the use of suicide bombers. All these reflected high-level planning and operational capabilities, resolve, and total indifference to large number of casualties among innocent bystanders.

Some observers explained the choice of Turkey as a target with references to its identity as a Muslim democracy – an abhorrent model in the eyes of al-Qaeda and its affiliates – and to its close ties with the United States, NATO, and Israel. Those factors undoubtedly contributed to the decision to carry out such spectacular attacks in Turkey. But it is important to recall that the same factors are mentioned, with certain nuances, each time any country is attacked by the "global jihad." In the world-view and actions of al-Qaeda and its affiliates, all targeted countries share a common

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denominator – that they are part of the enemy camp in the global confrontation between Islam and its opponents: the "Crusaders," the Jews, the Hindus, and those Muslims who fail to adhere to the path of God as interpreted by al-Qaeda. That charge was also made when responsibility was claimed for attacks in Bali, Mombassa, Casablanca, Jakarta, and Riyadh. And the campaign fought between al-Qaeda and its affiliates and "the rest of the world," which entered a new stage after 9/11, is seen as a zero-sum conflict that leaves no room for compromises or reservations about how it is waged. Consequently, there is nothing really new or surprising in the choice of one country or another as the theater in which to carry out large-scale terror attacks.

The decisive factor in the choice of locale or timing for an attack is the operational readiness of the terrorist network that carries out attacks in any given country. It should therefore come as no surprise if further such attacks are launched by Qaeda-supported networks in Africa, Asia, Europe, North America, and even South America (which is the only continent to have thus far escaped Qaeda-type attacks, for no apparent reason other than that the local networks are not yet ready).

As part of the strategy of al-Qaeda, alongside terrorist attacks elsewhere in the world, Bin Laden and his supporters are now exploiting the opportunity opened up for them in Iraq. Chaos in disorder in that country provide them with a convenient theater of operations for terrorism and guerrilla operations; they can exploit the weak points of widely-dispersed foreign military forces and of unprotected western humanitarian support agencies working in a foreign and hostile environment to inflict high casualties on their enemies. At the same time, the foreign presence in Iraq gives al-Qaeda an ideological lever that adds momentum to the global campaign it is waging against the enemies of Islam in Iraq and

elsewhere, in an effort to rehabilitate its image of invincibility, which was severely damaged in the course of the rapid military defeat inflicted on Taliban forces and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan in late 2001.

The feeling of western impotence reflected in global media reports about the terrorism of al-Qaeda and its affiliates stems, in the first instance, from unrealistic expectations that the terrorism of the "Afghan alumni" could be quickly and totally eliminated, as well as from the groundless belief that the terrorists could be denied any successes in the confrontation with them. These expectations are particularly unfounded in light of protracted neglect of the problem of the "Afghan alumni." That neglect allowed Bin Laden to set up a terror industry and cultivate it without interference for more than a decade, especially during the years 1996-2001, when he operated under the auspices of the Taliban in Afghanistan.

An effective response to the terrorist networks of al-Qaeda and its affiliates, like those who carried out the recent attacks in Turkey, needs to focus on several operating levels, and first of all on the level of awareness. World public opinion needs to understand the aims and operating strategy of al-Qaeda and its affiliates so that public support and, through it, leadership commitment, can be mobilized to invest in the resources and the cooperation necessary to combat them. Only an effective and unified international coalition committed to an intensive, persistent and focused effort has a chance of dealing with the global threat. The need to strengthen international coordination is underscored in recent statements by heads of security services in leading western states and in the latest report of the IAEA concerning the increasingly concrete threat of unconventional terrorism. These warnings may well prefigure a truly new kind of international terrorism that would make the consequences of terrorism in its present form pale in comparison.