

# A CLOSER LOOK

ANALYZING THE NEWS THAT MAKES A DIFFERENCE

**T**his past Shabbos, a blast in one of Istanbul’s most famous neighborhoods killed four tourists—three Israelis and one Iranian—and injured scores of others in the area. This suicide bombing, apparently carried out by members of the terrorist group ISIS, is the latest in a series of deadly explosions that have hit Turkish cities in recent months. A suicide bombing that took place last week in Ankara killed 37 people.

Some attacks over this past year have been attributed to ISIS; others have apparently been carried out by Kurdish groups.

According to late reports out of Istanbul, the Israeli tourists were followed from their hotel to the site of the bombing on Istiklal Caddesi, a major shopping destination, leading to speculation that they may have been targeted because they were Israeli. According to Prof. Jenny White, an anthropologist at Boston University and former president of the Turkish Studies Association, that might also indicate a more organized operation than previous attacks attributed to ISIS necessarily indicated.

How does such an attack affect President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who has maintained an authoritarian grip on the Turkish government? Prof. Sinan Ciddi, director of the Institute for Turkish Studies at Georgetown University, told *Ami* that some observers see the attacks as strengthening Erdogan. “One school of thought

says that he may use this to announce a strong executive presidency,” Ciddi said.

Erdogan has been pushing for a constitutional amendment that would increase the power of the presidency, giving him powers that Prof. Gokhan Bacik, a professor of international relations at Ipek University in Ankara, told *Ami* would be akin to those of Vladimir Putin in Russia.

And some attacks have been seen as helpful to Erdogan in the past. Prof. White noted that the bombings that took place between Erdogan’s loss in the polls last year that would have required him to form a coalition government and this year’s regain of his control of parliament seem to have helped him in that second round of electoral success. She said that there have even been some suggestions—including by international investigative journalists—that the bombings were actively planned by the government, particularly one attack that hit a group of leftist activists trying to enter Syria.

Erdogan has also used those attacks attributed to the Kurds to unleash a massive assault on Kurdish cities in southeast Turkey. “The Turkish government is ruthlessly punishing and killing its own citizens,” Ciddi said.

White noted that entire major cities have been put under 24-hour curfews for weeks at a time, denying them food and medicine. “It’s collective punishment. Every Kurdish-majority city is being attacked,” she said. Cities in the southeast now resemble the rubble-filled scenes that we have become used to seeing from Syria.

Still, Ciddi said, the bombings have caused a wave of criticism of Erdogan. “It does weaken him. People want to know, why has no one resigned? And people are very afraid.” He pointed out that spring is arriving, which historically was a time that the PKK (the Kurdish Worker’s Party) increased attacks.

The Turkish government’s attitude toward ISIS may be coming back to bite them, White told *Ami*. She said that a major figure in



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## A Bombing in Turkey Hits Israelis

WHAT TERRORIST  
ATTACKS MEAN  
TO ERDOGAN AND  
HIS QUEST FOR  
POWER

the AKP, Erdogan's party, tweeted after this latest attack: "When the Kurds are responsible, we bomb them. When it is ISIS, we ignore them." And in his statements, Erdogan has not mentioned ISIS, instead referring to generic "terrorism."

Prof. White also noted that while the government has cracked down on Kurdish websites accused of fomenting violence, ISIS websites have never been affected. A huge prayer rally associated with ISIS was also allowed to take place without the government stepping in. "Their chickens are coming home to roost," she said.

An analysis of ISIS violence in the country has indicated that there is an extensive ISIS network in Turkey. "The AKP government allowed them to wander around Turkey," White said.

Erdogan's policy of ignoring ISIS is related to his goals in regard to Syria, both Ciddi and Bacik told *Ami*. Ciddi said that Erdogan has focused on toppling Syrian President Bashar Assad. For Bacik, even that has not been Erdogan's focus: "His key objective in Syria is to stop Kurdish autonomy. Ankara is obsessed with this strategy."

Still, despite the failures of Erdogan in regard to controlling ISIS, the average Turkish citizen may not understand this. The government has put heavy restrictions on the dissemination of information.

Dissenting journalists have been jailed. "Ninety percent of TV channels are controlled by the government," Bacik told *Ami*.

White noted that each terrorist attack is followed by a social media blackout. "They argue that it is because of people sharing

gory pictures." But she said that it serves to constrict the flow of information that contradicts the official government story. "A recent poll found that the most trusted source of news for Turks is other people whom they know." In her research in a working-class Turkish neighborhood, she found that they "completely buy the government line."

Will the deaths of three Israeli tourists change the relationship between Turkey and Israel? In recent months, there have been suggestions that there will be a new rapprochement between the two countries and Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu sent condolences to the Israeli people in the wake of this recent attack, but the experts we spoke to were skeptical that this would serve to push any deal forward. Ciddi said that the only person on the Turkish side who will decide whether a *détente* will happen is Erdogan himself.

Prof. Bacik said that these attacks are impacting the Turkish economy, with hotel numbers showing huge drops. He said that he has never seen ordinary Turks in this psychological state. And he said that the Turkish state does not really have the material ability to deal with attacks.

At the same time, he said that there is little unity in Turkey, due to an increasing polarization of politics. And he said that political change is unlikely to happen, due to Erdogan's hold on power.

Bacik said that Europe, in particular, which has the strongest influence on Turkey, has failed to react to the problems with Turkish democracy and the oppression of the Kurds. "Europe is obsessed with the Syrian refugee problem. They'll tolerate anything about Turkish democracy and the Kurdish civil war."

Prof. White agreed. "Europe is despicable at the moment." ●

# Breaking the Silence Breaks the Law?

## ESPIONAGE ON THE GAZA BORDER

Israel's political class is up in arms over a report that aired last week on Channel 2, stating that the leftwing NGO Breaking the Silence attempted to collect classified information about IDF activities at the Gaza border.

The allegations surfaced after the group Ad Kan released a video showing Breaking the Silence activists asking soldiers about IDF operations. The NGO had previously claimed (including in an interview with *Ami*) that it does not contact active-duty IDF soldiers.

Its members are former IDF members, who tell their stories about serving in the Palestinian territories in an effort to cause Israel to leave the West Bank and end the blockade of Gaza.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu reacted to the report by stating that the group had "crossed a red line" and that the security services would be investigating. Other politicians, both from the



right and the left, declared their repugnance toward the behavior. Breaking the Silence's CEO Yuli Novak denied the allegations and added, "There are several organizations, together with members of the Knesset from the Likud and Habayit Hayehudi, who are working to silence whoever tries to criticize the government and the occupation."

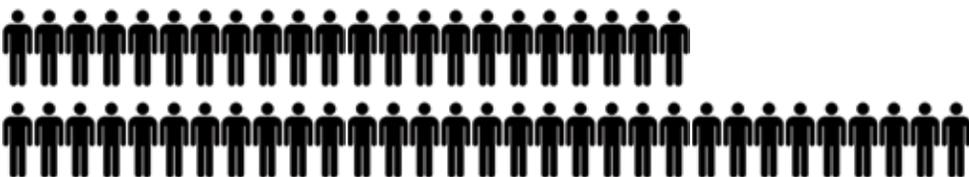
Recent proposed legislation had targeted NGOs like Breaking the Silence that receive funding from foreign governments.

### LIFE IN NUMBERS Numbers of fighters

## Danger in Numbers

Purim is a time when we count the numbers of our enemies, as the *Megillah* goes into at length. So the reporting this week by several media outlets about alleged numbers of fighting men in Gaza was apropos—if disturbing.

The original numbers come from Egyptian news outlet Youm7, or Seventh Day. It didn't include numbers for all Gaza forces, such as the Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade, but it did include some of the largest groups, alongside profiles of their capabilities and components.



Al Qassam Brigades (Hamas):

18,000-24,000

Al Quds Brigades (Islamic Jihad):

8,000-14,000

Abu Ali Mustafa Brigades (PFLP):

3,000

National Resistance Brigades (DFLP):

3,000



## UPDATES

New Info on Stories We've Run

### A New Fire in Duma

The house of the only witness to the arson that killed several members of the Dawabsha family in the Palestinian village of Duma last July was burned over the weekend. The witness, Ibrahim Dawabsha, escaped with his life, though his house suffered extreme damage.

The new fire engendered an outcry from Palestinian government officials and from the UN. Robert Piper, United Nations Coordinator for Humanitarian Assistance and Development Aid, said, "I strongly condemn today's arson attack by suspected Jewish extremists on the home of Palestinian Ibrahim Dawabsha in the occupied West Bank village of Duma."

But after his denouncement, the police and the Shin Bet issued a report stating that they did not believe that the fire was set by Jewish extremists. "The findings thus far at the scene are not consistent with the characteristics of a deliberate arson attack by Jews," they said in a joint statement.



### Hezbollah Hijinks

We've looked recently at the conflict going on in Lebanon between the Saudis and Hezbollah. But the Kingdom of Saud may be a close runner-up to Israel as Hezbollah's biggest enemy. That enmity was underscored once more with the discovery of a huge explosives cache on the island nation of Cyprus.

A 26-year-old man with a Canadian passport but who was born in Lebanon was detained after almost two tons of ammonium nitrate—often used in car bombs and other explosive devices—was found in his basement. Israeli sources have told media that they believe he was working for Hezbollah.

There is an Israeli Embassy on Cyprus and it is a popular destination for Israeli tourists.



### Yemenite Jews Escape

Seventeen Yemenite Jews escaped the war-torn country in a secret initiative by the Jewish Agency and Israeli government, reaching Israel this past Monday. They followed another two members of the community who had escaped in recent days.

Fourteen out of the recent 19 refugees were from the city of Raida, and they included the rabbi of the town, who brought with him a *sefer Torah* that is believed to be between 500 and 600 years old. The other five refugees were one family from Sana'a.

There are still about 50 Jews living together in a compound near the American Embassy in Sana'a, who refuse to leave the country. The Jewish Agency announced this latest removal of Jews from the country as the end to its efforts to bring Jews out of Yemen. The increasing violence in the country has caused concern about the remaining Jews.



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