

REINA NIGHTCLUB ATTACK REVEALS HIGH REACTIVITY OF ISLAMIC STATE TO ADAPT OPERATION METHODS TO CHANGING SECURITY ENVIRONMENT

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The arrest of the Reina nightclub shooter by Turkish police on January 16 and the latest results of the ongoing investigation, made public by Turkish media, confirm that **the attack was not an act of a lone jihadist, but the result of coordination between the Turkish IS terror network and the operational centre in Syria.**

On New Year's Eve, in Istanbul, Abdulkadir Masharipov, an Uzbek national, arrived at the famous Reina nightclub in Istanbul soon after midnight and opened fire on the crowd with an AK-47, killing 39 people and wounding 65. Among the victims of the shooting were nationals from Israel, France, Tunisia, Lebanon, India, Belgium, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. IS claimed responsibility for the attack on January 2 and qualified Turkey as “the protector of the cross” stating that, “the Caliphate struck a nightclub where the Christians celebrate their apostate holiday.”

The perpetrator of the attack, along with 3 females and an IS member of Iraqi origin, were caught by the police in the Esenyurt district of Istanbul on January 16. \$197,000 in cash were seized from their apartment.

Turkish media, quoting passages from the prosecutor’s indictment, reported that, after leaving Afghanistan with his family, Masharipov first went to Iran and stayed there for over a year in order to travel to Syria to join IS. Failing to do so, the family illegally entered Turkey on January 2016 and settled in the city of Konya, communicating with IS via an intermediary in Raqqah.

In early December, after Masharipov reportedly received an order from his contact in Raqqah to commit a suicide bomb attack in the Taksim district on New Year's Eve, he came to Istanbul with his family on December 15. His indictment reported that, on December 25, 2016, Masharipov received an order through Telegram from an IS contact in Syria known as Abu-Shuheda, to commit an attack on New Year’s Eve. **On the same day Masharipov talked with another IS terrorist in Raqqa a.k.a. Rahova on Telegram and agreed to commit a suicide attack. After talking with Rahova, Masharipov again contacted Abu Shuheda and reported to him that he was ready for action. Once he reported to Abu Shuheda, Masharipov received a voice message from an IS member in charge of attacks in Turkey known as Abu Jihad, telling him that he should not be worried about his family and that IS will take care of its needs.** Police found the voice message on Masharipov’s electronic tablet. The Turkish journal, Sabah, alleged that it obtained the audio file police found and reported that Masharipov received the message 5 days before the attack.

According to Sabah, an IS member contacted Masharipov on Telegram and asked him to meet at a bus stop where he gave him a USB key with an audio file recorded by an IS member ordering him to commit a suicide attack in Istanbul. The audio file included passages justifying attacks against Turkey and inciting Masharipov to commit an attack by saying that “one of God’s believers must show them they can’t bomb women and children and kill Muslims.” The message also encouraged Masharipov by saying “**this world is like a carcass and a lion will never eat carcass, you should leave no place for this world in your hearth.**” The voice in the audio file assured Masharipov **that after his death IS, would take care of his family and bring them to Syria.**

The prosecution’s indictment stated that, on December 27, Masharipov recorded a farewell video in which he stated that, **he was going to commit a suicide attack and urged his son to follow his lead and do the same and reach martyrdom.** On the same day, Masharipov rented a room for 3 days in the Basaksehir district in Istanbul to be used as a contact point with the IS network. Nevertheless, so far, neither the video nor the audio file were made accessible to the public.

The day of the attack, on December 31, around 7 p.m., Masharipov left his house in the Zeytinburnu district unarmed and tried to go to the Taksim district of Istanbul for reconnaissance but was forced to change his direction because roads were blocked by police. Failing to reach Taksim, Masharipov contacted Abu Jihad on Telegram and received 2 pictures of alternative targets, one was the left-wing Cumhuriyet journal and the other was the Reina nightclub. Both jihadists decided that Cumhuriyet was an unsuitable target arguing that due to New Year’s Eve, there would be no one in the offices. Shortly after, Masharipov took a taxi to the Reina night club for reconnaissance. Seeing that there were no police officers around, he decided to attack the nightclub and reported it to Abu Jihad. Abu Jihad approved the plan and sent pictures and footage from inside of Reina on Telegram to Masharipov.

The terrorist took a taxi back to Zeytinburnu and, on Telegram, contacted another IS terrorist a.k.a. Ebu Muhammed asking him to deliver him the gun and bombs at a location unmonitored by cameras. Masharipov received the gun from another IS terrorists, aka Abu-Nur who previously fought in Syria and put the gun in the trunk of taxi and went back to Reina to commit the attack.

Once he got out of the taxi, Masharipov first **killed the police officer standing guard** in front of the nightclub and **entered while shooting the AK-47** from his hip. Security experts stated that such a shooting technique required a lot of practice and experience, suggesting that Masharipov had gone through some **war training** in the past. Once he fired all his rounds, he reached for the flashbangs with the intention of triggering a powerful explosion and killing himself.

Masharipov told the police later that once he realised the flashbangs did not explode and kill him as he expected, he left the nightclub and contacted Raqqah. According to his statement, Raqqah ordered Masharipov **to contact an IS member of Iraqi** origin in Istanbul and to wait for further orders to leave the city.

The attacker’s indictment showed that Masharipov used armour piercing ammunition to cause maximum damage. Many people were therefore killed or wounded by the same bullet.

Turkish media reported that during his interrogation, Masharipov said that the IS terrorist who brought him the flash bangs told him that these were **American made hand grenades** and that he **reserved the last flash bang which he thought to be a hand grenade to kill himself and blew it towards his head in order to prevent from being identified by the police.**

The indictment stated that, after the explosion of the last flashbang, Masharipov started to move towards the exit and, once he approached the exit door, started to crawl pretending to be wounded and was helped by police special forces to sit on pavement. He then left the location, limping to avoid arrest.

After the attack, Turkish security forces launched a massive investigation with a task force composed of 1000 investigators. Police discovered the phone number of **Masharipov's wife from a SIM card** that was found in the jacket that assailant left at the Reina club. From her, they learned that after the attack, **Masharipov returned to his house with an Egyptian woman** and made a phone call using his wife's mobile phone. The Turkish journal Hurriyet reported that police got information on the whereabouts of Masharipov from his wife because she was jealous of the Egyptian woman. **On January 16, Turkish security services arrested Masharipov in an IS hideout in the Esenyurt district of Istanbul with 3 women and an Iraqi man.**

Turkish state authorities declared that the attacker, Abdulkadir Masharipov, a.k.a. Ebu Mohammed Horasani, an Uzbek of Tajik origin, was born in 1983 in Uzbekistan and received **extensive war training in Afghanistan and Pakistan** during 2 years and speaks **5 languages: Russian, Arabic, Mandarin, Turkish and Uzbek**. Masharipov most probably entered in Turkey illegally on January 2016 and established contact with IS in Syria. Turkish media reported that the 3 women were **a gift from IS to Masharipov for the attack.**

The latest details confirm that the Reina nightclub attack was **not the act of a lone jihadist**, but a **coordinated operation**, teleguided by an IS Emir in Raqqa, Syria. It demonstrated not only the **high capacity of the terrorist network to orchestrate and guide terrorist attacks from across the border**, but also its high **adaptivity** to a changing security environment that allowed to switch both target and modus operandi within hours.

Despite police efforts which forced Masharipov to cancel the original suicide bomb attack in Taksim square, IS successfully dispatched orders **to randomly find a new target** and quickly sent guidelines on the new target to the terrorist.

The \$197,000 that police seized during the operations to arrest Masharipov could be interpreted as a **reward from IS to Masharipov's family**, whose original order was to conduct a suicide attack.

IS was once more **able to strike a country and terrorise people all over the world with extreme violence**, an IS trademark, **despite all security efforts**. Nonetheless, from an operational perspective, Masharipov **failed** for the simple reason that **he did not die during combat.**

In the latest edition of Rumiya (Issue 6) in an article entitled "Shedding light on the blessed operation in Istanbul," the **Islamic State praised the attack**, justifying its modus operandi, chosen time and target. Meanwhile on the **5 pages dedicated to Reina attack, not a single reference was made to the perpetrator of the attack** by his name, picture or any indirect way. Instead, the article said: "We ask Allah to give honour and victory to those who conducted the attack."

The fact that **Masharipov is not mentioned in the IS propaganda** documents is not in itself particularly surprising. The terrorist group never mentions its members who have not died and who are in detention in its propaganda documents in order to avoid providing further information to investigators and aggravating their judicial cases.

In contrast, when IS operatives **died** in previous attacks **against western targets**, the assailants were praised and IS who devoted several lengthy articles to them. This was the case

in July 2016 for 5 suicide attackers of Gulshan Dhaka in Bangladesh. The Issue 2 of Rumiyaah included 4 pages about the attackers, presenting their biographies and praising their courage. Each terrorists' biography ended with a passage highlighting martyrdom **“may Allah accept his shahadah (martyrdom) and inspire many more mujahidin through his words and deeds.”**

In the 4th issue of Rumiyaah, an article entitled “The Pledge to Fight to Death” praised those who died in combat or suicide attacks: the best martyrs are those who, when “cast in into the fray, do not turn their faces until they are killed.”

It also provided **operational guidelines** for conduct in battlefield and suicide missions composed. These guidelines contain **3 principles**:

The **first principle** involves making a pledge to conduct a virtuous deed that is allegedly highly deemed by Islam, for example, killing non-believers or Muslims who fight against IS.

The **second principle** is **“The Ruling of Pledging to Die in Shar’i Combat”** and orders that **an IS terrorists who has pledged to fight to death shall not retreat** because doing so would be **disobeying God**.

The **third principle** is **“The Obligation of Fulfilling this Pledge”** which warns the fighters of a **godly punishment if they break their oath to die in combat** by reminding them that **“whoever has stipulated a condition and then nullifies it has indeed committed treachery.”**

In the article, IS followers are warned about the possible **negative impacts of retreat out of fear of death** referring to passages from Quran: **“do not turn in flight**. And whoever turns away on the day, unless changing direction for combat or joining another company or troops, then **he has earned the wrath of Allah and his abode is Hellfire.”**

In conclusion, although **IS managed to show great efficiency** in the planning and execution of a terrorist attack in a city where police and all the other security services were on alert, the attack at Reina nightclub was **not a complete success**. From IS' perspective, Masharipov failed as he did **not fulfil his pledge to die in combat** despite recording a farewell video to his family. Contrary to the operational guidelines communicated by IS, he left the nightclub by crawling and pretending to be one of the victims and left the scene, an act that can be interpreted as cowardice by IS.

The Reina nightclub attack was **an exceptional IS incident**: for the first time, the **perpetrator of such a large-scale successful attack survived and was caught alive by police**. Moreover, following the perpetrator's arrest, multiple members of the **local IS network** responsible for attack in Istanbul **were detained**. While the Islamic State made the Reina nightclub attack a central topic of its 6th issue of Rumiyaah, the way in which the attack was praised demonstrated that the **Masharipov's mission was not considered fully accomplished**.

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