



Turkey 2016 Crime & Safety Report: Istanbul

Travel Health and Safety; Transportation Security; Stolen items; Religious Terrorism; Left-wing; Nationalist; Theft; Financial Security; Fraud; Insurgencies; Riots/Civil Unrest; Significant Events; Religious Violence; Faith-based Organization; Earthquakes; Counterfeiting; Rape/Sexual Violence; Drug Trafficking

Europe > Turkey; Europe > Turkey > Istanbul

2/17/2016

Overall Crime and Safety Situation

Istanbul, Turkey's largest city, is a rapidly growing metropolis divided by the Bosphorus Strait. Despite its population of more than 15 million people, as well as the mass of visitors coming from other countries, the city is considered one of the safest in the world. Travelers to Istanbul will find most people hospitable, friendly, and generous.

Post Crime Rating: Low

Crime Threats

Istanbul's overall crime rate remains lower than that of other cities of comparable size. According to available data, one out of 66 people in Istanbul is the victim of a crime each year. Generally, the majority of Istanbul and the main tourist areas are safe. However, there have been reports of people falling victim to crimes of opportunity (pickpocketing, purse snatching,

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ATM scams). While the majority of crime is non-violent, there have been violent criminal acts committed against tourists and expatriates. These tend to be crimes of opportunity and are not common. In addition, there are neighborhoods where the majority of the residents support leftist or far-right groups and terrorist organizations and where drug trafficking is more prevalent. Some neighborhoods of Istanbul maintain conservative values and customs and may not be welcoming of foreigners. Also, with the influx of refugees coming from conflict zones in neighboring countries, there has been a slight uptick in petty crimes.

Crowded areas where tourists congregate in Sultanahmet, Beyazit, the Grand Bazaar, Istiklal Caddesi, and Taksim Square tend to attract thieves and criminal incidents involving foreigners tend to be concentrated in those areas.

Crime rates in Istanbul have been considerably lower in recent years as a result of more successful policing and operations carried out by law enforcement and by the use of MOBESE (Integrated Mobile Electronic System [CCTV]). MOBESE is a "City Information and Security System" enacted under the Istanbul Security Department with the support of Istanbul's Governorship that includes approximately 600 modern cameras installed throughout the city. The continued improvement of public services and administrative functions also contributes to decreasing crime rates.

The most common crimes in Istanbul involve theft, pickpocketing, bag snatching, and purse slashing. Muggings are rare and are typically confined to more indigenous areas during hours of darkness. Violent crimes against tourists and expatriates are also very rare.

Cybersecurity Issues

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There have been several reports of threats, some of them originating in Turkey, being received through social media. All visitors should take proactive measures to mitigate any potential cyber threats and protect all electronic devices accordingly.

Other Areas of Concern

There are no areas within Istanbul deemed off limits to U.S. government personnel. There are no travel restrictions in and around Istanbul. However, for all travel into the eastern and southeastern parts of Turkey and locations on the borders with Syria, Iran, and Iraq, extra security precautions should be taken. U.S. government employees need prior approval before traveling to these areas.

Transportation-Safety Situation

Road Safety and Road Conditions

Traffic and the threat of accidents provide a daily challenge for anyone living in or visiting Istanbul. Traffic fatalities are high in Turkey. Drivers are aggressive and frequently ignore basic traffic regulations by driving through red lights and stop signs or by turning left from the far right lane (and vice versa). Pedestrians routinely ignore traffic rules by crossing against the

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light and walking in the street. Pedestrians do not have the right-of-way, and extreme caution should be exercised when crossing streets.

The safety and condition of roads in Istanbul are generally good, especially major arteries and thoroughfares. However, smaller streets throughout Istanbul's neighborhoods can be neglected and require repair. Istanbul is an extremely hilly city, so driving during inclement weather (heavy rain, ice, snow) can be quite treacherous. Nighttime driving conditions in Istanbul are for the most part good.

Do not leave valuables in your automobile in plain view or you will risk a thief breaking a car window to steal your items. Valuables have also been stolen from vehicles stopped in traffic or at controlled intersections, although this occurs infrequently.

Public Transportation Conditions

Istanbul's mass transit system is reliable and safe; however, particular caution should still be used while using public transportation. Trams are a favorite location for pickpockets to operate. Travel with a companion during late night and early morning hours. Airline, ferry, train, and bus safety practices and procedures are implemented.

Although taxis are plentiful and the majority of drivers are honest, overcharging by taxi drivers, particularly by those parked near popular tourist areas (the Grand Bazaar, the Sultanahmet district) has been reported. Another reported scam targets people who are returning to their residence from the airport in a cab. As the victim returns home, s/he is approached by a

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number of young people (the groups have been described as being both male and female and ranging in age). The young people offer to help the subject with their luggage and subsequently abscond with some piece of it. Police authorities suspect that the cab drivers may be involved in the scam. Also, pay attention to what denomination of bill you are using to pay for the fare, as there have been reports of taxi drivers switching money and claiming you handed over a smaller denomination than you actually did. This is particularly a problem with TL 5 and TL 50 bills, which are somewhat similar in color.

Only utilize taxis with meters, sit in the back seat, and utilize the seat belt if it can be found. Do not accept food or drink from the driver and practice good security by automatically recording the license or number of any taxi you enter. Any improper actions on the part of a taxi driver can be reported to the Tourist Police or by contacting the Istanbul Chamber of Commercial Drivers (Istanbul Sofoler Esnaf Odasi, Ibrahim Karaoglanoglu Caddesi, No: 3 Oto Sanayi Seyrantepe, Istanbul, tel: 0212-272-2572 or fax: 0212-272-6160).

Aviation/Airport Conditions

Security at Turkey's international and domestic airports is satisfactory. Many airports utilize private security firms to handle all person and luggage screening. The Turkish National Police – Immigration Department process all passengers who enter/exit Turkey via international airports. In addition, the Customs Department randomly inspects luggage and other personal items. Passengers departing Istanbul Ataturk International Airport on flights bound direct for the U.S. should allow for additional time required to undergo enhanced personal and baggage screening procedures.

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Terrorism Threat

Post Terrorism Rating: High

Local, Regional, and International Terrorism Threats/Concerns

Terrorist groups in Istanbul are numerous, organized, and active. However, the Turkish National Police (TNP) remains thoroughly engaged in combating the threat from terrorism. Small-scale bombings, violent demonstrations, and vehicle arson are known to occur.

Indigenous and international terrorist groups operate in Turkey, including in Istanbul. Sensational attacks against Sabiha Gokcen International Airport in December 2015 and the January 2016 suicide attack in Sultanahmet Square demonstrate resolve and lethal capability by domestic and transnational terrorist organizations. The January 12, 2016, suicide attack occurred in an area heavily frequented by Western tourists, and it claimed the lives of 10 German tourists. Turkey's most active indigenous terror groups, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and Revolutionary People's Liberation Party/Front (DHKP/C), continue to focus their attacks against Turkish military and law enforcement facilities and personnel. However, on August 10, 2015, the U.S. Consulate General in Istanbul was attacked by two DHKP/C-affiliated individuals armed with handguns and assault rifles. Besides one of the attackers being shot by police, no other casualties were reported. On August 19, 2015, in a separate incident, two DHKP/C supporters fired automatic rifles at the ballistic-resistant police booths located at Dolmabahce Palace, a highly visited tourist attraction.

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In general, terrorist groups in Istanbul can be separated into three categories:

Leftist Marxist/Leninist Groups

Leftist groups (the Revolutionary People's Liberation Party/Front (DHKP/C, Dev Sol), MLKP (Marxist-Leninist Community Party)) are anti-Western and anti-American. In the 1980s and early 1990s, DHKP/C was responsible for attacks against the U.S. Consulate General and American citizens/businesses. The TNP have had success in combating, although not eliminating, this threat.

In March 2008, authorities disrupted a suspected DHPK/C cell. During the raid, police uncovered evidence that indicated the group may have been plotting to target U.S. companies in Istanbul.

In November 2010, individuals affiliated with DHKP/C attacked U.S. businesses in Istanbul with Molotov cocktails to commemorate the December 19, 2000, military action in several Turkish prisons that resulted in the deaths of several DHKP/C members.

In 2012, the DHKP/C targeted Istanbul TNP police stations and officers multiple times, but refrained from any organized attacks against civilian/foreign business targets.

On February 1, 2013, a DHKP/C suicide bomber committed an act of terrorism against the U.S. Embassy in Ankara, taking the life of a security guard and injuring several others.

In late 2014 and early 2015, the DHKP/C claimed responsibility for the Dolmabahce Palace police sentry post attack, as well as an attack on a police post in Taksim Square.

In August 2015, DHKP/C personnel attacked the U.S. Consulate and the Dolmabahce Palace;

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however no civilians were injured/killed.

On November 12, 2014, three U.S. sailors were involved in an altercation with the Turkish Youth Union (Turkiye Genclik Birligi, TGB) in the Eminonu neighborhood of Istanbul. While chanting slogans, the TGB members hurled red paint, representing blood, at the sailors and put hoods over their heads. The sailors eventually broke free and departed the scene while being chased by the TGB members. None of the sailors sustained serious injuries. It is believed that the attack was intended to frighten and embarrass the sailors and attract media attention, rather than to inflict physical harm.

Kurdish Separatist Groups

Kurdish separatists are primarily represented by the PKK (aka KADEK, Kongra Gel). The PKK has traditionally avoided directing its terror campaign against American citizens/facilities. However, splinter organizations and affiliates (the Kurdistan Freedom Falcons, TAK), which formed after the 1999 capture of PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan, have repeatedly warned foreign tourists not to visit Turkey.

The TAK claimed responsibility for the December 2015 mortar attack against Sabiha Gokcen International Airport that killed one person.

Consistent with its threats, TAK claimed responsibility for several attacks in 2005 and 2006 that targeted tourist areas in Turkey, including Istanbul.

Violence with the PKK has intensified since July 2015 after peace talks with Turkish government officials broke down. The government, as stated by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, has no plans to return to the negotiating table. The PKK remains relatively

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disciplined with regard to limiting attacks to symbols of the Turkish state, namely military and police personnel/facilities.

Foreign Extremist Groups

Radically pro-Islamic groups (al-Qai'da, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), al-Nusrah Front, Great Eastern Islamic Raiders Front (IBDA-C)) pose a possible threat to Americans in Istanbul.

In the aftermath of the November 2003 bombings of two synagogues, the British Consulate General, and the headquarters of HSBC Bank in Istanbul, police discovered that al-Qai'da and other international terrorist groups had recruited from various groups in Turkey for possible terrorist actions.

On July 9, 2008, a group of independent extremists attacked the U.S. Consulate General in Istanbul, resulting in the deaths of three police officers and injuries to two others.

On January 6, 2015, a foreign female suicide bomber attacked a TNP tourist police station in the Sultanahmet district of Istanbul.

The investigation surrounding the January 12, 2016 suicide bombing in Sultanahmet Square remains ongoing; preliminary indications suggest the perpetrator was radicalized by ISIL ideology but not part of a bigger plot to attack Westerners.

Anti-American/Anti-Western Sentiment

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There have been instances where certain groups have expressed anti-American/anti-Western sentiment but not to a degree that has created large-scale issues or concerns. There have been several isolated incidents where small American flags have been burned and minor property damage occurred. Americans and/or Westerners are not being singled out and targeted on the streets of Istanbul.

Political, Economic, Religious, and Ethnic Violence

Post Political Violence Rating: High

Civil Unrest

Protests and demonstrations are a common occurrence in Istanbul. Taksim Square and Istiklal Caddesi, two areas frequented by tourists, are often the venue for demonstrations. While demonstrations are usually peaceful, their potential to escalate into political violence should not be underestimated. In late May 2013, protests against the redevelopment of Gezi Park turned violent when police used tear gas, water cannon, and pepper spray to disperse peaceful protestors, attracting extensive international press coverage. "Gezi Park" protests subsequently took place across Turkey, highlighting a wide range of concerns, at the core of which were issues of freedom of the press, of expression, of assembly, and the government's encroachment on Turkey's secularism. In the past, Labor Day (May 1) events have resulted in clashes between the police and workers. Travelers and residents of Istanbul are advised to avoid participating in, observing, or driving in the vicinity of political demonstrations.

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Religious/Ethnic Violence

In addition to terrorist activities, there have been instances of religious violence targeting individuals working as religious missionaries or viewed as having proselytized for a non-Islamic religion. Threats and actual instances of crime have targeted Christian and Jewish individuals, groups, and places of worship, including several high-profile murders of Christians over the last decade.

In February 2013, the TNP foiled a plot to assassinate Izmit's Protestant Church pastor.

In May 2013, police arrested a man in relation to an alleged plot to assassinate the Ecumenical Patriarch.

The level of anti-Israeli feeling remains significant following Israel's 2008 Gaza offensive. Turkish officials said that their criticism of the government of Israel in the wake of the intervention by Israeli Defense Forces on the Free Gaza Flotilla in May 2010 (aka "Mavi Marmara incident") was not directed Jewish people in Turkey or elsewhere. In 2014, the Israeli Consulate General sustained minor property damage from a large group protesting against Israeli aerial bombardment of Gaza.

Post-specific Concerns

Environmental Hazards

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Istanbul sits on the North Anatolian fault line and is very susceptible to earthquakes. In August 1999, a 7.2 earthquake occurred 60 miles east of Istanbul. The resulting damage highlighted the vulnerability of Istanbul and its structures. Most buildings in the city do not comply with Western earthquake standards and would likely sustain heavy damage in the event of a significant quake. Members of OSAC are encouraged to consider this threat when identifying office and residential property to occupy. Earthquake preparedness should be incorporated into emergency planning.

Critical Infrastructure Concerns

There have not been any recent large-scale industrial or transportation accidents within Istanbul. Generally, employee safety and security is a priority for the employer.

Economic Espionage/Intellectual Property Thefts

It is not difficult to find high-end counterfeits in Istanbul. It is relatively easy to find such items at the Grand Bazaar or at other street bazaars. Do not buy counterfeit or pirated goods, even if they are widely available. Not only are bootleg copies of copyrighted goods illegal to bring back into the U.S., if you purchase them, you are breaking local law.

Privacy Concerns

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Precautions should be taken to protect sensitive computer-based programs and operations. It is not uncommon for a corporation or government agency to fall victim to a hacker or other cyber-related attacks.

Personnel-Background Concerns

In general, Turkish men are respectful toward women; however, physical assaults can occur. Foreign women may be verbally harassed, stared at, pinched, or followed. Often, a man's insistent advances are the result of cultural misinterpretations of behavior. Some Turkish men might understand smiling or friendliness as an invitation, so it is best to keep interactions with unfamiliar men as formal as possible and avoid eye contact with men on the street.

Drug-related Crimes

Istanbul is not immune to drug-related crimes. Turkey is a transit country for a substantial amount of illegal drugs coming from Central Asia and Afghanistan. The PKK terrorist network is engaged in trafficking and marketing of drugs. The PKK has an established infrastructure and network to produce, transport, and traffic opiates and cannabis throughout Europe. Moreover, material evidence and intelligence sources have shown that the PKK is also engaged in laundering money derived from human and drug trafficking. There were also two shootings in in December 2014 related to organized crime drug smuggling operations. The government believes that there should be a unified front in the fight against drug trafficking and terrorism, as the illegal proceeds generated from the illicit drug trade directly support terrorist organizations.

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Kidnapping Threats

There have been several kidnappings in Turkey, but they are usually politically and criminally motivated and involve Turkish politicians/citizens. There is no common trend of foreigners working and living in Istanbul falling victim to kidnappings.

Police Response

Overall, the TNP is a professional police force and is responsive to crimes committed against foreigners.

Turkish law dictates behavior toward Turkish political figures and institutions, particularly the founder of the Turkish Republic, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk. It is a crime to insult or to deface statues and images of Ataturk and the Turkish flag, including its use on clothing. Turkish authorities enforce these laws vigorously. Turkish citizens will quickly take offense at any perceived criticism of or show of disrespect toward Ataturk. Insulting the current president is also illegal.

How to Handle Incidents of Police Detention or Harassment

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If you are an American citizen and are detained or harassed by the police, contact American Citizen Services at +90-212-335-9000 or via email at acs_istanbul@state.gov.

Crime Victim Assistance

If you or someone you know becomes the victim of a crime while in Istanbul, you should contact the local police (dial 155) and if you are an American citizen contact the U.S. Consulate General (+90-212-335-9000). The Consulate can:

- replace a stolen passport;
- help you find appropriate medical care if you are the victim of violent crimes (assault, rape);
- put you in contact with the appropriate police authorities, contact family members or friends; and
- help you understand the local criminal justice process and direct you to local attorneys, although it is important to remember that local authorities are responsible for investigating and prosecuting the crime.

Police/Security Agencies

Employing almost 228,000 sworn police officers, the Turkish National Police (TNP) is one of the largest public sector organizations in the country. TNP is the leading law enforcement organization and prides itself on providing professional police and security services to the

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general public.

In addition to the TNP, the Jandarma is a para-military police force, which provides law enforcement services outside of major cities and in rural parts of Turkey.

Medical Emergencies

In the event of a medical emergency, dial 112, for emergency medical ambulance service. Most emergency rooms in Istanbul have physicians who speak English.

Contact Information for Recommended Hospitals/Clinics

American Hospital

Address: 20 Güzelbahçe Sokak, 80200 Nisantasi, Istanbul

Tel: (212) 311-2000

Fax: 212-230-4752

Trauma Level III Total Beds: 135

The American Hospital in Istanbul is a full-service hospital. Their emergency care unit is

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equipped to deal with most medical needs.

Acibadem Hospital Maslak

Buyukdere Cad. No: 40

Maslak, Istanbul

Tel: (212) 304-4444

Trauma Level III Total Beds: 200

Acibadem Maslak Hospital is a member of a chain of hospitals throughout Turkey. Their emergency care unit is equipped to deal with most medical needs.

Florence Nightingale Hospital Gayretepe

Cemil Aslan Guder Sok, No: 8

Gayretepe, Istanbul

Tel: (212) 288-3400

Florence Nightingale Hospital Gayretepe is a member of a chain of hospitals and clinics in Istanbul. All medical specialties are available.

Available Air Ambulance Services

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There are multiple air ambulance services that support Istanbul. It is recommended to research and identify one that will best meet your specific medical requirements.

Country-specific Vaccination and Health Guidance

The winter season brings poor air quality to certain neighborhoods throughout Istanbul due to the burning of coal, wood, and other materials for home heating.

For additional information on vaccines and health guidance, please visit the CDC at: <http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/destinations/turkey.htm>.

OSAC Country Council Information

Istanbul has an active OSAC Country Council. For more information on the Country Council, please email OSACIstanbul@state.gov. To reach OSAC's Europe team, please email OSACEUR@state.gov.

U.S. Consulate General Location and Contact Information

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Consulate General Address and Hours of Operation

Uçsehitler Sokak, No. 2

34460, Istinye, Sariyer

Working Hours: 07:30 a.m. - 16:30 p.m.

Consulate General Contact Numbers

Operator - +90-212-335-9000 (24 hours)

Facsimile: +90-212-335-9102

Regional Security Office - +90-212-335-9020; Email: OSACIstanbul@state.gov

American Citizen Services (ACS) - +90-212-335-9000; Email: acs_istanbul@state.gov

Foreign Commercial Service (FCS) - +90-212-335-9000

Website: <http://istanbul.usconsulate.gov/>

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Nearby Posts

Embassy Ankara: <http://ankara.usembassy.gov/>

Consulate Adana: <http://adana.usconsulate.gov/>

Consulate Guidance

U.S. Consulate General Istanbul highly recommends that all U.S. citizen travelers enroll in the Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP) prior to traveling to Turkey. The program can be found at www.travel.state.gov/step. Americans without Internet access may register directly with the nearest U.S. Embassy or Consulate. By registering, American citizens make it easier for the Embassy or Consulate to contact them in the case of an emergency. In addition, all travelers should read the Consular Information Sheet for the latest information pertaining to Istanbul and the security environment.

Tips on How to Avoid Becoming a Victim

Scams

A common scam in Istanbul involves the victim being approached by an individual on the street who tries to engage him in conversation. The suspect may invite an unsuspecting visitor

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to a bar or cafe. The suspect may drug the victim through food/drink and rob him after helping him back to his hotel or to a cab. Another scenario results in the suspect taking the victim to a "family" bar/restaurant. Once the victim enters, drinks are served and women appear. The victim is then served with an exorbitant bar bill, often in excess of US\$1,000. If the victim refuses to pay, he is threatened with violence and held until he pays the bill or a significant portion of it. Travelers can avoid these scams by exercising caution and good judgment when approached by strangers. Such scams are common in the Taksim Square and Istiklal Caddesi area. Police have been ineffective in combating these crimes.

Situational Awareness Best Practices

In light of recent events, extra precautions should be taken to enhance personal security. Tourists continue to be a favorite target of criminals. Using good judgment and common sense will go a long way in helping ensure you do not become a victim of a crime in Istanbul. Avoid speaking with strangers on the street. Conversations can be a prelude to a criminal act. One should be particularly cautious while visiting tourist areas (Istiklal Caddesi, Taksim Square, Sultanahmet, Galata Bridge, the Grand Bazaar). Avoid walking around alone at night in areas where tourists congregate.

Pickpocketing in tourist areas is increasingly common. Be alert and aware of your surroundings and be on the lookout for common tactics used by criminals in Istanbul. One such tactic involves a diversion (a fistfight, argument). As the victim directs his/her attention to the staged event, another subject approaches from behind and steals a wallet or purse. If you witness such an event, protect your belongings and leave the area.

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Men should secure their wallets and carry only a limited amount of money placed in various locations on their person. Women should secure their purses close to their body while walking and when they put it down at restaurants and other venues. As a precaution, carry only what cash and valuables are needed. Keep a photocopy of your passport with you, and keep the original in your hotel, preferably in a safe-deposit box.

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