Deadly Interactions

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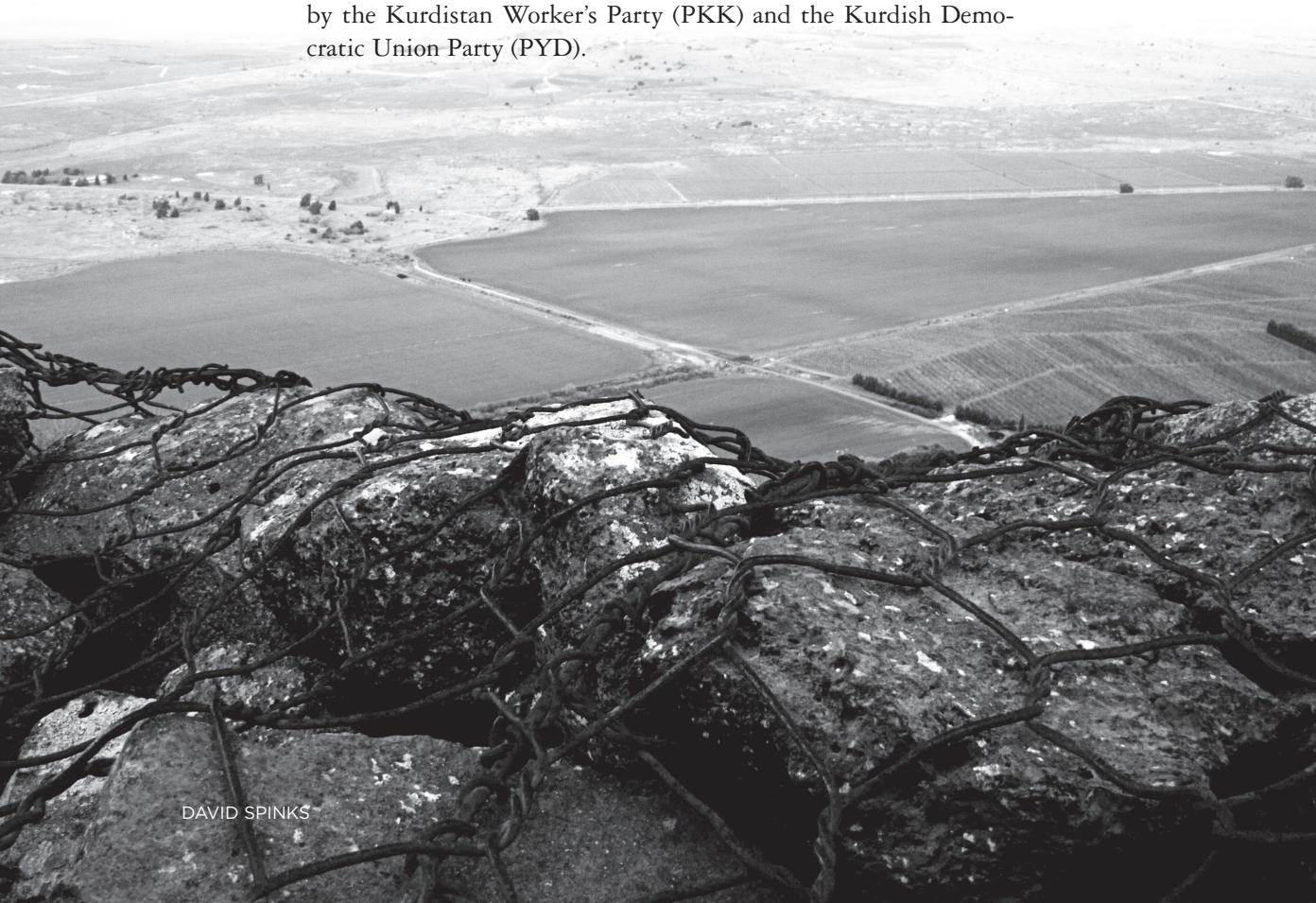
Şanlıurfa, Turkey—With its history going back 11,000 years, Şanlıurfa, Turkey, is one of the oldest continuous settlements in the world. The city is the capital of Şanlıurfa Province, the ninth most populous in the country with nearly 2 million residents. Sharing its entire 139-mile southern border with Syria, the region has become a violent frontier in the deadliest civil war in recent history. Along the south border of Turkey, four cities—Şanlıurfa, Gaziantep, Kilis, and Hatay—have deep interactions with Syria, the opponents to the regime of President Bashar al-Assad, and a number of radical groups in Syria, including the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or ISIS. The remaining border that southeastern Turkey shares with Syria faces down the cities of Mardin, Sirnak, Diyarbakir, and Hakkari. But this stretch is controlled by the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) and the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD).



DAVID SPINKS

The population of Şanlıurfa, Gaziantep, Kilis, and Hatay is a blend of Kurdish and Arabic elements with local Turkish populations inherited from the time when the Ottoman Empire ruled the entire region. Many Arabs and Kurds still have relatives and family members across the border in Syria, and intermarriage across the border is a common. So the historic and ongoing interaction of Arabs and Kurds across this frontier stems not only from activities such as smuggling or illicit trafficking in drugs or refugees, but also family interactions. Lately, stretches of this border have also become a facilitator for the objectives of ISIS as well.

THE CAMPS

Along the border, a network of refugee camps has opened for Syrians and is growing rapidly. There are five in Şanlıurfa alone with around 105,000 refugees in total. Beyond their function of providing refuge for those fleeing Syria, the camps have also become recruiting, training, and staging grounds for opposition groups in Syria and especially for ISIS. Syrians can remain in the camps as long as they don't make trouble. Apart from the camps, over 250,000 Syrians live in the city of Şanlıurfa alone. Generally, they are the more affluent who've managed to flee with some resources or to relatives abroad—they've rented houses and opened businesses. Syrians account for a fifth of the population, which allows ISIS and criminals to blend in and operate freely.

Down the road from Şanlıurfa, two main border towns, Şuruc and Akçakale—each numbering over 100,000 people—are essential to terrorist and refugee movements. Şuruc is just across the frontier from Ayn al-Arab (Kobani), site of a recent violent ISIS push that was defeated by Kurdish forces with the help of coalition air offensives. Akçakale, east of Şuruc, is across from Tell-Abyad, another border crossing until recently controlled by ISIS but taken over by PYD forces. Locals in Akçakale say that just 30 ISIS fighters faced down 400 Free Syrian Army fighters, taking over the border gate, and the city of Tell-Abyad. They add, "we cannot understand how come they handed over the city to PYD without even shooting a single bullet."

Some 25,000 Kurds live in the Şuruc refugee camp, almost all from Kobani. Another 30,000 refugees in the Akçakale refugee camp are largely Arabs as the two nationalities are carefully separated to avoid any conflicts. As many as 10 members of a family may live in a 16 square meter tent, where meals, free medical service and medicine distribution, and schooling are provided. But these camps may be serving some nefarious purposes as well.

UNTOLD STORIES

Şuruc Kurds are not returning to Kobani, though their hometown has been freed from ISIS. Only armed PKK or PYD supporters chose to return, while 25,000 are still in the Şuruc camp. Of course, there is more to this story. First, contrary to common belief, not all Kurds support the PKK and PYD. Many may feel closer to ISIS because of PYD-PKK Kurds' attitude toward Islam. When asked why they've remained in Şuruc, one individual, who like

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many of those consulted, insisted on anonymity out of fear for his safety and that of his family, observed, "the PYD does not follow the rules of Islam. We do not consider them devout Muslims or even Muslims at all. Many PYD Kurds are Marxists, and they hate religion."

"The PKK kills more police officers and soldiers than ISIS does," says one local Kurd. "I do not see any difference between the violence practiced by either side." Indeed, ISIS had managed to co-opt some Kurdish fighters and commanders in the battle for Kobani, including a senior ISIS commander from Halabja known as Khattab al-Kurdi, who was leading the fight against the PKK and PYD.

In the recent Kobani battle between ISIS and PYD, many slain ISIS members were carrying Akçakale Camp ID cards, which indicate that they were Arabs. In the wake of such reports, men under the age of 40 and without families were frequently barred from entering the camp—a measure taken to prevent terrorists from infiltrating. The camp population is widely comprised of the elderly, women, and children, but men with their families are also accepted. The Akçakale camp is divided into quarters, each with a mosque and other common facilities. Imams lead prayers and give sermons. Some of these imams or other undeclared preachers, called sheikhs, recruit heavily for ISIS in Syria. They say that jihad is *fard al ayn*, meaning fighting is mandatory for all Syrian men since their country is at war.

"In the camp, it is like a mafia," says one. ISIS recruits, and if anyone dares to get in the way of recruitment, that person faces bodily injury or loss of life.

ISIS THRIVING

At the beginning of the Syrian civil war, there were many rallies held in Turkey to aid Syrians fleeing the Assad regime. In Turkey, especially in Şanlıurfa, locals carried out support campaigns, while the Turkish government organized humanitarian relief operations. This sympathy toward the people of Syria and those who took up arms in revolt against the Assad regime was cleverly manipulated by ISIS operatives. Believing the conflict was unlikely to last longer than six months, Turkey maintained an open border policy. As the situation in Syria worsened, some 3 million Syrians were welcomed (officially and unofficially) as refugees. Some gravitated to the camps, but many fanned out across the country. The 3 million, which include Syrians who've crossed the border illegally and never registered with relief agencies or Turkish authorities, is an optimistic figure, since many relief organizations believe the real number is closer to 4 million.

IF ISIS IS TOLD AN UNDESIRABLE IS SEEKING PASSAGE, AN OPERATIVE MAY WAIT AT THE BORDER TO EXECUTE HIM.

At the same time, Turkey had embarked on a "democratic initiative process," or cease-fire with the PKK, marked by mutual promises to end the years of conflict. (Since 1984, over 40,000 people have died in this conflict.) This continued until July 2015, just after the latest Turkish general elections. During this period, PKK members used the cease-fire with Turkey as an opportunity to turn their attention to the fight against ISIS in Syria, moving explosives and weapons into Turkey for future clashes, in addition to recruiting and training thousands of new members.

Many PKK and PYD members as well as ISIS and other opposition fighters in Syria were also brought to Turkey for free medical assistance. As the numbers of wounded fighters increased, authorities gave up all efforts to control passage across the frontier. Ambulances were constantly streaming in both directions, often bearing Syrian or EU license plates, wandering around border towns and in the city center. Of course, not all were being used for medical purposes, but rather to ferry supplies, while many ISIS terrorists were treated free of charge. "Ahmet El H," the deputy to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, was reported to have been brought to one of Şanlıurfa's hospitals after his left leg was broken following an American air attack.

Foreign fighters from the West began crossing the border into Syria virtually unchallenged—which quickly became a central issue for Western powers who feared they would return as terrorist threats. All the while, Turkey continued its open support of opposition groups battling the Assad regime in Syria.

Finally, there was the broader question of cross-border smuggling. Long before the rebellion in Syria and the arrival of ISIS, many border villagers would smuggle cigarettes, tea, and other goods through established routes with their connections just across the frontier. In the past, some of these villagers would also help transfer people over the border for $25 to $300 per person. The villagers proved essential as guides, because they were familiar with the terrain and knew firsthand how to cross the border without stepping on land mines or being caught by soldiers.

When ISIS arrived, it adopted the same practices. Using already established routes, ISIS paid or coerced villagers, increasing the volume of cargo and the number of people being transferred. Eventually, the volume of such traffic required a shift to trucks instead of mules. A similar logistical shift was taking place across Turkey where ISIS was developing a broad network of supporters. One ISIS ring rented dozens of 4X4 trucks simply drove the trucks to Syria through Akçakale.

Akçakale is now one of the main support hubs of ISIS. A coffee shop sits just 20 yards from the border in Akçakale. Anyone who wants to pass the border to Syria goes there to meet smugglers. Of course, there are hidden procedures for human smuggling. For example, smugglers must inform the ISIS handlers when they are assisting ISIS members passing the frontier from the Syria side.

At the Akçakale/Tell-Abyad border gate, there is a middleman called "Timsah," meaning the alligator. He handles everything in the name of ISIS. An acquaintance, when discussing him, suggests that this is an individual calculated to inspire fear. He works with ISIS intelligence, which maintains a strong network in Syria, Iraq, and Turkey. If someone is fleeing from ISIS, he must pass the border with the help of a smuggler. The smugglers are mandated to inform Timsah about all those who pass through. There is even a printed border pass. Without this permit, the smugglers and people they are helping risk their lives. If someone is fleeing ISIS, the bribe paid to a smuggler is often staggering and still carries no guarantee of safety. If ISIS is told an undesirable is seeking passage, an operative may wait at the border to execute him. If the smuggler is caught helping without informing the ISIS middleman, he could be killed as well.

Other precautions are taken by ISIS to prevent forbidden passages from the Syria side to Akçakale. Taxi drivers along the

Turkey-Syria border fear being murdered by ISIS. One driver describes a man fleeing from ISIS who was caught at an ISIS checkpoint in a taxi. The taxi driver and the man fleeing were summarily executed on the spot so that the other drivers would not drive any escapees. Such lethal checkpoints, named *hicaz*, dot all roads leading to the border.

There are only two ways to flee from ISIS—first through mountains and remote villages to avoid detection. The second is with the help of smugglers, which requires a reliable connection in Akçakale who will ensure that the smuggler will not tip off ISIS. There are also reverse transfers—Turkish ISIS members and foreign recruits who must cross the border to fight. Early foreigners who arrived to fight for ISIS would fly to Şanlıurfa from Istanbul. Eventually, to avoid detection, the network moved to inter-city buses to travel from Istanbul or rented cars to drive to Şanlıurfa, Kilis, and Hatay. They were instructed to blend into the local population once they arrived in Şanlıurfa. In a city of nearly 2 million, that was not a difficult task.

One blonde Frenchman described how he joined. "After I converted to Islam with my wife and two children, I flew to Istanbul from Paris as a tourist. From Istanbul, we went to Şanlıurfa and to the border. I was instructed to meet my handler where he took us to a border village. From the village, we crossed the frontier with the assistance of a smuggler. Upon arrival, our passports and phones were taken and destroyed. There is no Internet, and, in fact, none is allowed. After Sharia education, I received military training for around a month and became a fighter. I've seen people from the United States, Britain, Germany, France, Russia, Chechnya, China, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Tunisia, Algeria, Egypt, Palestine, Lebanon, China, Azerbaijan, and Uzbekistan."

At some point in 2015, this scope of traffic led some ISIS members to believe they could cross the border officially. Stories like those of three Yemenis only fueled this myth. The three were said to have walked brazenly up to the border gate and told the customs officers they were going to join ISIS and would like to cross. The officers refused, but they also did not arrest them. The Yemenis turned back and crossed into Syria from a nearby village with the help of a smuggler.

But ISIS isn't stopping at border crossings. A former ISIS member in Akçakale describes how ISIS is developing bomb factories. "ISIS acquired strong steel pipes together with a lot of fertilizer from Turkey. We had seen them passing from the streets and arriving at customs," he recalls. "The truckers did not even bother to cover the trucks. Later, those pipes and fertilizer were used to make a kind of rocket called a 'hell fireball' in Raqqa with LPG {liquid petroleum gas} tanks—more powerful than many of the rockets available in Syria and Iraq." He adds, "they had produced and used over 8,000 of these 'hell fireballs' from those pipes."

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THE PEOPLE OF ŞANLIURFA

No matter what the Turkish government has done to try and stop ISIS, many in Şanlıurfa have been distrustful. "All the people of Şuruc believe the government is supporting ISIS no matter what," says one observer. In fact, "the Peshmerga {a

Kurdish military force] was supported and sent to fight in Kobani through Şuruc with the permission of the government," hoping that ISIS would deal a mortal blow to the potent anti-Turkish force.

Many Turks also hate ISIS. One prominent local businessman describes ISIS as "like wild animals," stating further, "we do not support them and what they do is not part of our religion." An Arab farmer from Harran, a town neighboring Akçakale) says, "ISIS was given weapons to fight the PKK, but they killed many innocent Kurdish people, which is not acceptable." And another local businessman in Şuruc claims that "ISIS is killing our brothers across the border, and we have not heard anyone from the government calling ISIS 'a terrorist organization.'"

Apart from the ideology and violence that has marked the spread of ISIS, people in Şanlıurfa are not happy about hosting hundreds of thousands of people forced from their homes in Syria. Since their arrival here, rents have almost doubled. Many Syrians have started to work for lower wages, replacing locals and leaving Turks unemployed, while thousands of Syrians still live in unsanitary conditions.

SUNNI VS. SALAFI

Most of Turkey's population, including those of Turkish, Kurdish, and Arabic ancestry, are Sunnis. Historically, they have distanced themselves from the Salafist ideology and its strict interpretation of Islam—at least until the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. A number of Turks travelled to Afghanistan during that war, and many who returned had fought side-by-side with the Taliban and al-Qaida and become indoctrinated by Salafism. For most Turks, it was their first such exposure as there had been very few mosques or Islamic centers funded by Salafists anywhere in Turkey.

Establishing their own networks in Turkey, they have had some success recruiting among the local population. The 2003 truck bombings by al-Qaida in Istanbul were the first significant manifestation of their advance across Turkey. On Nov. 15, 2003, two trucks loaded with explosives were driven into the Bet Israel and Neve Shalom synagogues in Istanbul, killing 27 people, most of them Turkish. Five days later, al-Qaida suicide bombers blew up two trucks at the headquarters of HSBC Bank and the British Consulate, killing 30 more, serving as a wakeup call for Turkish law enforcement.

Today, the seeds planted by those al-Qaida fighters have morphed into direct support for ISIS, with over 1,200 Turkish recruits actively fighting in Iraq and Syria. Most of the recruits are drawn from former jihadists' close circles, largely in the western and interior regions of Turkey, including many of the nation's leading population centers—Istanbul, Ankara, Konya, Adana, Gaziantep, Bursa, Sakarya, Adıyaman, Kocaeli, and Gebze. Videos broadcast by Turkish television show the activities of ISIS members and preachers in ISIS training grounds in Adapazarı, Düzce, and Istanbul, and around the Marmara Sea in western Turkey. While there is a measurable, and apparently growing number of Salafists, the ratio is still statistically low—barely one in 50. However, with the recent escalation of PKK violence, some have started to feel closer to ISIS simply because it is fighting the PKK in Syria.

Also, the recent politicization of Islam in Turkey over the last decade has increased support for Salafism and perhaps even broadened the support and acceptance of ISIS. Some politicians and government officials have praised ISIS activities while disparaging the PKK. Political Islam (us-

ing the religion of Islam for political gains rather than as a lifestyle as required under Shariah law) may be shifting the sympathies of a growing number of Turks toward an Islamic philosophy where a so-called "jihad" plays a central role.

ISIS RECRUITMENT

There is a host of reasons ISIS has proved so successful in its recruitment. Radical ideology and indoctrination of Salafist ideas play a vital role in addressing a range of injustices in Muslim nations. One ISIS operative described the reasoning behind his decision. Several people in his neighborhood were arrested and released following earlier al-Qaida operations in 2003. Each of these individuals returned to the neighborhood. "I was doing drugs," the recruit continued, "and needed money very badly. They knew I needed money. After hanging out with them, I came to believe in Salafist ideology. They told me to fight with ISIS in Syria so that I could cleanse my sins, save myself from drugs, and make some money as well."

"Some people join ISIS to become martyrs so that their past sins are forgiven," said another ISIS recruit, while another observed that "ISIS preachers are well-educated and impressive. They persuaded me to become a suicide bomber in just three two-hour sessions, though I was against suicide from the beginning." It was an effective pitch: "They spoke very emotionally and convinced people by pointing to political injustices around the world as examples, including Western support for dictators and kings who oppressed people across the Middle East, describing how our sisters were suffering in the prisons controlled by Bashar al-Assad and how Muslim blood was shed without any hesitation around the world."

Promises of women, excitement, and money are other central ISIS recruiting tools. ISIS fighters are promised $200 a month, the equivalent of 38,000 Syrian pounds. ISIS officials also arrange marriages, provide free housing, furniture, and funds to purchase slave girls after their marriage—all conditional on an agreement to fight and live by their strict rules. Some Westerners have described how they came to Syria to fight because it was fun and exciting to wage war. Still, no one arriving in Syria to join ISIS without prior connections or a referral is accepted immediately. If one is not brought in through direct contact with a foreign recruiter, then that person will have to earn their trust and acceptance.

THE CENTRAL MEASURE IS TO TARGET ITS SALAFIST IDEOLOGY AND ITS PROPAGANDA OUTREACH

HIGHER EDUCATION

Six universities are scattered across the Turkish-Syrian frontier region, but historically in Turkey, radical Islamic thought seems to have had little success in establishing a support base in many institutions. By contrast, leftist and Kurdish separatist movements have flourish in universities.

The PKK and Kurdish nationalist movements appeal to the very sensitive issue of Kurdish ethnicity among many university youth. The PKK has become adept at attracting the support of Kurdish youths and has even managed to win the backing of many students of Kurdish descent who do not support the PKK's more revolutionary tactics. While ISIS seems to have found a base and some support in western and interior regions of Turkey, usually among the less educated popula-

tion, at universities students rarely support radical Islamist organizations.

Recent events like the ISIS-led assault in Kobani against Kurds and widespread violence by ISIS have only shifted sentiment toward the PKK and Kurdish nationalist movements. So rather than enhancing ISIS's appeal on Turkish campuses, the current atmosphere at the region's universities toward ISIS has become increasingly negative.

CHALLENGING IDEALS

Terrorist organizations stay alive through their ideologies, propaganda, social support, new recruits, ongoing attacks, and uninterrupted flow of finances. Though waging a conventional fight against a terrorists is an obligation of governments, certain steps must be taken to cripple and eventually destroy these organizations. In the case of ISIS, the central measure is to target its Salafist ideology and its propaganda outreach, rebutting its repeated claims of moving toward a caliphate run according to Islamic ideals. There are two significant roadblocks. The first is the Saudi government, which is pouring billions of dollars around the world into a campaign promoting its own Salafist approach to Islam. This has produced thousands of determined Salafist youth, the finest candidates for ISIS recruiters. The second roadblock is the political turmoil in the region, which can be blamed at least in part on the support the West has offered undemocratic leaders in the Middle East, under whose cruel and unjust rule Muslim people have suffered for decades. Terrorist organizations point out this "hypocrisy" and use it to persuade new recruits to embrace their violent regimes.

If the world, especially the Muslim world, were to provide a viable counterweight to ISIS's ideology of violence, and political solutions were found for the current unrest in Syria and Iraq, then it would be far easier to deal with ISIS. A political solution is, of course, the most difficult to achieve but once security and stability is assured, it's far more difficult for groups like ISIS to continue spreading its message of hate. Before a political solution is reached, creative solutions must be tried. One option is to use the stories of ISIS defectors and even Syrian refugees fleeing ISIS-controlled areas against the group to delegitimize their claims of creating an Islamist utopia when they are nothing but a ruthless terrorist organization. Another is teaching adolescents in the West to recognize virulent and extremist ideologies that promote violence so they are inoculated against terrorist propaganda. Finally, it is imperative to monitor the Internet carefully for anyone who espouses an alignment with ISIS thinking in order to stop him before he is able to turn words into actions.

Unfortunately, in Turkey and the Islamic world, the voices against radicalized Islam are not loud enough. Only a handful of prominent Islamic leaders have been prepared to stand up against ISIS violence. As Muslims, we must be more vigilant and careful to defend our religion, which is fundamentally opposed to violence, and not allow Islam to be mixed with political issues. As the Prophet Muhammed said, we must prioritize the struggle with our inner evils, known as *Jihad Al-Akbar*, or the Greater Struggle, in order to be a better person. Above all, we must not forget that during his prophecy of 23 years, the Prophet waged war not more than two months in all.

Furthermore, the world should consider terrorism and especially radicalization of youth as a multidimensional social prob-

lem with links to religion, culture, economics, and politics. From this perspective, both the Muslim world and Western nations should pursue polices to eradicate the fundamentals of terrorism, including bringing a swift end to the conflicts in the Middle East. The most respected leaders of the Muslim world—both secular and religious—should openly, clearly, and without reservations denounce violence, extremism, and radicalization.

There is a need for equal educational opportunities provided to every member of society, regardless of gender, ethnicity, religion, and wealth. Above all, we must ensure that future generations flourish in a culture where compassion, equality, human rights, and multicultural interactions are valued, and violence and extremism is denied unconditionally. Parents, particularly mothers, can be strong forces in keeping their youth away from violent extremism—that is if the parents are alerted that their children are becoming involved.

Every nation must be sincere in rejecting terrorism regardless of its political philosophy. In this fashion, the movement of terrorists must be strictly controlled. Thousands of Westerners have visited Turkey, ostensibly as tourists, then joined ISIS by crossing Turkey's frontiers. If Turkey had prior intelligence, it could stop these individuals. To put a halt to such a pattern, the world may need a new system, whether through Interpol or another dedicated international body, that allows countries to cross-check tourists, bypassing national bureaucracies to ensure efficiency and swiftness, as most illegal border crossings happen in less than 12 hours.

Moreover, countries like Turkey located on transit routes to Syria must provide better security measures, especially at their borders. Mountainous frontiers are certainly difficult to manage. But flat land like the Turkish-Syrian border can be blocked from any illicit movements with the help of technology or even cement walls. It's become clear that for its own security and that of many other nations, Turkey must secure its borders, ensure that no weapons and explosives are transferred through the frontiers, and employ measures that will neutralize any efforts to subvert this process. In Turkey's case, physical barriers, coupled with satellite technology and drones for the eastern mountainous frontier, could assist this effort.

THERE IS A PATH TOWARD A FUTURE THAT WILL SEE AN END TO TERROR ACTIVITIES.

Finally, there is a need to understand that having rival organizations fight each other is unlikely to provide a desirable result. Setting ISIS against the Kurds, or al-Qaida or its offshoots against ISIS may yield short-term results but is counterproductive in the long run. As happened in Afghanistan, this strategy leads to more civilian casualties and further hatred and alienation. Killing violent extremists by using other extremists becomes a foundation for new and more passionate terrorists on both sides of the equation.

Still, in the case of Turkey and Syria, there are strategies that may yield results, such as better and more precise intelligence sharing to stop the flow of jihadists through borders. There is a path toward a future that will see an end to terror activities and security for our people. ●