

## ISSUE BRIEF

# Islamic State Networks in Turkey

## Recruitment for the Caliphate

OCTOBER 2016 AARON STEIN

The rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) and the concurrent war in Syria present serious challenges to European and Middle Eastern security. For many in the West, the direct appeal by ISIS for scores of men and women to travel to Syria and Iraq in order to live in a self-declared caliphate has overwhelmed intelligence organizations. In Tunisia, Iraq, Libya, France, and Belgium, people who had spent time in Syria or Iraq returned home to carry out terror attacks. Turkey has faced a similar spate of large-scale attacks since the start of the Syrian conflict. In a series of attacks since 2015, 276 people have been killed in Turkey, with another 961 injured, in a mixture of suicide, bomb, small arms, and rocket attacks.<sup>1</sup> Research indicates that a large group of Turkish ISIS members are behind the bulk of the suicide bombings, designed to foment ethnic tensions between Turkey's Kurdish and Turkish citizens.

The failed July coup attempt in Turkey—and subsequent purges of the Turkish military and bureaucracy—have raised concerns about the US-led air war against ISIS with its operations out of Incirlik Air Force base. To date, the instability in Turkey has had no discernible effect on the air war, and the Turkish security apparatus has also managed to continue its cooperation with European intelligence officials to help stem the flow of foreign fighters.<sup>2</sup> However, in the aftermath of the failed coup attempt, Turkish security officials are now being asked to fight three different sub-state groups: followers of Fetullah Gulen; the Kurdistan Workers' party (PKK); and ISIS. The variety of sub-state threats could undermine efforts to clamp down on the local ISIS danger to Turkey.

The Atlantic Council's Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East studies political and economic dynamics in the Middle East and recommends US, European, and regional policies to encourage effective governance, political legitimacy, and stability.

1 The author calculated the death and injury figures from the following attacks: The ISIS-linked suicide attacks in Sultanahmet, Suruc, Ankara, Istiklal, Gaziantep (twice), and Ataturk airport, along with the bombing of political offices and rallies in Adana, Mersin, and Diyarbakir. Additionally, the author added the death and injury numbers from ongoing rocket attacks on Turkish border town and cities.

2 Author Interview, European Official, Washington, DC, July 20, 2016.

ISIS's rise in Turkey closely followed on the group's successes in Syria and Iraq. However, the group's cross-border infrastructure, which is used to ferry recruits and supplies to the caliphate from Turkey, is built on decades-old al-Qaeda and like-minded jihadist networks based in numerous Turkish cities, and was previously used as a secondary route for jihadists to join the Iraq jihad during the US occupation between 2003 and 2011. From the outset of the conflict in Syria, Turkish citizens travelled back and forth, oftentimes joining with Turkish-speaking sub-groups in larger, anti-regime opposition groups, the two most prominent of which are Syria's al-Qaeda affiliate, Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (Syria's rebranded al-Qaeda affiliate, previously named Jabhat al-Nusra, or the Nusra Front) and the Salafi Ahrar al-Sham. With the rise of ISIS in 2013, Turks began to travel to the caliphate, where they joined with Turkish-speaking units, complete with Turkish imams and military trainers. The available open-source evidence points to a slight difference in Turkish ISIS and al-Qaeda members. In the case of the latter, the fighters tend to be older, whereas Turkish ISIS members are younger.<sup>3</sup> However, there are exceptions, underscoring the need for more data to draw definitive conclusions about "typical" Turkish ISIS members.

In both cases, fighters from ISIS and Jabhat Fateh al-Sham/Nusra Front used similar networks to enter the Syrian conflict, often after being exposed to elements of conflict via social media, active Islamist nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) involved in speaking out against the Syrian regime, or through the large number of Islamist aid groups active along the border. In certain instances, these NGOs provided the means to enter the Syrian conflict, where a small number of Turks then opted to stay with the groups that received the aid. In other instances, returning ISIS recruiters sought out those that had returned from Syria, whom were then sent for indoctrination and religious training inside Turkey. Another ISIS member would arrange for their transit to the border and on to Raqqa, the caliphate's Syrian capital city.

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This paper uses a series of case studies to examine the ISIS recruitment network, including the role of Turkey-based recruiters, and how these individuals took advantage of the relatively permissive environment inside the country to give support to the jihadist campaign against Bashar al-Assad and his allies, Russia and Iran. The data suggest that the age range of the Turkey-based recruiters varies, but key individuals have links to the Afghan Jihads (1979 to 1989 and 2001 to present). These recruiters were well-known to people living in their communities and, often times, had links to informal *cemaats*, or small religious groups that gather like-minded individuals for religious training.

This article is based on open-source—and fragmentary—information about ISIS recruitment in Turkey, and uses a series of case studies to examine the group's methods of recruitment in different Turkish cities. The sources reveal similar recruitment efforts in numerous different cities and an interconnected network of Salafis, committed to the idea of an Islamic State. The conclusions in this article are based primarily on Turkish-language sources citing various police reports. One potential drawback is that little is actually known about the content of discussions between ISIS recruiters and their recruits. As such, the findings are based on the available evidence and must be updated as new information about the group

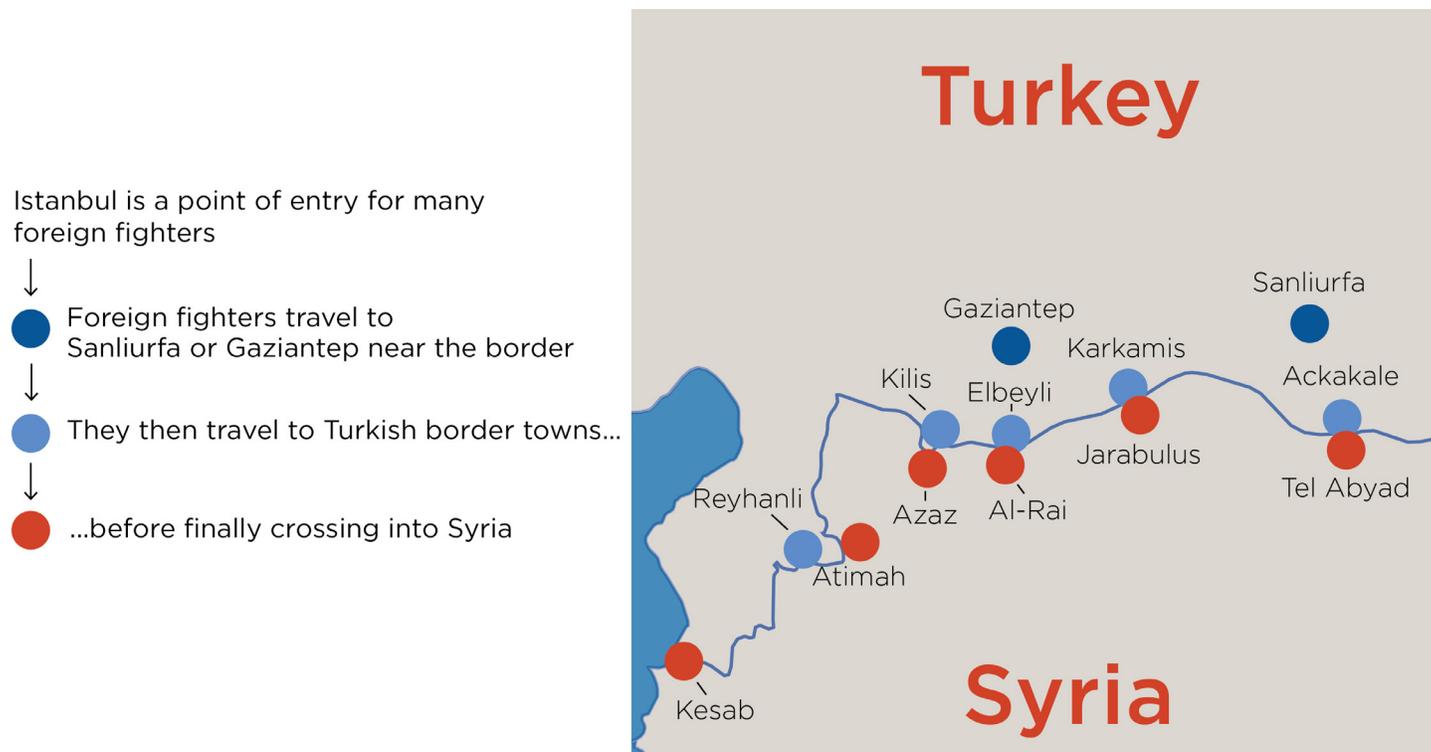
and its activities in Turkey becomes available. The lessons learned from this study can be of benefit to other countries, where ISIS will remain—in some way, shape, or form—long after it loses territory in Iraq and Syria and where like-minded jihadists could continue to recruit at-risk youth, either to support a continued insurgency, or for a different jihad in another part of the world.

### Al-Qaeda in Iraq: The Turkish Connection to the War in Syria

The history of ISIS is well-documented. The group is the latest incarnation of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's Jamaat al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad, which later morphed into al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). After Zarqawi's death in 2006, the group moved ahead with its plans to establish an Islamic State, first under the direction of self-declared Caliph Abu

<sup>3</sup> The average birth year of ISIS members previously based in Adiyaman is 1990, according to birth years of known members this author has collected.

Map 1. Primary path of ISIS foreign fighters through Turkey into Syria



Omar al-Baghdadi. The group subsequently rebranded itself as Islamic State Iraq, or ISI, and began to focus on taking and holding territory in Anbar to establish its desired caliphate. Abu Omar was subsequently killed in 2010, giving rise to the current Caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, along with the current leadership of ISIS. In 2011, al-Qaeda dispatched Abu Muhammad al-Jolani to Syria, where he was tasked with establishing the Nusra Front, the al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria. Baghdadi remained the overarching leader of the Nusra Front, but ultimately the two groups split.

A key group of Turkish recruiters for ISIS first provided support for the Nusra Front, recruiting for the group and using well-established networks in Turkey to smuggle men and materiel to Nusra Front-held territory. This Turkey-based network pledged allegiance to ISIS and has since been providing the same type of support/logistical help to the caliphate. This is reflected in documents captured about the movement of foreign fighters through Turkey to Syria.

According to West Point's analysis of over 4,600 ISIS personnel records, written between early 2013 and late 2014, 93 percent of foreign fighters listed entered

Syria through six different border towns: Yayladagi, Atmea, Azaz, al-Rai, Jarabulus, and Tel Abyad.<sup>4</sup> For many foreign fighters, Istanbul was the first point of entry, before ISIS facilitators arranged for travel to two key cities near the border, Sanliurfa and Gaziantep. From these two cities, ISIS fighters then moved to Kilis, Elbeyli, Karkamis, or Ackakale. At least three of these areas—Yayladagi, Atmea, Azaz—are no longer under ISIS control, with the Nusra Front or Ahrar now taking their place as the most dominant group in these areas.

The available data suggest that ISIS was able to embed itself within a larger sub-set of the Turkish Salafi community. A sub-set of the Salafi community has lent support to the jihad in Iraq against the United States, as well as other jihadist conflicts like those in Afghanistan, Bosnia, the Ogaden,<sup>5</sup> and Iraq. The Iraqi

4 Brian Dodwell, Daniel Milton, and Don Rassler, "The Caliphate's Global Workforce: An Inside Look at the Islamic State's Foreign Fighter Paper Trail," *Combating Terrorism Center, West Point*, April 2016, p. 25, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-caliphates-global-workforce-an-inside-look-at-the-islamic-states-foreign-fighter-paper-trail>.

5 OS Mahmood and North Caucasus Caucus, "The Clear Banner: Turkish Foreign Fighters and the Ogaden," *Jihadology*, January

and Afghan cases indicate that old recruiters, some of whom fought in one or both of the conflicts, returned home and recruited a new generation of Turks to go fight in Syria, either with the Nusra Front or, later, ISIS. This suggests that jihadist networks cluster around a small number of individuals who fought abroad, only to return to their country of origin, where they then speak about their experience. This poses a longer term problem for law enforcement agencies tasked with disrupting these clusters because so many foreign and Turkish fighters crisscrossed the border for years to fight in the on-going Syrian civil conflict. ISIS also poses a comparatively different threat than al-Qaeda because so many of its recruits from Turkey come from poor urban and rural areas and have no history of support for jihad or terrorism.

### How ISIS Recruits in Turkey: The Strategic Model

The data suggest that Turkish ISIS members use a variety of recruitment techniques. The most effective, it seems, is the recruitment of new members through face-to-face or small group settings, wherein recruiters are embedded with other members of their community and target specific groups.<sup>6</sup> According to Sara Daly and Scott Gerber, this method of recruitment is “public and proximate,” in that recruiters “commingle with groups they deem ripe for recruitment” and are able to continue with their recruitment efforts because of “political sensitivity, insufficient legislation, or fear of negatively polarizing the audience’s attitudes.”<sup>7</sup> This approach, according to Daly and Gerber, is most amenable to the “infection model,” wherein a recruiter penetrates relatively insular groups, largely opposed to the government. The growing number of recruits, in turn, places pressures on others to conform, therefore leading to a growing number of sympathizers within the original target group.<sup>8</sup>

ISIS supplements these efforts with its Turkish-language media operations, which are designed to take advantage of political and religious sympathies among a small segment of the Turkish populace supportive of the idea of an Islamic State. This propaganda,

according to S. G. Grimaldi and Selim Koru, unfolded in three phases. The first, informal phase saw Turkish ISIS members post propaganda on their Facebook page. In one such example, Oguzhan Gozlemecioglu (aka Muhammed Selef), posted pictures of his trips to Syria, intermixed with similar images from Hacibayram, Ankara, his hometown and a well-known ISIS recruitment node.<sup>9</sup> Gozlemecioglu also reportedly helped to recruit for al-Qaeda/the Nusra Front in 2012 at Ankara’s Middle East Technical University, targeting a small group of students who met every Wednesday to discuss religion.<sup>10</sup>

The second phase, according to Grimaldi and Koru, coincided with the split of ISIS from the Nusra Front in 2013. A number of well-known Turkish-language jihadist news websites began to espouse pro-ISIS narratives, albeit without any of them serving as ISIS’s official Turkish-language media outlet.<sup>11</sup> The third phase began in June 2015, beginning with the start of Darul Hilafe, an official Turkish-language organ of ISIS’s al-Hayat Media. That same month, Darul Hilafe began to publish an official Turkish-language magazine, *Konstantiniyye*.<sup>12</sup> The publication has grown increasingly hostile toward the Turkish government since early 2015. The turning point, it appears, was ISIS’s loss of the town of Tel Abyad to the Kurdish-majority Democratic Union Party, or PYD. The town was of critical importance for the caliphate’s day-to-day operations, with at least 1,229 people having entered Syria through the town between 2013 and 2014, according to the West Point analysis.<sup>13</sup>

During the Kurdish-led offensive for this town, *Konstantiniyye* published an article accusing the Turkish government of colluding with the PYD and the United States to defeat ISIS. In the January and April 2016 editions, ISIS sharpened its anti-Turkey message. In both publications, the group refers to the Turkish

12, 2015, <http://jihadology.net/2015/01/12/the-clear-banner-turkish-foreign-fighters-and-the-ogaden/>.

6 Sara Daly and Scott Gerwehr, *Al-Qaida: Terrorism Selection and Recruitment* (Washington, DC: McGraw Hill, 2006), pp. 81-82, <http://www.rand.org/pubs/reprints/RP1214.html>.

7 Ibid.

8 Daly and Gerwehr, op. cit., p. 78.

9 S.G. Grimaldi and Selim Koru, “Is the Islamic State Trying to Draw Turkey into Syria,” *War on the Rocks*, May 13, 2016, <http://warontherocks.com/2016/05/is-the-islamic-state-trying-to-draw-turkey-into-syria/>.

10 “El Kaide ODTÜ’de böyle örgütlendi,” *Cumhuriyet*, August, 22, 2016, [http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/turkiye/551991/El\\_Kaide\\_ODTU\\_de\\_boyle\\_organize\\_organize.html](http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/turkiye/551991/El_Kaide_ODTU_de_boyle_organize_organize.html).

11 Grimaldi and Koru, op. cit., <http://warontherocks.com/2016/05/is-the-islamic-state-trying-to-draw-turkey-into-syria/>.

12 North Caucasus Caucus, “The Conquest of Constantinople: The Islamic State Targets a Turkish Audience,” *Jihadology*, June 9, 2015, <http://jihadology.net/2015/06/09/guest-post-the-conquest-of-constantinople-the-islamic-state-targets-a-turkish-audience/>.

13 Dodwell, Milton, and Ressler, op. cit., p. 26.



Former location of Adiyaman's "tea house," a known center for ISIS recruiting. *Photo credit:* Emily Feldman/Mashable.

military as an irreligious entity, whose members are infidels, or *kafir*.<sup>14</sup> These two publications coincided with an increase in direct ISIS attacks on Turkish military assets, beginning in Iraq and extending to artillery units near Karkamis.<sup>15</sup> In addition, ISIS began rocket attacks on Kilis, a border town that still serves as an important overland route for ISIS travel to and from Turkey to Syria.

### Recruitment Case Studies

ISIS and the Nusra Front appear to have used a similar recruitment strategy in four different Turkish cities: Istanbul, Adiyaman, Konya, and Izmir. In each case, recruiters were members of the community, with recruits culled from the local population or introduced to the recruiter through a family member. In at least two instances, the future ISIS fighter appears to have

been an outsider to Turkey's Salafi community, with reports suggesting that two such men—Savas Yildiz and Mesut Yonay—had to grow beards to fit in with their new social groups. In all cases, recruiters operated in relatively overt locations, where their activities drew the attention of the local populace and police forces. In the cases of Konya, Adiyaman, and Istanbul, members of these cells had personal/familial links to one another, further suggesting a loose network of like-minded individuals, collaborating to send fighters to Syria after indoctrination inside Turkey.

#### Istanbul: Three Cases in Gungoren

In 2013, twenty-year-old Mesut Yonay sent a letter to his family, telling them of his intention to travel to Syria to fight with ISIS. Yonay, an ethnic Kurd, travelled to Syria from Gungoren, a lower-class Istanbul neighborhood near Ataturk airport. Yonay, along with two other unnamed men, were textile workers in the neighborhood, where they came into contact with a fourth man, Mehmet Hanifi Oruc. Oruc reportedly

<sup>14</sup> Kafir, kufer, or kuffar in the Arabic transliteration is a derogatory term for an "unbeliever," often defined as infidel.

<sup>15</sup> Grimaldi and Koru, *op. cit.*, <http://warontherocks.com/2016/05/is-the-islamic-state-trying-to-draw-turkey-into-syria/>.

contacted Yonay to introduce him to Kursat, an ISIS commander in Aleppo.<sup>16</sup> According to Yonay's uncle, Oruc was a fixture in the neighborhood. He would chastise people for smoking and put pressure on children to be more pious. Kursat reportedly communicated with Yonay through Facebook, before convincing him to travel to Gaziantep and then Syria. During these Facebook sessions, Yonay became outwardly more pious, growing a Salafi-style beard. He also began to reject the relatively relaxed conditions in Turkish mosques, refusing to sit near women and openly complaining about the number of smokers in the area.<sup>17</sup>

This pattern of radicalization, as well as the neighborhood where it took place (Gungoren), is similar to that of another ethnically Kurdish ISIS fighter, Huseyin Peri. In this case, Peri, a native of Adiyaman, worked at a local bakery. In 2014, Peri began to attend religion classes at HISADER, a religious NGO based in the neighborhood. Like Yonay, Peri became more outwardly religious during his indoctrination and met often with the local ISIS recruiter, Ibrahim Usame,<sup>18</sup> at HISADER's prayer room. At the outset of the recruitment process, Usame recommended that Peri read texts by Muslim Brotherhood ideologues, presumably those that justify violence in pursuit of a Salafi Islamic agenda.<sup>19</sup> Peri joined ISIS while in Gungoren in September 2014, travelled to Syria in November via Gaziantep, and then joined a Turkish unit. The commander of this unit, Abu Osama al-Kurdi, is another ethnic Kurd from Konya. Like other al-Qaeda/ISIS recruiters, Kurdi fought in Afghanistan before making his way to Syria, where, along with his brother, Abdussalam, the two commanded the Turkish

unit with one acting as the military leader and the other as a spiritual leader.<sup>20</sup>

A third Gungoren-linked individual, Ilyas Aydin (who used the kunya, or war name, Ebu Ubede), has also been linked to ISIS recruitment in Istanbul.<sup>21</sup> Like Kursat and Usame, Aydin frequented the local mosque, where he would identify potential recruits. After making contact, he would hold informal group sessions, where the attendees would converse about Islam. According to *Haber Turk*, Aydin favors the imposition of Sharia in Turkey and, using rhetoric similar to other Turkish Salafis, refers to Turkey's current government as *dar al-harp*<sup>22</sup> and its politicians as kafir.<sup>23</sup>

Aydin also had a presence online and would post speeches, similar to Halis Bayancuk, who is better known by his kunya, Ebu Hanzala. Both men were arrested at the same time in 2011 for links to al-Qaeda but were subsequently released. Aydin also recruited in Europe and central Asia, most probably in Germany and Azerbaijan, where there are strong ethnic and linguistic ties. It is unclear how he maintained ties to potential recruits abroad, but it was likely through various social media channels. After making contact with recruits, Aydin does appear to have helped with their journey to Syria, using a trusted network based in Gaziantep.<sup>24</sup>

### Adiyaman: Turkey's Most Prominent Cell Conducts Attacks

There is a large, once-overt ISIS cell based in Adiyaman<sup>25</sup> that has direct links to eight of the ten ISIS bomb attacks in Turkey, as well as at least two additional failed attacks. The group had some thirty-one core members, from two different countries: Turkey and Germany.<sup>26</sup> The group's leadership structure mirrored

16 The Kursat with whom Mesut Yonay spoke about Syria may, in fact, be Kursat Akcicek, a core member of Turkey's ISIS cell, linked to a series of bombings discussed earlier in this issue brief. See, "Gaziantep police 'stopped tracking ISIL cell before attacks,'" *Hurriyet Daily News*, August 19, 2016, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/gaziantep-police-stopped-tracking-isil-cell-before-attacks.aspx?pageID=238&nID=103033&NewsCatID=509>.

17 "Cihad' adına gençlerimizi savaşmaya götürüyorlar," *Aydinlik*, April 21, 2014, <http://www.aydinlikgazete.com/mansetler/cihad-adina-genclerimizi-savasmaya-goturuyorlar-h38685.html>.

18 This is his kunya, or war name. The open source does not reveal his real name. Also, Usame is reportedly from the neighborhood and worked as a milk delivery man. "Cihad' adına gençlerimizi savaşmaya götürüyorlar," *op. cit.*

19 Amberin Zaman, "Captured fighter details Islamic State's Turkey connection," *Al Monitor*, June 17, 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/06/turkey-syria-iraq-isis-new-turkish-unit-lures-kurds.html>.

20 Ibid.

21 "İŞİD-PYD çatışması İstanbul'a sıçradı," *Vatan*, December 2015, <http://www.gazetevatan.com/isis-pyd-catismasi-istanbul-a-sicradi-895554-gundem/>.

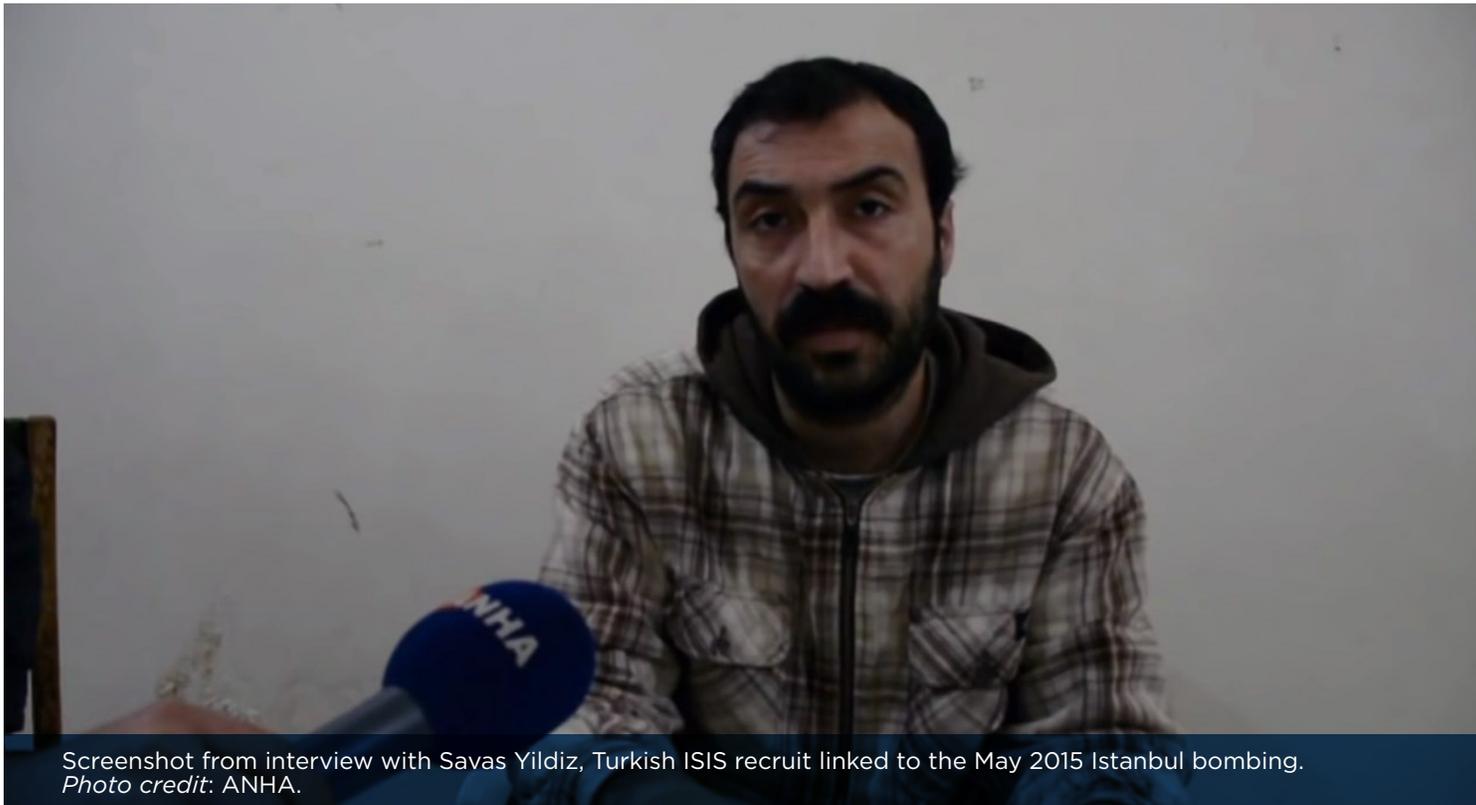
22 *Dar al-harp* or *dar al-harb* from the Arabic transliteration means a territory of war that has yet to submit to dar al-Islam and whose leaders do not have a peace or non-aggression treaty with Muslims.

23 "Örgütün İstanbul lideri 26 yaşındaki Ebu Ubeyde," *Haber Turk*, December 19, 2015, <http://www.haberturk.com/gundem/haber/1169248-orgutun-istanbul-lideri-26-yasindaki-ebu-ubeyde>.

24 Ibid.

25 Huseyin Peri also has extensive links to Adiyaman.

26 One of the group's female members, Walentina Slobodjanjuk, was a German national. She appears to have been an immigrant, originally from Kazakhstan. After travelling to Germany she



Screenshot from interview with Savas Yildiz, Turkish ISIS recruit linked to the May 2015 Istanbul bombing.  
*Photo credit: ANHA.*

that of Turkish ISIS sub-groups inside Syria, with an overarching leader, Mustafa Dokumaci, and a spiritual emir, Ahmet Korkmaz. It also appears as if three other members, Ibrahim Bali, Yunus Durmaz, and Halil Ibrahim Durgun, emerged as key members of the group's operational wing. Bali was reportedly in charge of this group's operations inside Turkey, directing a wave of terror attacks from Syria, before being replaced by Mustafa Mol, an Arabic-speaking Turkish citizen from Urfa.

Korkmaz, the group's main recruiter, reportedly spent time in Syria, or was involved in humanitarian work

near the Syrian border. He appears to have approached impressionable youth who were active in the same field or had recently returned from Syria. Korkmaz's recruitment method entailed identifying potentially susceptible individuals and bringing them to his house for lessons on religion. These recruits also began to spend time at a tea house, managed by future suicide bomber Yunus Emre Alagoz. The manager's brother, Seyh Abdurrahman Alagoz, also chose to be a suicide bomber, carrying out the July attack on a gathering of leftist youth in the border town of Suruc. Yunus Emre Alagoz and a still unidentified Syrian carried out the September Ankara train station attack, which killed 103 people.

The majority of the group's recruits spent time in Syria near Aleppo in or before 2013, prior to returning to Turkey. It is unclear for which groups the Adiyaman cell members fought during this time period. At least one member, Yakup Aktulum, first travelled to Aleppo in 2013 with the Humanitarian Aid Foundation (IHH), an Islamist NGO that controls much of the Turkish aid delivered to Syria, according to an interview with his

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settled in Mönchengladbach, a city with a reputation as a Salafist stronghold. A second female member, Merve Dunder, is also a German national, although her name suggests she is of Turkish origin. She also travelled to Turkey and then Syria via Mönchengladbach. It is unclear if they knew each other before leaving for Syria. Both women married Adiyaman cell members inside Syria, before travelling across the border to Adiyaman. The group's reach extended well beyond the core membership, with tens more linked to the group, either as lower level members of the group in charge of remedial tasks like transporting items to the Syrian border, or through associations with members linked to the group.

father in the Turkish daily *Radikal*.<sup>27</sup> Aktulum stayed in Syria for an additional four months, reportedly joining the Salafi Ahrar al-Sham, before returning to Adiyaman and then frequenting the tea house. As of summer 2015, he was in a psychological facility.<sup>28</sup>

Korkmaz reportedly fled to Syria in March 2015. A different individual, Ibrahim Bali, is reportedly in charge of the current wave of ISIS attacks against Turkey, almost all of which are linked to the Adiyaman group.

### Konya

According to Savas Yildiz, a Turkish ISIS member currently in Kurdish custody in Syria, the head of ISIS recruiting in Konya is Mustafa Gunes, a Salafist with a long history of jihadist-related activity in Turkey. Gunes has links to an imprisoned German-Turkish Salafi, previously based in Germany, Mehmet Kaplan. Kaplan argues in favor of an Islamic State and met with Osama bin Laden in 1997, but he has disavowed links to ISIS over disagreements about methods. Germany extradited Kaplan to Turkey in 2004, where he was then tried and convicted of working to overthrow the Turkish state. In 2008, Gunes split from Kaplan's group, reportedly forming different cells in Sultanbeyli, Istanbul, and Pendik, an industrial city outside of Istanbul. In Sultanbeyli, Gunes began to target Turkish youth through the establishment of illegal religious education and prayer centers. According to *CNN Turk*, veterans of the Afghan jihad and Turks previously based in Pakistan took part in these two cells.<sup>29</sup> In 2008, Turkish police arrested members of these two cells. Gunes fled to Egypt, but does appear to have returned to Turkey sometime before 2014.

To attract recruits, Gunes attended funerals for Turkish citizens killed fighting in Syria approaching people in attendance. He also went door-to-door in certain instances, according to a *Haber Turk* report. These recruits, according to the same report, would then gather in a book shop, where conversations about Islam took place.<sup>30</sup> Gunes posted these conversations on

YouTube and Facebook and, on at least a few occasions, would appear alongside Halis Bayancuk. At least one woman who attended these lessons volunteered to be a suicide bomber but was arrested before carrying out an attack.<sup>31</sup> At least four ISIS recruits from Konya travelled to Syria in 2014 through Tel Abyad.<sup>32</sup>

### Izmir

In Izmir, Murat Baysal (also known as Sari Murat) headed local recruitment efforts. As in the other cases mentioned in this article, Baysal held discussions about religion with recruits for up to four months before the recruit was sent to Syria. These classrooms doubled as prayer rooms. Baysal, according to *Hurriyet*, had a table/stand at the local neighborhood *pazar* (outdoor market).<sup>33</sup> He also had links to other *cemaats*,<sup>34</sup> with at least one of his recruits, Savas Yildiz, travelling from Adana to Izmir with an ISIS-linked family member, before moving to Syria. Yildiz has since been linked to Ilham Bali and is the reported perpetrator of the first ISIS-linked bomb attack in Turkey against a Kurdish political target in May 2015.

Like with Mesut Yonay in Gungoren, Yildiz was not a Salafi before joining the religion classes. Yildiz is an ethnic Kurd originally from Van, but lived in Adana. Yildiz's brother-in-law, Burhanettin Sari (Muqatil), first introduced him to Turkish Salafis at an *iftar* (the meal when Muslims break their fast during Ramadan), where he reportedly met Eyup Hoca,<sup>35</sup> a former fighter in Afghanistan. Shortly thereafter, Yildiz's wife's uncle, Erol Sahin, introduced him to Murat Baysal in Izmir. According to Yildiz, speaking to his Kurdish captors in Syria, Salafis close to Baysal made fun of him for not having the proper beard when he first began attending Baysal's classes. Yildiz had travelled to the city to work in construction after business slowed in Adana. After spending five to six months in Izmir, Yildiz and his wife's uncle, Erol Sahin, travelled to Syria via Gaziantep and Kilis. Shortly thereafter, Yildiz returned to Turkey

27 As cited in: Noah Blaser and Aaron Stein, "The Islamic State's Network in Turkey," *Turkey Wonk*, October 30, 2015, <https://turkeywonk.wordpress.com/2015/10/30/the-islamic-states-network-in-turkey/>.

28 Ibid.

29 "Polisten 3 ilde El Kaide operasyonu," *CNN Turk*, December 19, 2008, <http://www.cnnturk.com/2008/turkiye/12/19/polisten.3.ilde.el.kaide.operasyonu/505453.0/>.

30 Ismail Akkaya. "İŞİD şüpheli kadın konuştu," July 28, 2015, <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/isid-supheli-kadin-konustu-gundem-2093869/>.

31 "İŞİD şüpheli kadın konuştu," *Milliyet*, July 28, 2015, <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/isid-supheli-kadin-konustu-gundem-2093869/>.

32 Idris Emen, "Diyarbakır saldırısının arka planı: Alevi, Kürt zanlı İŞİD'e böyle katılmış," *Radikal*, June 15, 2015, <http://www.radikal.com.tr/turkiye/diyarbakir-saldirisinin-arka-plani-alevi-kurt-zanli-iside-boyle-katilimis-1379173/>.

33 Banu Sen, "İzmir'de İŞİD operasyonu: Çok sayıda gözaltı," *Hurriyet*, April 1, 2016, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/izmirde-isid-operasyonu-izmir-haberleri-40079161>.

34 Small religious groups that gather like-minded individuals for religious training.

35 Hoca used in this context is meant to denote a muslim scholar or clergyman. It is not a last name.

to collect his wife and children, then crossed back into Syria.<sup>36</sup>

Yildiz's experience inside Syria mirrors that of his recruitment in Turkey. After crossing the border, he was taken to Suluk, a town near Tel Abyad. Once there, he was placed with a Turkish-speaking group of men, dubbed the Fursa El Xilafe Taburlari. A man named Abdulmuhit (it is unclear if this is his real name, or his kunya) was in charge of this Turkish-speaking group, alongside Ebu Talha, who oversaw military training. A third man, Ebu Nur, was in charge of physical training. After his training, Yıldiz fought against the People's Protection Units (YPG), before being dispatched to Turkey to carry out the attack against the Kurdish-linked Democratic Peoples' Party (HDP) in May 2015.

## Findings

In every case, a local recruiter with knowledge of the community identified recruits, engaged them in conversation, and then invited them to religious training courses. It appears as if the potential recruits would attend these courses for four months, before officially declaring allegiance to ISIS. After making this pledge, the recruits would be sent to Syria, either through Gaziantep or Sanliurfa, before an ISIS member would meet them on the other side of the border. The recruits would then be placed in Turkish-speaking units, complete with military and spiritual trainers. The recruits would continue the training that began in Turkey, before some were sent to fight on the front lines or placed in a supporting administrative role.

In Gungoren and Adiyaman, ethnic Kurds were recruited, and then sent to fight against other ethnic Kurds, affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the PYD. This finding may be the result of a small, biased sample size. However, tangential evidence supports the idea that Turkish ISIS members have sought to exacerbate Turkish-Kurdish ethnic tensions inside Turkey. Digital files on a captured laptop that belonged to Yunus Durmaz, a key member

36 "YPG'nin elindeki IŞİD'in canlı bombası Savaş Yıldız: Adana ve Mersin HDP saldırılarını MİT söyledi, ben yaptım," *Bir Gun*, March 22, 2016, <http://www.birgun.net/haber-detay/ypg-nin-elindeki-isis-in-canli-bombasi-savas-yildiz-adana-ve-mersin-hdp-saldirilari-mit-soyledi-ben-yaptim-107008.html>.

in charge of logistics for the Adiyaman group, indicate that the group has plans to attack Kurdish, Alevi, and international and security targets inside Turkey.<sup>37</sup> Durmaz detonated a suicide vest in a May 2016 police raid in Gaziantep, killing himself. To date, the majority of the attacks have been against Kurdish-related targets, though more recent bombings have also targeted economic and security targets. The majority of these bombings link back to one cell, previously based in Adiyaman and Gaziantep, with recruiting links extending to Ankara, Istanbul, and Izmir. The economic-focused bombings, with the exception of the Istiklal attack, suggest that ISIS has a dual-pronged strategy for Turkey and is using two different groups to carry it out. The first prong is to exacerbate ethnic tensions, while the second is to damage the Turkish economy. Both prongs contribute to the same goal: eroding public trust in the elected government.

[T]angential evidence supports the idea that Turkish ISIS members have sought to exacerbate Turkish-Kurdish ethnic tensions inside Turkey.

The recruitment model also suggests that ISIS took advantage of their relative freedom of movement to embed themselves in small communities. The growing ISIS presence, in turn, helped to "infect" potential recruits and spread to small, confined sub-sets of the population in the community. The research also suggests that recruits travel in familial clusters, often times with brothers or close friends attending recruiting sessions and then travelling to Syria together. Recruiters also used social media, both in an overt manner through Facebook and YouTube, as well as private messaging applications to communicate with potential recruits. Further still, in at least one case, ISIS members were able to communicate with foreign communities, most probably in Germany and Azerbaijan.

These two methods of recruitment, according to Gerwehr and Daly, have longer term ramifications for the future of ISIS in Turkey. In March 2015, the Turkish government began to crack down on these networks, arresting many ISIS members. The police action will likely force recruiters underground, giving more importance moving forward to private communication.

37 "IŞİD Türkiye'de 26 ayrı noktayı hedef almış," *Radikal*, January 28, 2016, <http://www.radikal.com.tr/turkiye/isis-turkiyede-26-ayri-noktayi-hedef-almis-1501735/>.

## THE PATH OF ISIS RECRUITS



In addition, the growing number of Turkish ISIS members now in custody poses a secondary problem. The recruitment process can continue in the prison environment, wherein committed ISIS members can continue to pursue similar techniques to those pursued in their original home communities. The success of ISIS, for example, has been linked to the imprisonment of key individuals in Camp Bucca, a US military prison during the occupation of Iraq.<sup>38</sup>

This dynamic will place greater emphasis on secondary Turkish efforts to combat radicalism. Currently, Turkey's religious affairs directorate, Diyanet, is spearheading this effort through the publication of sermons and reports that attack the religious credibility of ISIS.<sup>39</sup> It is unclear if these efforts are having an effect, but efforts such as these will grow in importance as more Turkish ISIS members are imprisoned. At the same time, ISIS recruiters are certain to remain a fixture on

social media networks, requiring vigilance on the part of law enforcement to monitor the large number of postings. Moreover, Turkey's legal code will also have to be adjusted, in order to clarify the distinction between a crime and a private citizen simply espousing a point of view about a desired political end state.

This study suggests that there are concurrent ethno-political dynamics at play inside Turkey that could make recruits more amenable to ISIS recruiters and propaganda. The data indicate that ethnic Kurds are drawn to polar opposite ends of the political spectrum, with sub-sets joining both ISIS- and PKK-affiliated groups. This dynamic, in turn, contributes to radicalization when these two groups come into direct conflict, as is the case now in Syria. Inside Turkey, Kurdish groups affiliated with the PKK, as well as the religiously conservative Huda Par (which is the political wing of the radical group, Kurdish Hezbollah, and also linked to Halis Bayancuk), have clashed in recent years. The largest of these clashes took place in October 2015, during the ISIS-PYD war for Kobani. During two days of riots, members of the PKK's youth group, the YDG-H, killed tens of Huda Par supporters in the southeast. These clashes mirrored tensions in Syria,

38 Martin Chulov, "Isis: the inside story," *The Guardian*, December 11, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/dec/11/-sp-isis-the-inside-story>.

39 Hilmi Demir and Selim Koru, "The Theological Battle Between ISIL and the Turkish State," *War on the Rocks*, May 4, 2016, <http://warontherocks.com/2016/05/the-theological-battle-between-isil-and-the-turkish-state/>.

with YDG-H members accusing Huda Par of recruiting for and giving support to ISIS.

These ethnic and religious cleavages in Turkish society require a nuanced counterterrorism strategy, whereby state officials focus on the drivers of recruitment for radical religious ideologues versus the secular/Marxist outlook of the PKK. However, Turkish efforts to stop PKK recruitment thus far have failed, with each cycle of violence fueling more Kurdish youths to leave their hometowns to fight with the PKK. At the same time, the corresponding data suggests an uptick in support for Salafi groups, linked to the fighting in Syria. Thus, while al-Qaeda has had a presence in Turkey—and ran smuggling networks to facilitate the flow of foreign fighters to Iraq—this current cycle has increased support for these groups inside Turkey.

## Conclusion

From the outset of the Syrian civil conflict, Turkish ISIS recruiters were active in local communities and targeted potential members. These recruiters all used similar tactics, before sending fighters who officially pledged allegiance to the group after months of indoctrination. To facilitate the travel to Turkey, ISIS/the Nusra Front first relied on older, well-entrenched networks that al-Qaeda had previously used to smuggle personnel and materiel to Iraq. Once in country, these fighters underwent further indoctrination with Turkish-speaking members, before they were sent to the front lines to fight or placed in administrative units in different cities under ISIS control. The rise of ISIS and the expansion of the Syrian civil conflict led to more people joining the jihad and the networks growing larger in size.

The method of recruitment blended relatively overt recruitment efforts with a mixture of open and closed online propaganda. Prominent online personality Halis Bayancuk appears to have considerable influence, despite not having ever made a formal pledge of allegiance to ISIS. Additionally, lesser-known Salafi personalities also leveraged their presence on

Facebook to engage with potential recruits, including some from foreign countries. In all three cases, these recruiters have taken advantage of loopholes in the Turkish legal code, as well as lax enforcement of existing laws up until March 2015, the month when Turkish authorities began to increase their crack down on ISIS. It is unclear what prompted this rapid shift, although one explanation is that ISIS's propaganda vis-à-vis Turkey grew increasingly hostile in early 2015, perhaps raising the threat level.

The data also suggest that there is an understudied intra-Kurdish element, grafted on top of wider Salafi sympathies for the idea of an Islamic state. As Turkey begins to clamp down on these recruiters, the process will likely be forced underground, raising the importance of digital, encrypted communication. Moreover, the growing number of ISIS members in custody requires that the authorities take preventative measures to ensure that recruitment does not continue in prison.

These networks have proven resilient, outliving previous efforts to crack down on their activities inside Turkey. They are likely to outlive ISIS, as well. At a minimum, Turkey must now draft new laws to grapple with this challenge and empower police and municipal forces to enforce updated legislation. However, the data clearly show that these groups will continue to be present in Turkish urban areas and to maintain a presence online. These networks will have to be continually disrupted, underscoring how Turkey's ISIS problem will persist and requires a long-term commitment to police effectively—one designed to combat the "infected" segments of the population and to counter the longer term repercussions of fighters who return to Turkey, then re-start the cycle of recruitment all over again.

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