

ISIS recruiters cause concern in Kurdish town in Turkey

by [Dominique Soguel](#) in the [September 16, 2015](#) issue

*(The Christian Science Monitor)* White-on-black Islamic calligraphy still adorns the establishment that the self-described Islamic State used to recruit fighters and bombers in Adiyaman, a town in southeast Turkey.

Known as the Islamic Tea House, it was a hub for bearded men in tunics who lured young men for explosives training in Syria before complaints from the community led police to shut it down.

“It wasn’t exactly a tea house, but they did drink tea,” said Mahmoud Tunc, a boy with a whisper of a mustache who works at a tea shop across the street. “They were a carbon copy of the IS guys you see on social media. Even if you put a Qur’an in front of them, they wouldn’t read it. They would just parrot their stupid ideology. They were not harmful to us, but they were very harmful to Adiyaman and Islam.”

Adiyaman is still reeling from the notoriety of two of its sons. One was Orhan Gonder, the suspect in twin bombings that killed four people at a June election rally in Diyarbakir, unofficial capital of Turkey’s Kurdish region. The other was the suicide bomber behind the July 20 attack in Suruc, a way station for anti-IS Kurdish activists, that claimed 32 lives and rent Turkey into a bellicose tailspin against both IS and Kurdish militants.

Conservative Muslim Kurds are in the majority here. In contrast to Diyarbakir, Adiyaman supports Turkey’s ruling Justice and Development Party of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. But the two incidents have sparked soul-searching in a time of unrest in Turkey.

Gonder reportedly has protested his innocence from behind bars. His uncle said the extroverted young man, who cracked jokes at weddings, is a victim of manipulation. He and others say these attacks were preventable if authorities had heeded the warnings of parents whose radicalized sons had traveled to Syria.

“We think he was brainwashed,” said Ercan Gonder, the boy’s uncle. “We think IS was involved, but we don’t believe there is just one hand at play.”

When Gonder disappeared in October 2014, his family knew something was amiss. The young man had grown a beard and began to pray five times a day, a tradition normal for Sunni Muslims, but not for his parents, who are Alevis. [Like the Alawites in Syria, Alevis share key beliefs with the largest branch of Shi'a Islam. They also share some traditions with Sufis.]

The family was uneasy about the time he spent at the Islamic Tea House and with books extolling Afghan and Chechen warriors. They became alarmed when they learned that 15 of his friends had traveled to Syria. They decided to inform the police.

Before Gonder disappeared, a police officer met with him, but only took his statement. Ercan Gonder described the family's appeal to authorities and search efforts as largely futile.

Many here suspect that Turkish intelligence is complicit in Islamist militant activity, including the flow of foreign fighters to Syria. In 2012–2014, Adiyaman was a recruitment and fund-raising center for Syrian rebels, primarily via a stand near the municipality bearing the banner of the Free Syrian Army. Over this period, moderate rebels gave way to hard-line groups such as al-Qaeda and IS, fueling suspicions that the FSA was a screen for militants.

Adiyaman residents pride themselves on their religious diversity: Syriac Christians, Armenians, and Alevis live alongside Muslims from the major branches of Islam. Yet Adiyaman has one of the highest unemployment rates in the country. While much of the older generation worked in the tobacco industry, urbanization has left the new generation without jobs.

“There is nothing for young people in the city—no pubs, no clubs, no entertainment, only cafes where you can play tawula,” or Turkish backgammon, said Ozgur Sever, a native of Adiyaman who moved to Istanbul to study. “Since they have no entertainment or cultural activities, they are open to ideological radicalization.”

Hidayet Aktoprak, a conservative Muslim who runs the local branch of Mazlumder, a rights organization, is not convinced that IS recruitment represents a widespread phenomenon among youth. By his calculation, at least 127 Adiyaman natives have traveled to Syria. “The [real] number is estimated to be 400, because many went to Syria as a family, leaving no one behind to report them missing,” he said.

The fact that there are Kurds in IS ranks in Syria battling Kurds backed by a U.S.-led coalition also creates tension.

Osman Suzen of Insan Haklari Dernegi, another rights association, is based in Adiyaman. He believes that IS recruitment is underreported.

“Most of the families are scared and hide it,” he said. “Some think that no measures will be taken. Others are satisfied as they received money.”

Many here claim that IS recruits receive \$5,000 upon joining and a stipend of \$2,000 thereafter.

Analysts say that IS recruitment efforts in Turkey often have a “personal touch.” Unlike in the West, where social media is highly influential, friendships and face-to-face relationships play a crucial role here.

Ayse Gul, cochairwoman of Egitim Sen, a pro-Kurdish and leftist teachers union, pins blame on government policies that favor religious education over more secular schooling.

“Most families in Adiyaman are conservative and want their children to have a religious education,” she said. “They see it as an opportunity, but in reality it leaves their children vulnerable to IS and other radical ideologies.”

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