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Syria's chaos casts a deep shadow over our future

Kazakhstan's foreign minister on the rise of ISIL and the need for better international cooperation to curb the threat.

The positive contribution of the Middle East to the world, both in the past and today, is immense. Our science and culture would be much poorer without the thirst for knowledge of its people. The energy produced here helps drive the global economy. Its investment creates jobs and prosperity in every continent.

All countries including Kazakhstan benefit from the increasing economic and political links with the region. Trade between our country and the Middle East is flourishing. Improving transport links will see it continue to grow fast.

The new Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan-Iran railway, which opened last year, provides a direct connection between our landlocked country and the Gulf. It is expected to see rail traffic increase from three million to 20 million tonnes by 2020. As the balance of economic power continues to shift east and south over the coming decades, we see our links with the Middle East as increasingly important to our future.

But what is also without doubt is that the region is at the heart of some of the greatest challenges facing the international community. In a globalised world in which national borders no longer contain problems, these put all our stability, security and prosperity at risk. And all of us must play our part in turn in finding solutions.

Collective hopes

The continuing conflict and chaos in Syria, which has deepened problems in Iraq, casts a deep shadow over our collective hopes for the future. More than 200,000 Syrians have perished, and over six million people are displaced within its borders with almost four million more taking refuge in neighbouring countries. It is a humanitarian catastrophe which, without determined action, will have long-standing consequences.

As well as the terrible impact on human lives and the tragic loss of talent and potential, the danger is that the despair will provide an additional recruiting cause for violent extremism. The rise of the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and its brand of terror is a threat to all countries in the region and beyond.

Kazakhstan, for example, takes great pride in the stable, harmonious and moderate society we have built. Citizens of many different faiths and backgrounds live in peace and tolerance within our country. Around 70 percent of our population are Muslim but their faith has nothing in common with the hate-filled doctrines which are a perversion of all in which they believe.

But we are not complacent. While violent fanaticism had not taken hold in Kazakhstan, it is a growing threat within our region. We recognise the importance of the collective efforts to tackle extremism and its causes and are determined to play our full part.

Common ground

It is why, at the request of a number of Syrian opposition groups, we hosted talks this week to facilitate finding ways to tackle the country's humanitarian crisis and create the common ground to end the conflict. After four years of fighting and the immense suffering it has caused, it is clearer than ever that only a political solution will prevent further bloodshed and destruction. No matter what difficulties there are to overcome, the Geneva process remains the best hope of a lasting and peaceful solution.

We are also stepping up our efforts within our country and with our international partners to root out and counter extremism. This, of course, requires improved cooperation on security and intelligence and the development of global anti-terror measures such as the recent UN Security Council Resolution on Foreign Terrorist Fighters which Kazakhstan co-sponsored.

We must strengthen efforts to stop money laundering and the financing of terrorism and to prevent weapons of mass destruction falling into the hands of terrorist groups.

But we also have to do more to tackle poverty, inequality and hopelessness which provides the extremists with fertile ground for recruitment. Kazakhstan's economic success has enabled our country to move from being a recipient of international assistance to a donor. Through KazAID, our development aid agency that is being established, we are determined to help promote stability and opportunity outside our borders.

Exploiting divisions

We are increasing our support for Afghanistan whose citizens have suffered badly from extremism. We are helping enhance the new Afghan government's security capabilities through training, promoting economic development and are funding the education of its brightest young people in our universities. Extremists thrive, of course, by exploiting divisions between faiths. It is why promoting respect and understanding between religions is also vital. We are proud to host the triennial Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions, whose fifth meeting takes place in Astana in June 2015.

We must also work together to tackle political challenges such as the continuing failure of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process which is a major source of tension. International efforts must be stepped up to secure a fair and lasting settlement on the basis of a two state solution. This is the only viable option to a peaceful future for both peoples.

It is easy, looking around the Middle East, to feel pessimistic about the future. But look beyond the immediate security and political challenges and it is a region rich in resources, talent, leadership and potential. It is why it is in the interests of all countries to do all they can to help ease tensions and end conflict. Kazakhstan, as a near neighbour, is determined to play its full role to achieve these goals.

Erlan Idrissov is the foreign minister of Kazakhstan.

The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera's editorial policy.

Source: Al Jazeera