YOUTH AND EXTREMISM
WHY YOUTH JOIN VIOLENT EXTREMIST GROUPS IN CONFLICT ZONES

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The staggering number of Muslim youth in general and the Arab youth in particular flooding into conflict zones and volatile areas since the eruption of the war against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan followed by the internecine war against America, as well as other conflicts in Chechnya, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Somalia and several regions of Africa, and most notoriously is the aftermath of the full-scale war in Iraq, let alone the ongoing bitter conflict and the devastating war machine in Syria, which since the outbreak of the Syrian revolution has become a haven for the youth driven only by their emotive enthusiasm and sympathy; all have brought about a whole host of security, social, cultural and ideological risks and concerns. The youth who have once made up the first nucleus have also helped to fuel and generate many extremist groups and cells that have adopted violence and carried out terrorist acts, while committing appealing atrocities at home and across most Arab and Islamic countries.

Appeal of Extremism

Sadly enough, with the Arab and Muslim youth flooding into brutal and bloody conflict zones and volatile areas, especially to war-torn countries such as Syria, many questions are being raised about the reasons and motives for such appeal, and whether there are psychological, social or cultural characteristics that distinguish such Arab and Muslim youth from others. Again, it has become widely known that travelling to such regions is strictly banned, and being engaged there for fighting purposes is also prohibited and criminalized by legal institutions and *fatwas* made by scholars.

Shockingly enough, terrorist organizations can efficiently attract and tempt the youth, generating more organizational strength and the means for survival. The newly recruited multinational members are enthused with the mandates and are tasked and entrusted with new roles and responsibilities. With a backdrop of clandestine recruitment, terrorist organizations have done well in widely spreading their ideology

and behavior. The pointed question remains unanswered: what is it that makes the youth more attracted to joining such terrorist organization and feel irresistibly tempted?

Psychological Emptiness

Given this problematic situation and the probing questions left unanswered, it was necessary to conduct an objective scientific study in line with the security and rehabilitation dimensions in such a method as to come up with a vision that helps to accurately diagnose the current situation, providing more insights into combating extremism and countering terrorist behavior. This also helps to realize a higher degree of ideological security and develop plans that prevent the youth from slipping into such milieus rife with terrorism, while evincing readiness to receive the returnees from such areas through rehabilitation programs in terms of ideology and behavior. Tailored as such, such youth can no longer be a cog in the machine operating against their communities.

The findings of the study reveal that the secret lies in the youth themselves and in the surrounding circumstances, making them ready to be an easy victim for such terrorist groups. Admittedly, they are trapped into such a vicious circle due to the social isolation towards them in comparison with the deceitfully smart activity displayed by such terrorist organizations that seize such opportunities to be an ideal alternative in their lives and fulfill their aspirations. Hence, violent behavior snowballs initially as a feeling within an extremist. By time, the psychological state of an extremist becomes the basis for all his or her actions that respond to external influences.

Therefore, we find that these groups, especially Daesh (ISIL), seized the opportunity of some bad conditions – be it political, economic, social or otherwise expressed – for some youth in their communities, spiritual emptiness, and psychological shock. As such, the rhetoric that touches their feelings is an attempt to fill the existing emptiness by promoting broadly worded promising slogans. They deceive and manipulate the youth to make them believe that to join the ranks of these groups or support them is the right path to restore dignity and uphold the essence of faith, now that injustice and corruption have become notoriously rampant and the persecution of Muslims and committing transgression against their wealth and property abound.

Such groups powerfully use fiery rhetoric, which stirs up and arouses emotions through eloquence, elaborate professional photography, rousing chants and battle hymns that inflame passion before the mind, using high-quality digital technologies to promote their socially acceptable ideas and goals albeit unreal. They instrumentalize such emotive tools to publicize battles in which they claim that they achieve victory over

Allah's enemies, all with the aim of influencing the hearts and minds of the youth, who are mentally, emotionally and psychologically prepared and ready.

Stimuli and Responses

Two key reasons explain the appeal of extremist and violent groups to the youth and the raison d'être of their presence in countries that experience armed conflict. The two reasons are the factors relating to one's personal life and the factors of social milieu. The two reasons work in tandem in that one factor represents a stimulus while the other one represents a response to such a stimulus. When the two factors work in harmony, the youth evince much readiness and preparedness to joining extremist and violent groups.

The different trends and research centers of different disciplines that address the investigation of the root causes of the phenomenon of extremism and terrorist behavior point to many and interrelated factors, which interact with each other in the long run, and ultimately create extremist and violent ideology. Trends also differ in categorizing these causes and factors, and there is a multiplicity of visions and insights towards their ideological effects. Based on field experience, there is an unshakable conviction that the root causes of extremism stem from two main factors or causes: internal and external. Subsumed under these two key factors are many other secondary yet contributory factors.

Personal causes are inherent in the same person, which can be called self-motivation. They are internal stimuli that represent the force that pushes the individual to display a behavior to satisfy his or her needs or goals. The source of such stimuli is the person himself or herself; such a person is stimulated externally based on an internal desire aimed at self-actualization.

As such, a latent potential force lies inside, which is always pushing towards self-actualization that puts pressure on the self. These pressing desires of the group heading for extremism are manifested in escaping from the painful and bitter reality for various reasons, such as mental disorders, and various social problems, making it difficult to resist such a powerful force, and ending up in joining violent groups, especially in volatile and conflict-torn areas.

Milieu of Extremism

It is critically necessary to consider the power inherent in the youth joining extremist and violent groups as psychological motivations from the psychology point of view. Latent power differs from one person to another and is different across motives. It is also important to draw attention to the fact that the psychological motives that drive towards escaping from reality are an important precondition for extremist and violent

groups; therefore, they are concerned with psychologically disorganized youth, and seek to include and recruit them because they poorly unaware of the stark reality.

As for environmental factors, they are all external stimuli surrounding a person, and they represent a group of external conditions or influential factors that have a great impact on human life, contributing to the construction of lifestyles in terms of natures and behaviors, line of thinking, methods of achieving goals and satisfying needs, in addition to the functional role that affects a person being a natural result of being under impact.

Given the external factors that represent stimuli or causes that require a response from internal or personal factors to transform into behavior, regardless of whether this behavior is positive or negative, we find it mostly in everything that has to do with human life, and affects the way it deals with ideology, behavior and method. The impact varies from one person to another, but it is often represented in the social milieus.

The surrounding environment and the different social conditions in which some youth live, in addition to psychological suffering make them more vulnerable to extremism; rather, they may see that joining groups of violence along with pursuing the means of violence is the irreplaceable way, because if they are not happy in their lives, and they live under stressful life and bitter pressures, they may resort to escaping this painful reality.

It is striking that the external causes that contribute to joining extremist and violent groups despite their similarities are not in all circumstances of the same degree, type and impact in all communities, as they differ from one community to another, between one social class and another, as well as over time. Nevertheless, in addition to the ever-changing ideas of extremism over decades, there is often one common reason, which is the loss of the multiplicity of ideas, locked opinions, and their unilateral nature, which all make extremism permissible. Multiplicity of ideas, freedom of putting them forward and discussion of developing them within the framework of jurisprudence of reality help in countering and eliminating extremism.

It is also remarkable that it cannot be asserted that there are certain causes or even specific motives that can be claimed to lead to the emergence of violent behavior among the youth, because the reasons are different, multiple and intertwined, and differ from one environment to another, between one community and another, and between one person and another. However, this does not prevent the emergence of a basic cause among the youth, and that these causes and factors are recurrent.

Daily Reality

It is appropriate to draw an example to display the cogency and telling evidence of reality: "One of the detainees recounts that he was always at odds with his father at the secondary school stage, (a family social factor), as the father wanted his son to study a specific academic specialization, but the boy did not want this specialization; he wanted to study another major (educational factor). To fulfill his father's preference and end the disagreement with him, he studied the specialization that his father preferred. Unfortunately, his dispute with his father (family social factor) did not end, so this young man thought about escaping from this reality as a result of the psychological struggle that he experienced (psychological factor.) He had the idea of going to Iraq for jihad, and he asked the teacher of Islamic Education to help him out and find a way to get him to Iraq (social, religious and educational factor). After some days, the teacher managed to deliver him to people practicing terrorist acts inside, and he had no previous knowledge of them. The beginning of his involvement with them was that they asked him to buy a car in his name. They paid him the price for it. He did not tell his father about all of these things because of his weak personality (psychological factor). The next stage was to indoctrinate extremist ideology and persuade him to disbelieve in the government power! He was not aware of the meaning of *takfir*, and he complied with them in their extremist views and *takfiri* beliefs. Then the third stage followed, which was funneling weapons and training, on the pretext of the necessity of self-defense. In the last stage, he was injured in one of the confrontations.

It is noted that in the previous example there are multiple and intersecting causes and factors. It was also found that the student has a weakness in personality, lack of self-esteem, and that he depends on others in deciding his future and taking important decisions. The student also has religious unawareness and cultural shallowness; the student was unsuccessful in choosing a cleric for consultation, trust and knowledge. The student relied on the scholastic relationship with a teacher who he is ignorant with regard to whether that teacher is truly religious or not! Likewise, the lack of trust between the student and the family was demonstrated, because they did not inform the family of anything that happened to him.

It is noted that the family insisted on its preference, in response to the custom or social reality that is highly appreciated for those with scientific specialties, without respecting the capabilities, preferences and inclinations of the student. Then comes the impact of the teacher, who is considered a pillar of the educational environment. Therefore, it is evidenced that there exists more than one influential cause and factor to this problem, which first snowballed as educational, then familial, then social, then psychological, then religious, then ended up with extremism, recruitment and joining a violent terrorist group.

Conclusion and Lesson

The bottom line is that extremist ideology and violent terrorist behavior espoused by a great number of youth did not come arbitrarily out of nowhere and did not come to existence aimlessly; rather, both have their motives, causes, conditions and factors. Terrorism *per se* is ideology and behavior, regardless of its goals and means, and it is the result of many different factors, the main slogan of which is intertwining psychological and social factors. It is commonly agreed that investigating these factors (motives and causes) is a difficult task to accomplish, either because terrorism with its ideological and behavioral conditions is a complex phenomenon given its intricate elements and methods, or because it requires an in-depth analysis of most of the complex problems.

Hence, the issue of the youth heading for conflict-locked areas and joining violent and extremist groups should be critically addressed. Therefore, reliance on ideology or religiosity is the basic motive for travelling on the pretext of *jihad*, which lacks a lot of accuracy and evidence; rather, it may even be ravaging Islam, and this is what many enemies of Islam seek to achieve, regardless of their religion, orientations or goals.

It should be noted that this does not mean to ignore ideology or religiosity, or to exclude both permanently, or to deny the fact that they both exist, as such existing components go in line with other factors; however, with other factors both represent the causes that provoke the internal psychological motives pressing on the personality that is seeking to alleviate both components, by escaping towards ways that reduce these pressures, such as the use of drugs or drinking alcohol, or heading for countries experiencing bloody conflicts and violent fighting.