SYRIA

Deir Ezzor and Violence
Reasons for Joining

February 2019

منظمـة العدالة من أجل الحياة
Justice For Life Organization

JFL

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Reasons for Joining

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

During the ongoing Syrian crisis socio-economic factors have been mistakenly considered the main drive leading people to join violent organizations. NGOS in this part of the Middle-East, both local and international, relied on this flawed approach as they address recruitment and mobilization into extremist groups. Two basic fallacies resulted: a. failing to acknowledge cultural aspects related to the specific society; b. neglecting psychological factors leading certain people, rather than others, into extremism.

The latter fact deals with psychological preparedness. It is the reason why some people joined extremist organization while their siblings, for example, did not join. Social variables that were mistakenly considered reasons for such a behavior are actually facilitators. This pilot study skimmed into those facilitating factors while applying cultural relativism — it is the study of a culture from within (emic study) while trying to understand this culture based in its own standards rather than on those of the researcher.

Through a qualitative methodology, the study explored psychological factors related to the upbringing of people in Deir Ezzor that pushed them to join ISIS or HTS under the socio-economic circumstances of the Syrian crisis affecting this specific Syrian subculture.

From childhood up, reasons behind getting into an extremist organization where examined during interviews. Participants were found to be inhibited by their families when they were children. They were not allowed to be proactive in their decision-making process when they became adolescents, and their experience within the household often included witnessing conflicts between parents, lacking the required authority of the father, and having strong attachment to the mother.

Furthermore, most of the young men studied had a sexual inhibition — their relationship with female peers succumbed to tribal prohibition. This is one of the important reasons making such males easily exploited by extremism. Violence

becomes essential to those people lives, both from a psychoanalytic perspective of conflicting internal drives as well as from a religious approach promising them with mermaid-like creatures in the afterlife. Identity confusion is noticeable in adult subjects who were studied. The participants had severely flexible ego. Their conscience was distorted by the tribal context which reinforces hatred of those who are not of the same subculture. Others are wrong and deserve annihilation. This made it easier for extremism to manipulate such people to join.

Based on the findings, it is recommended to expand the pilot study to a quantitative research ensuring statistical significance. It is also recommended to approach female subjects and compare prospective findings with those of the pilot study. In addition, a comparative study is requested to check reproducibility of findings in areas like Raqqa and Hasakeh. Finally, it is recommended to apply an alternative approach to prevent further involvement of people in extremist organizations by mirroring the latter through what could be called "non-violent sleeper peace cells".

WHY RESEARCH?

Many projects received funding in Syria. Such projects dealt with current as well as prospective solutions for the effect of war on the populace. Application of such projects was driven from previous experience in other areas of the world where war had its share. Measurements of the efficiency of such projects rely on quantitative assessment while almost totally neglecting cultural effects. In addition, such projects rely on considering social variables as the main, if not to say sole, reasons for the behavior of the population.

In order to avoid misleading statistical numbers based on such assessments, a research study is essential to set the bases for understanding what happened and why, thus unfolding the real factors and reasons contributing to a sociological fact. Here, it is that of believing in and joining violent organizations.

It is only through research that an understanding of a phenomenon, sociological or psychological, can be achieved. Such an understanding is the prerequisite for any further decision about whatever project is to be carried to "help" a society. What would one say about a society like that of Syria where many cultures, sub-cultures, and counter-cultures coexist? How important would it be to understand why one or more members of the same family joined DAESH while others didn't? How could one find out what needs to be done to prevent further involvement in violent organizations while many people in different areas of Syria like Deir Ezzor and Raqqa are convinced until the moment that DAESH is the only solution in their region, the muslim world and the "infidel" Europe?

For a better understanding of the culture effect mentioned above, the work of an ethnologist could be sufficiently descriptive

In the frame of diagnosing schizophrenia, for example, visual and auditory hallucinations represent a major element in the favor of the mental illness in the West. When studying Touaregs, Dr Jack Hureiki (Psychiatrist and Ethonologist) encountered a

full tribe seeing and hearing spirits. Should he consider the whole tribe to be schizophrenic or would it be wiser to understand the cultural components forcing Touaregs to have a solid belief in the existence of ghosts and thus leading their minds to induce such hallucinations?

Who said that children who witnessed violence in Syria should play with clay to overcome their traumas?

There is a wide gap between assessment made to quantify projects and research which seeks understanding and sets recommendations for applications.

Now, it is the time for research which not only sets evidence-based recommendations and solutions, but also performs it in a cost-effective environment compared to the costly trial-and-error approach of administering antibiotics to treat a resistant infection — one needs first to determine the type of infection and appropriate antibiotics that would eradicate it.

INTRODUCTION

Deir Ezzor is one of the Syrian governorates affected by the presence of extremist organizations that ruled and controlled the area over years. This affected the daily life of people deeply enough and destabilized the society through the promotion of violence.

There is no doubt that the cultural context of the region highly absorbed into tribal structure, traditions and habits paved the way for a rapid expansion of extremism. In this regard some tribes deliberately drove numbers of its members to join violent organizations in order to keep or gain power over other tribes.

Some people were driven by poverty, others by greed, to take part in an organization that provides its members with privileges not otherwise accessible.

Accordingly, socio-economic factors leading people from Deir Ezzor to join extremist organizations cannot be overemphasized. However, those are not the sole determining factors driving specific people, rather than others, into the vicious cycle of violence. As it is scientifically known, psychological determinants stand in the deep layers of the personality of people who are capable of slaughtering a human being.

In the case of is and similar violent organizations, religion was the medium, social and economic factors were the facilitators, and psychological preparedness was the basic drive. Needless to explain that the psychoanalytic approach detailing personality and its structure is widely absorbed into the mainstream of psychology as it stresses that aggression is one of the human basic motives.

Social factors, economic variables as well as religious elements have been extensively assessed in the understanding of what could push people into extremism during the Syrian crisis. Psychological drives are left to be understood.

Accordingly, a qualitative research approach is essential to find out why some people became members of violent groups and why some still believe in them so strongly that they would become themselves (or induce others) to become reservoirs for any

upcoming extremism in the near future. It also clarifies the difference between intrinsic variables of individuals and social motives.

The current work is a pilot study carried prior to expansion to a complete research on the area of Deir Ezzor. The pilot allows primary touch with realities of the geographical area and skims possible undiscovered matters that could shift the course of a study later on. The pilot study (which could be referred to as "pilot" in this work) is the key to understanding, probing, and deciding what to be done next.

WHY DEIR EZZOR?

It is perhaps needless to emphasize the role of Deir Ezzor in the development of violent organizations and their expansion in Syria. However, it is of importance to stress tribal structures and the effect of tribal culture in the passage of violent ideology easily channeled through an interconnected geographical area joining Aleppo in Syria to Al-Anbar in Iraq. The second largest governorate in Syria hosted around 1,700,000 inhabitants in the beginning of 2012. Although numbers of those who joined violent organizations in Deir Ezzor is not clear, believers in the jihadi ideology keep showing their consistent wish to return to life under violent organizations. Many of those are now dispersed all over Syria, Turkey and even in European countries.

METHOD

1- Qualitative Research

The current pilot study that was conducted over a 3 months period is an application of qualitative research whereby field researchers of Justice for Life (JFL) NGO conduct face to face interviews with subjects involved in violent organizations and people close to them. Involving people related to the subject fills in blanks left by interviews of the subject himself. It also provides multiple points of view about the case being studied and allows for follow-up with the subject when discrepancy arises between different interviewees. In addition, interviewing relatives and friends allows indirect access to subjects not readily available for interview because they are afraid, actually involved in combat, or unwilling to talk. The method seeks answers to a questionnaire designed to ensure collection of psychological and sociological data about the different phases of development of included subjects.

Qualitative research allows interviewees to answer open-ended questions for in-depth determination of causative agents and variables. Interviewees are allowed the possibility to express themselves more often which provides ample place for noticing a multitude of factors that would otherwise be unnoticed through closed-ended questions. This also reduces the number of questions which lowers the burden on both interviewer and interviewee and lessens the feeling of an investigation-led insecurity by both parts of the work especially when questions are embedded in a form of daily life conversation.

2- The Questionnaire

It is supposed to collect basic demographic data providing the researcher with possibility to notice effects of sub-cultures within the studied region which could include tribes as well as sub-tribes and families. The questionnaire seeks basic information about the different phases of development of the subjects of the study. Such questions ensure understanding of the nature-nurture continuum in the formation of the personality of the subjects. They also determine the type of relationship with the larger environment (beyond home). They examine effects of caretakers as well as peers on the subject's development.

The questionnaire is divided into 3 different phases corresponding to the phases of development of an individual. Questions start by establishing the baseline of human growth and continue throughout the different phases of adolescence and adulthood (if the subject reached this phase) to examine the path of personality development and check for possible deviations from standards. The last part of the questionnaire deals with the period when the subject joined a violent organization (if he did). Reviewing relationships as well as personal changes form the major component of this phase.

People who were at the verge of joining extremist groups were considered part of the study especially that they formed a driving power that pushed others to join.

All over the questionnaire, cultural specificity of the region and of its sub-parts is observed in the design of the material as well as in its utilization during interviewing.

When subjects are available for questioning, interviewers were trained to talk to them directly and collect answers with as much details as possible. For the sake of such work, field researchers were instructed to keep in their mind the "why" question whenever they did not understand something from the answers while avoiding to push the subject to the limit of insecurity. In addition to the subject himself, a member or more of his family is also interviewed with the same questions. As questions turn indirect with relatives answers provide different points of view as well as additional information not usually known to the subject or intentionally hidden by him during face to face

interviewing. Similarly, a friend or neighbor provides more information to the same questions and fill in the gaps not provided by the subject and his close family. Such indirect interviews included females of the family whenever available. There were 3 females, 2 mothers and a sister interviewed.

In addition, indirect interviews provide data about subjects who were not available for the questionnaire because they were either active members of an extremist organization unwilling to talk, afraid, or absent due to being in the battlefield.

3- The Researchers

The study was carried by a main researcher and 3 field researchers. The latter are young men from the area being studied who work with the NGO and have years of experience in interviewing, assessment, and report writing. They have the advantage of being from the same region and culture. Although they might have some distinct sub-cultural differences with the subjects of the study, field researchers' years of experience with JFL minimize intra-cultural tension usually leading field work to a still.

Field researchers were trained to work with the questionnaire through WhatsApp calls. Training was ensured by the main researcher. They were under constant follow-up by Mr. Jalal Al Hamad, JFL executive director, in order to check for possible difficulties, needs, and further clarifications of unclear or insufficient info noticed in the answers of the questionnaire questions.

The main researcher, Dr. Ibrahim Chalhoub, designed the questionnaire and trained the field researchers to fill it. Dr. Chalhoub reviews the material seeking any further info when needed. He decides about the importance of certain interviews and asks to target other people involved in the case of a certain subject, should that case require such expansion. He analyzes the data and writes the final report in coordination with JFL. The main researcher is a psychoanalyst who has a PhD in psychology. He has been teaching in universities in Lebanon since 2006 and was involved in research since 1999.

4- Geographical Area Covered by the Study

The pilot study covers the governorate of Deir Ezzor. Cases cover the city of Deir Ezzor as well as cities of particular symbolic significance in the development of violent organizations like Al-Bukamal and Al-Mayadin. Cases also came from towns in western as well as the eastern suburbs of Deir Ezzor. There were interviews carried with people in their corresponding cities. However, others were made in other Syrian cities like Al-Bab due to the fact that interviewees are internally displaced people

5- Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Being a pilot study inclusion was more flexible than a full research study. This allows discovery of different types of cases including ones that might not have been thought of theoretically. This being said, the pilot excluded dead members of violent organizations as the main subject of study as this would be a topic on its own. Inclusion criteria put focus on living people who believe (and/or believed and changed their point of view) in joining violent organizations in Deir Ezzor and who are able to speak about themselves if possible. It also focuses on those who may not be approached because of their non-willingness to talk to researchers for any reason (still an active member of the organization or being afraid or any other reason). This group was studied through indirect interview using relatives, friends and neighbors. The reason why this group was included in the study is that as such people are still living they could be approached later on when the full research study will take place. Therefore, people or are active members, deserters and those who hold the violent perspective of violent organizations in Deir Ezzor form the subject matter of the work. HTS and DAESH are the 2 organizations included in the study being the most prominent organizations that affected the area of study and left on-going effect on its population.

PS. People who carry the perspective of DAESH and/or HTS (also known as Nusra) are people who were at the verge of joining one or more of the violent organizations but never did because of a multitude of reasons including advanced age, illness, physical disability or fear. Those people had an important effect on others who decided to join and still have an effect on the society. They are considered catalysts for violence.

Excluding females form the study was not intentional. In fact, one young woman was being interviewed but was not willing to provide answers to the questionnaire. It was evident that she needed a female field researcher to feel at ease with. This opens the opportunity to carry out another pilot study focusing on female subjects in violent organizations and the role of women in Deir Ezzor in affecting people to join extremist organizations.

The study therefore involved only male subjects as well as field researchers. This provides data about the general population of members of extremist organization to the fact that the majority of their members are males and therefore represent the major study population. It is easier for field researchers to access such population if they are of its same sex in the studied subculture, and this was ensured by the 3 male field researchers.

6-Difficulties

In addition to the generally known fact that Syrian people lived mostly under oppressive governments, a research study carries additional intrinsic difficulties particularly in the Middle-East and more specifically in tribal areas. More so, prosecution by local as well as regional and international forces creates another wall to break for researchers to be able to carry their work. This is because the pilot study deals with members of violent organizations living with social as well as personal confusion and denial.

Field work was supposed to be carried in 4 different areas where field researchers are physically present. Three of the areas are inside Syria and 1 in Turkey (Urfa, with refugees). Only Syrian territory field work was achievable as interviewees in Turkey refused to provide answers they consider reason to have them arrested by local authorities or to affect their lives within their refugee environment as well as in the Turkish society they current live in.

It comes without saying that it was particularly difficult to communicate with active members of DAESH due to security matters. However, there were also life-threatening conditions that rendered field work harsh. Actually, field workers were generally afraid from people who they interviewed. Generally speaking, carrying the questionnaire with information to the questions of which are considered critical made field researchers live with fear during the study period and a bit after it.

Field researchers, in some cases, were only able to get answers from their interviewees thanks to the personal relationship that ties them with their counterparts.

DAESH deserters who are still convinced of the organization ideology and those carrying the jihadi perspective consider civil societies to be infidels and refuse to cooperate with research.

Some cases were excluded from the research analysis because interviewees refused to answer some essential questions as such people tend to be less talkative and get irritated if requested to explain. Yet other cases complained of some detailed questions to the extent that field workers had to stop the interview.
One of the researchers was accused to work with international intelligence organizations. This is common practice with most of the workers in NGOs. However, when such an accusation comes from people involved with violent organizations the matter becomes serious enough to make JFL take a decision to stop the researcher from carrying any further field work related to the pilot study.

RESULTS

Eleven cases were studied. All were males. Female cases will be subject to a separate study necessitating different requirements as mentioned earlier in this report.

As every case was subject to multiple interviews which would include what is referred to as "important others" in psychological terms, field work generated 23 interviews covering the included cases. Two further interviews were made with a 12th male subject but were not included in the study because interviewees refused to answer questions in a way that would allow necessary understanding of the situation. They also refused to provide further details. The single partial interview of the female subject was excluded as well, as mentioned earlier, due to insufficient information provided by the subject and the inability of field researchers to achieve a deeper work. Female subjects in a tribal subculture require a separate study intended to be executed at a later stage after ensuring necessary requirements like recruiting female field researchers and ensuring appropriate "informants" (technical term used in qualitative research which encompasses the meaning of the term "source").

All 11 subjects showed inhibition at their childhood age by their parents. Types of inhibition vary between relations with peers and personal development. Hobbies were not allowed. The father of Abu Abdulaziz refused that his son develop any hobby. "He used to say it is childish irrelevant behavior intended to make me avoid growing up".

Sexual inhibition was also remarkable during childhood as well as adolescence phases. Abu Ahmad Al-Ansari had no relations with girls during his adolescence. His brother says "he was very shy. I've never seen him with any girl outside the family and never heard about love stories in which he was involved as compared to his peers". Abu Ahmad Al-Tamimi used to be "shy of 'such matters' and never had any relations with a girl".

Most of the cases were not allowed to be proactive during the later childhood due to reinforcement of attachment to the direct family. This was especially prominent when conflicts between the direct family and close relatives were present. Abu Ahmad, 32,

"had an irregular childhood marked by a conflict between his parents and another family (relatives) that lead to the death of his uncle…and my father and elder brother were always talking about revenge which lead them to jail after killing 2 people involved in the death of my uncle". Abu Ahmad spent his time studying during winter time and working during summertime. "I couldn't play whenever or wherever I wanted, and had to find work as close to home as possible".

Parental conflicts were exaggerated in some cases leading to a build-up of a sense of revenge from the father or the representative of authority. In a tribal setting there is no channeling for such an aggressive drive. There is more frustration, instead. This would lead the subject to jump at the first possibility to reduce the increased frustration through violence.

Other cases related to a missing generally authoritative father who returned rarely home to exercise his authority and transpose the tension he suffers from at work on his children. Abu Abdulrahman, for example, says "my mother is the person who mainly raised us during childhood because my father was mostly absent. However, she used to take all necessary directives from my father in order to raise us appropriately". The physically absent authoritative father of Abu Abdulrahman came home rarely but when he did "he taught us not to raise our voice". The "tough" father of the 35 year old man was in the military.

Abu Fatima, for instance, tells the interviewer "there were 'some' happiness in my childhood…my father was very tough with us during childhood. He used to hit us and curse us for the slightest mistake we could do. He never forgave but punished us always".

Identity confusion was generalized among the 11 cases. Personality continuum was that of people who are shallow mostly because they did not go through identity crisis appropriately during adolescence. Subjects accepted what they were told during childhood and never experimented doubt appropriately during adolescence. Such subjects become easy preys for violence and get easily captured by violent

organizations especially when they are disguised in the dress of the moral ideal. Usually, this is facilitated through distortion of religious beliefs or their generalization as the subject cannot doubt but will rather accept what is given to him. Abu Al-Hareth, for instance, was totally shaken when his father died. The 42 years old man considers that the death of his father (although at this advanced age) "was the moment when I entered truly into life". In fact, this is a typical example of a person who never been through an appropriate identity crisis. A person who will be turned upside down at any event that would touch his internal standards. Those standards were never put under any doubt during adolescence. Rather they were copied into the personality of Abu Al-Hareth, as well as the other 10 subjects, without any questioning.

The studied cases ego was weak. It could not apply the usual "firm-but-flexible" role between Id and Superego. As Id is already inhibited since childhood, as mentioned above, Ego lended itself to an expanded superego. Subjects became preys of self doubt especially due to the lack of the image of the morally ideal person. This caused unconscious anxiety. On the other hand, rather than having a conscience focussed on what is to be considered right and wrong in a humanitarian perspective, the tribal context distorted the principles of the superego in a way to reinforce ethnocentrism around the tribe and the family. For such subjects the others became wrong and deserved annihilation. Ideological violent organizations rely a lot on such ethnocentrism. They remove such subjects from their usual environment and start manipulating them. Ethnocentrism is then applied on the new environment in which the subjects were placed, namely the violent organization, thus making all others wrong and deserving death.

CONCLUSION

The quantitative research approach brought about the different variables in the lives of the studied sample. Social, economic, as well as religious variables can be observed relatively easily during the research. The performed pilot study, however, was able to further excavate an additional variable, that of psychological preparedness. Results suggest that psychological factors stand at the basis of driving people in Deir Ezzor to join extremist organizations and are considered the primary determinant for the will of one person to become an extremist. Cultural specificity of the studied governorate seen in the tribal context creates a channel of variation in psychological preparedness as seen in the shift of the strong superego's conscience from preserving other humans to annihilating them. The combination of the prerequisite internal psychological preparedness with other mentioned external factors makes the final "magical potion" efficient for extremist organizations to draw people into joining.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Results of this pilot study were deduced from a questionnaire. They provide primary data indicating specific conclusions related to the psychological factors behind joining extremist organizations. However, a quantitative study requires a follow-up validation that can only be achieved through a qualitative process over a statistically significant sample of the population.

Therefore, it is recommended to expand the current pilot to a full research study involving larger numbers of cases. Such a study would not only confirm conclusions, as mentioned above. It would allow grouping of cases based on percentages as well. In other words, there will be a percentage for every result drawn from the study based on a statistically significant sample. An expected time frame for the quantitative research would be within a range of 6 months to 1 year.

During this time, female subjects could be approached in order to compare with available data about males. Primary results about female members of extremist groups will decide what will be the next step about this specific population. Eventually, they will either be incorporated into the expected quantitative study or they will require a separate work, depending on findings.

A separate comparative study based on the method and findings of the already performed pilot would show if results are reproducible in other areas like Raqqa and Hasakeh. This will cover north-eastern region of Syria. Results will suggest if data will later be added to the recommended quantitative study or require separate work.

Furthermore, the possibility to mirror extremist organizations as a means to prevent their development and neutralize their ability to draw people into their nets could be an effective approach that was not applied yet. An important recommendation would thus be the creation of a network of peace cells mirroring violent organizations sleeper cells. There will be sleeper peace cells able to promote ideas against terrorism on one hand, and build a network that has no clear structure able to penetrate the society more easily than any other form of anti-terrorism organization. Absence of a well-defined structure of this network of sleeper cells minimizes the ability of extremists to target the cells. It also allows easier spread of such sleeper cells because they do not make members feel the pressure on their daily life that a structured organization would lead to. This is especially noticeable with requirements of organizations in terms of writing reports and having a regularity in daily functioning. Members of such cells will feel free to act at their own pace.

Individuals will be picked up just like a recruiter would pick a potential extremist. The NGO involved in such a recruitment will be able to find such candidates during events the NGO carries, for example. Candidates for peace sleeper cells can be noticed among participants through their active interaction.
Other means of finding potential candidates will be through already established relationships with people who have been interviewed for any previous assessment or research.

Eventually, this would mean that people who could become reservoirs for later extremist organizations could become fighters for peace. And such cells can spread through what could be described as a "contagious form". The vector of the contagion will be members who already became part of the peace sleeper cells.

In order to achieve such a network, it is important to keep in mind that it should be similar to the individual terrorists developed by IS. This will involve many individuals, as many as possible, who will eventually fight ideas related to terrorism and keep increasing in numbers.

GLOSSARY

Ego: Part of the personality structure that obeys the Reality Principle which states that there should be a delayed satisfaction of basic motives until the timing and placing is appropriate. It holds a firm-but-flexible position between Id and Superego, the other constituents of the personality structure.

Ethnocentrism: The attitude taken by someone towards others who are not members of that person's society, culture, or group. This attitude considers above mentioned others to be wrong while anything right only comes from one's own culture.

Id: Part of the personality structure that obeys the Pleasure Principle which seeks satisfaction of basic motives regardless of the external situation and avoids any pain.

Identity confusion: State in which an adult seems shallow, unable to reach a clear decision, and lost at the occurrence of any event that could defy their beliefs.

Proactive interactions: Behavior of a child that grew enough to be able to start its own initiatives outside of the home environment that was created by parents.

Superego: Part of the personality structure that contains the image of the morally ideal, the conscience, and the internalized standards of the society. It is the judge that determines what is right and what is wrong.

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