

## Understanding Jihadists in their Own Words

Tackling the question of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) necessitates a thorough understanding of the psychology of its fighting force and their state of mind prior to recruitment. Literature on the organization has focused on the “who, when, and how,” leaving much to be desired with regard to the “why,” which, when it is addressed, tends to fall short in terms of personal testimonies of a sizable sample of ISIL fighters. Instead, most published accounts rely on a few isolated and/or unrepresentative encounters with ISIL detainees and defectors at best, or else on generic analyses of terrorism and counter-radicalization experts.

This White Paper edition aims at filling these gaps while also revisiting some of the more dubious narratives on ISIS’ *raison d’être* and *état d’âme*. It does not claim to be absolute or exhaustive of the full realities. Nonetheless, its relevance rests on the breadth and originality of its content. All of the findings are based on one-on-one interviews with ISIL’ and other extremist organizations’ fighters in Syria and Iraq, who are currently either detained, defected or still operating. The interviews themselves were accessed mainly through television programs on Saudi and Iraqi channels, *inter alia*, that were later transcribed into an academic categorization matrix and coding tool from which conclusions were derived. The forty-nine sampled fighters were profiled into nine categories of seekers and categorized by geographical origin: External fighters, both Western and Arab ; and internal fighters, operating in their countries of origin, *i.e.*, Iraqis in Iraq.

The study key-finding was the classification of extremist fighters into 9 categories, based on the push-factors that led them to join the ranks of ISIL and other extremist groups :

- Status Seekers (77% are local fighters): They want to improve their social standing ; their main drives are money, employment and certain recognition by others around them.
- Identity Seekers (63% are foreign fighters): Need the identity that comes from belonging to a group.
- Revenge Seekers (80% are local fighters): Consider themselves to be part of an oppressed group, and thus want to inflict harm on their oppressors and anyone who might support them (oppressors).
- Redemption Seekers: Perceive their engagement in Jihadi enterprise as a vindication from previous sinful ways of living.
- Responsibility Seekers: Value family ties and want to preserve their family’s well-being
- Thrill Seekers (67% are Arab fighters): Are filled with energy and drive. They want to prove their potential/power by accomplishing an arduous task or surviving a harrowing adventure.
- Ideology Seekers (7% of the study sample): Are mainly in search of a certain world view that they can identify with and the “Islamic Ummah” provides a pre-

packaged transnational ideology. The ideology seekers aim at “imposing” their world view on at least one other group.

- Justice Seekers : Consider what is happening in the conflict areas as a major injustice and feel they have a certain inner calling to reverse this injustice.

- Death Seekers : Have most probably suffered from a significant trauma/loss in their lives and consider death as the only way out with a reputation of martyr instead of someone who has committed suicide.

Other push factors were also detected such as : Defending Sunnis (15), Jihad (11), extremist environment (8), Being Muslim and the Syrian war (8), money (6), former prisoners (5), and being anti-Western culture.

Ultimately, this White Paper edition demystifies some existing theories on ISIL & co. For one, Islam is not the full side of the story. As the wording of the fighters suggest, Islam is a means to an end and not the end itself. Alternative, earthly pursuits seem to be the underlying end for a majority of sampled fighters. Second, ISIL is not a monolithic entity driven by ideology alone. It seems the allure of individual power and richness instigated by a context of marginalization and deprivation overrides the collective rallying behind a self-styled Ummah chronicle.

One hopes that upcoming literature on ISIL (and its cohorts) focuses more on a deeper understanding of the idea behind it, so one can understand, and hence, address it better.