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The New Foreign Fighters Trend

What motivates Europeans in general and Germans in particular to give up their comfortable life to join ISIL ?

This new phenomenon caused a public outcry since it arose in Germany four years ago, pushing everyone to wonder about the identity of those who head off to foreign countries to join armed fighters in their battle. Even political authorities were baffled by this new trend.

Today and after 4 years, we can say that we still have little insight about this phenomenon, as reality shows that the legion of foreign fighters includes persons with varied and often overlapping motives, coming from a range of economic and socio-cultural backgrounds and do not fit one stereotype.

Hence, we stopped asking about their identity, trying instead to elucidate their motives and considerations.

– One theory says that they suffer from mental illness and their personalities are weak. However, the field studies have showed the invalidity of this theory, since the majority of those who join the ranks of extremist movements are not mentally unstable.

– Another theory says that they do not suffer from mental illness but rather from neurosis, especially depression. Once again, reality has shown the invalidity of this interpretation.

– A third theory says that the reason behind this phenomenon lies in the manhood psyche, mentality and way of thinking, in terms of his strive for wars, power, adventure, bragging and fame etc... Here too, there is no conclusive evidence proving the validity of this theory.

– A fourth reasonable theory, Situation of Radical Change Theory, talks about young people joining extremist movements during a turning point in their lives (trauma). When a significant turning point event occurs in someone's life, he becomes weak and vulnerable to recruitment attempts. However, despite the logic behind this theory, it is not inclusive and totally effective in explaining foreign fighters' motivations.

We still have poor insight into the phenomenon of violent extremism in the West, and it is likely impossible to fully understand this ambiguous occurrence in light of the complexity of human psychology. In Germany, we are still at square one and need to share experiences with other European countries in order to tackle this issue.