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ISIS IN THE WEST

THE NEW FACES OF EXTREMISM

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I. INTRODUCTION

On Friday, November 13, 2015, France had its 9/11. At least 129 people were killed at multiple locations in and around Paris, including a concert hall, a soccer stadium, and a popular restaurant, the kinds of venues that ordinary Parisians flock to on a Friday night. At, or near, these venues the attackers deployed a mix of terrorist tactics, including multiple suicide attackers, an assault using more than one gunman willing to fight to the death, hostage-taking, and bombings. In the years after 9/11, we have seen various forms of this terrible news story play out before: the multiple bombs on trains in Madrid that killed 191 in 2004; a year later, the four suicide bombings in London that killed 52 commuters; the attacks in Mumbai by 10 gunmen willing to fight to the death in 2008, who killed 166; and the *Charlie Hebdo* attack in Paris in January 2015 that killed 12 people. The attackers in Paris seemed to have learned lessons from all these attacks.



France's *Libération* newspaper on Saturday, November 14, 2015, a day after terrorist attacks killed at least 129 in Paris. Photo adapted from image by Fotologic/Flickr. Used under a Creative Commons license.

French President Francois Hollande blamed ISIS for the Paris attacks. It is still early in the investigation, but already leading media outlets are reporting that as many as six French nationals who have been identified as among the perpetrators of the attacks had traveled to Syria, while one of the leaders of

the attack is a Belgian citizen who also spent time in Syria.¹ According to French prosecutors, one of the attackers identified by fingerprints is a French national known to police, and a Syrian passport was found on one of the bodies of the attackers.²

New America collected information about 474 individuals from 25 Western countries who have been reported by credible news sources as having left their home countries to join ISIS or other Sunni jihadist groups in Syria or Iraq

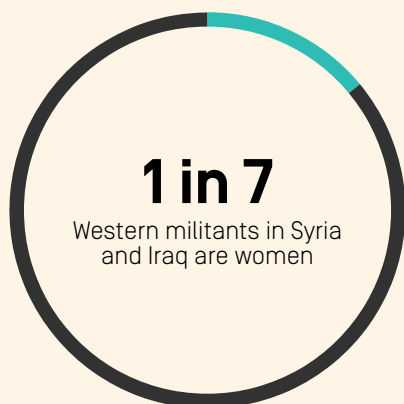
Hitherto, the only case of a Western fighter in Syria returning and conducting a deadly terror attack in the West was French citizen Mehdi Nemmouche, who is accused in the May 24, 2014, shooting at the Jewish Museum in Brussels, Belgium, that left four people dead. Returning militants like Nemmouche are a worrying source of terror attacks. And two major factors place Europe at far greater risk of “returnee” violence from veterans of the Syrian conflict than the United States—the much larger number of European militants who have gone to fight in Syria and the existence of more developed jihadist networks in Europe.

So who exactly are the estimated 4,500 Westerners who have been drawn to join ISIS and other militant groups in Syria and how great of a threat do they pose? In order to provide some answers to that question, New America collected information on 474 individuals from 25 Western countries who have been reported by credible news sources as having left their home countries to join ISIS or other Sunni jihadist groups in Syria or Iraq.*

*Information gathered on each individual includes their name, age, gender, country of origin, last known location, group they joined or attempted to join, their current status (dead, at large, in custody, etc.), familial ties to jihad, and social media use. The data was last updated November 16, 2015.

II. KEY FINDINGS

- **Western fighters in Syria and Iraq represent a new demographic profile, quite different from that of other Western militants who had fought in Afghanistan in the 1980s or Bosnia in the 1990s.**
- **Women are represented in unprecedented numbers.** One in seven of the individuals in New America's dataset are women. Women were rarely if at all represented among militants in previous jihadist conflicts.



25

Average age of male Western militants in Syria and Iraq

21

Average age of female Western militants in Syria and Iraq

- **They are young.** The average age for individuals in New America's dataset is 24. For female recruits, the average age is 21. Almost one-fifth of New America's sample are teenagers, more than a third of whom are female.
- **They are active online.** Almost a third of the foreign fighters in New America's dataset were reported either to have been active in online jihadist circles or to have radicalized via interaction online. However, there continue to be cases of in-person recruitment.
- **Many have familial ties to jihadism.** One-third of Western fighters have a familial connection to jihad, whether through relatives currently fighting in Syria or Iraq, marriage, or some other link to jihadists from prior conflicts or attacks. Of those with a familial link, almost two-thirds have a relative fighting in this conflict and almost one-third are connected through marriage, many of them new marriages conducted after arriving in Syria.

- **The Americans drawn to the Syrian jihad—250 have tried or have succeeded in getting to Syria, according to official estimates—share the same profile as the Western fighters overall: Women are well-represented, and volunteers are young, they are active online, and many have family ties to jihad.** One in six of the Americans involved in Syria-related violence are women. The average age of American militants is 25, with one-fifth still in their teens. Almost nine out of 10 of the Americans are active in online jihadist circles.
- **Almost two-fifths of Western fighters in New America’s dataset have been reported as dead in Syria or Iraq.** Almost half of the male foreign fighters and 6 percent of female militants have been killed.
- **The threat to the United States from returning fighters is low and will likely be manageable.** So far, no “returnee” has committed violence in the United States and only one returnee has been arrested for plotting a domestic attack. Of the 23 Americans identified by New America who reached Syria, nine have died, nine are at large, and five are in custody.
- **The United States will have to remain aware of the threat from non-American returnees - many of whom come from countries that are part of the United States’ visa waiver program.**
- **ISIS-inspired violence will pose the most likely threat to the United States.**
- **The threat from returning fighters to Europe is much greater than the threat to the United States.**
- **Few of the Western fighters who have traveled to Syria or Iraq are in government custody.** Only one-seventh of Western fighters in New America’s dataset are in custody and over two-fifths of the individuals are still at large, presumably in Syria or Iraq. (Almost all of the remaining two-fifths have been reported as dead.)
- **The most popular route to Syria is through Turkey.** Forty-two percent of the Western foreign fighters made their way to Syria or Iraq via Turkey. Only one has been documented as using an alternative route—via Lebanon. For the rest of the Western militants, it’s not clear from the public record how they arrived in Syria.
- **The majority of Western fighters have joined ISIS.** Only one-tenth have joined Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Qaeda’s Syrian affiliate, and only 6 percent have joined other smaller groups.

How are Western Foreign Fighters Reaching Syria?

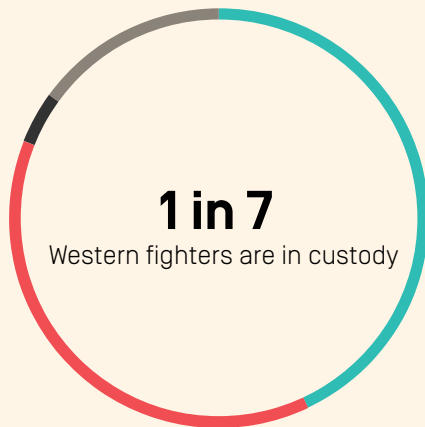


42.4%
Via Turkey [201 of 474]

0.2%
Via Lebanon [1 of 474]

57.6%
Unknown [273 of 474]

The Status of Western Foreign Fighters



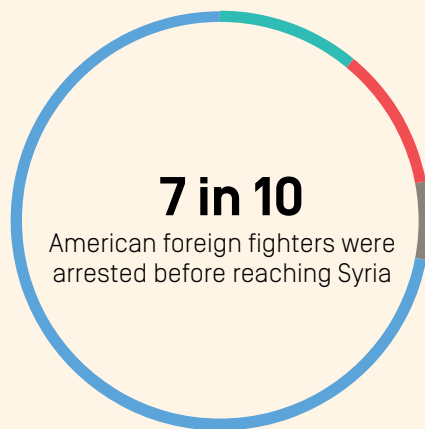
43%
At large [205 of 474]

38%
Dead [180 of 474]

4%
Returned and outside custody [16 of 474]

15%
In custody [73 of 474]

The Status of American Foreign Fighters



11%
At large [9 of 83]

11%
Dead [9 of 83]

6%
Returned and in custody [5 of 83]

72%
Arrested before reaching Syria [60 of 83]

III. WHO ARE THE WEST'S FOREIGN FIGHTERS?

Any assessment of the threat to the West posed by foreign fighters in the Syrian conflict must begin with an examination of who the fighters are. New America gathered names and information for 474 Western fighters from 25 Western countries: Albania (4), Australia (34), Austria (6), Belgium (91), Bosnia (4), Canada (25), Denmark (12), Finland (4), France (43), Germany (28), Ireland (7), Italy (5), Kosovo (3), Luxembourg, (2) Macedonia (4), Montenegro (1), Netherlands (29), New Zealand (1), Norway (12), Serbia (2), Spain (2), Sweden (20), Switzerland (2), the United Kingdom (106), and the United States (27).

A. Gender

Women are represented in unprecedented numbers. One in seven of the militants in New America's dataset are women. While Western women are not going to fight in the war in Syria, they are playing supporting roles, often marrying frontline fighters and sometimes working as a kind of police officers enforcing ISIS's draconian laws.

These are women like Sally Jones from the United Kingdom, who traveled to Syria in 2013 to join ISIS and her husband Junaid Hussain, another British foreign fighter and Emilie Konig who left France behind in 2012 to join ISIS. Both Jones and Konig were designated as foreign terrorist fighters by the United States.³ Other cases of women leaving including 20-year-old Minnesotan Yusra Ismail who is charged with stealing a friend's passport allegedly enabling her to travel to Syria in August 2014 and U.K. medical students Lena Maumoon Abdulqadir, Nada Sami Kader, and Rowan Kamal Zine El Abidine, who reportedly left for Syria in March 2015.⁴

Comparatively, in a New America dataset of Americans who have been charged with jihadist terrorism crimes between the attacks of September 11, 2001, and the start of the Syrian civil war, fewer than 5 percent were women.⁵ Thomas Hegghammer, in his 2013 study of Western foreign fighters between 1990 and 2010 in Bosnia, Somalia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and elsewhere, wrote: "Practically all Western jihadists are male."⁶

B. Age

Western foreign fighters in Syria are young, with an average age of 24. The women who have left for Syria are even younger; the average age of female militants is 21 and ranges between 15 and 44 years old. Men are reported to have joined between the ages of 13 and 68 with an average age of 25.

New America had documented 89 cases of teenagers who went to fight in Syria, constituting almost a fifth of the Westerners who have gone. More than a third of these teenagers are girls. Hans-Georg Maassen, the head of Germany's domestic security agency, said in March 2015 that nine female German minors left for Syria and that of 70 confirmed cases of women leaving, 40 percent were under 25.⁷ Discussing the arrest of 19-year-old American Mohammed Hamzah Khan, who was charged with attempting to join ISIS in Syria, a senior U.S. official told the *Washington Post*: "You will see more young and juvenile cases in the future."⁸

ISIS makes no secret of its exploitation of teenagers and even children, featuring them in propaganda. One ISIS propaganda video titled "Cubs of the Khilafah" features images of children receiving military training and religious teaching.⁹ For a December 2014 documentary reporting from within ISIS-held territory and guided by an ISIS press officer, *Vice* recorded interviews and footage of fighters, including at least one Westerner, and their children involved in indoctrination; the accompanying press officer, Abu Mosa, proudly claimed that children 15 and younger attend indoctrination camps while those 16 or older are allowed to fight.¹⁰ Abu Mosa told the *Vice* reporter that those over the age of 16 participate in military operations "because Usama Ibn Zaid [the adopted son of the Prophet Mohammed] led an army when he was 17 or 18 years old."¹¹

Children younger than 16 have been involved in violence, including acting as executioners. In March 2015, ISIS released a video of a French child shooting a Palestinian hostage in the forehead.¹²

C. Active Online

Almost a third of the foreign fighters in New America’s dataset were reported either to have been active in online jihadist circles or to have radicalized via interaction online.

ISIS relies on a multifaceted online strategy to recruit and advise potential foreign fighters and supporters. This includes both active efforts by individuals with social media accounts to recruit and organize other individuals as well as a more broad-based dissemination of propaganda. In the fall of 2014, J.M. Berger and Jonathon Morgan estimated that there were “no fewer than 46,000 Twitter accounts supporting ISIS” overtly and a maximum of 90,000 ISIS supporter accounts on Twitter.¹³

ISIS relies on active efforts by individuals with social media accounts to recruit and organize other individuals as well as a more broad-based dissemination of propaganda

New America has identified several individuals acting as online recruiters based on court records and press reports. Sometimes these individuals are involved in recruiting strangers and sometimes they recruit individuals with whom they share previous in-person or even familial ties. Among the individuals reported as having engaged in online recruitment activity are several Americans:

- Mujahid Miski, believed to be American Muhammed Abdullahi Hassan, who was charged with leaving to fight for al-Shabaab, al-Qaeda’s Somali affiliate, along with several other Somali-Americans from Minnesota.¹⁴ In 2015, Miski interacted with Elton Simpson, one of the shooters in the May 2015 attack on the Mohammed cartoon drawing contest in Garland, Texas, via Twitter urging violence against the event.¹⁵ At one point, Simpson and Miski reportedly shared direct messages via Twitter—a form of communication on the platform that is not public.¹⁶
- Abdi Nur, who is charged with having left to fight in Syria, took on the role of online recruiter after leaving for Syria. A complaint charging six other Minnesota men with trying to join ISIS accuses Nur of acting as an online recruiter and providing encouragement and advice to the men via Kik and other platforms from Syria.¹⁷
- Hoda Muthana, a 20-year-old American woman from Alabama, was identified by BuzzFeed as the individual behind the Twitter account “Umm Jihad,” which encouraged individuals to leave for Syria.¹⁸
- Abdifatah Aden, who lived in Columbus, Ohio, until he left in May 2013 for Syria, where he died fighting for Nusra, helped recruit his brother Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud and guided him into Syria in April 2014 by communicating privately online according to the criminal complaint charging Mohamud with providing material support to terrorists.¹⁹
- Ali Shukri Amin, a 17-year-old Northern Virginia high school student who ran a pro-ISIS Twitter account which provided in-depth technical information on anonymization techniques as well as promoting his jihadist ideas.²⁰ Amin pleaded guilty to putting his 18-year-old friend Reza Niknejad in contact with an ISIS supporter outside the United States using surespot, an encrypted messaging tool; that individual help facilitate Niknejad’s successful travel to Syria.²¹

There are also a number of Britons reported as having engaged in online recruitment activity:

- Junaid Hussain, a 20-year-old British hacker who is believed to have left in 2013 for Syria was reportedly engaged in online recruiting of hackers for the CyberCaliphate, the group that hacked the Pentagon’s Twitter account in January 2015.²² Hussain, who was killed in a U.S. airstrike in August 2015, was among those with whom Elton Simpson interacted with on Twitter prior to the attack in Garland, Texas.²³
- Aqsa Mahmood, a 20-year-old British woman, left for Syria in 2013 and became a prominent online recruiter for ISIS.²⁴ On one of her Twitter accounts she tweeted: “Wallah one of the things most loved to me is when a sister sincerely kiks me because she wants me to help her make hijrah [pilgrimage for jihad].”²⁵

Other individuals have been identified either anonymously or pseudonymously. For example, an unnamed co-conspirator is mentioned in the court

documents in the case of Shannon Conley, a 19-year-old Colorado woman, who pleaded guilty in 2014 to conspiring to join ISIS.²⁶ According to the plea, the man, who identified himself as a fighter in Syria, met Conley online and the two planned to become engaged.²⁷

However, not all recruitment relies upon social media and online communication. The United Nations Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team noted in their 2015 report on jihadist groups that “most Member States indicate that direct personal contact remains a core ingredient of most radicalization and recruitment processes for foreign terrorist fighters.”²⁸

Indeed, New America identified several cases in which in-person recruitment played an important role. For example, Jejoen Bontinck, a 19-year-old Belgian traveled to Syria as a result of ties he developed to the Sharia4Belgium radical Islamist group through a neighbor.²⁹ Bontinck was eventually invited to visit the headquarters of Sharia4Belgium where he attended a 24-week ideological training program that included watching videos by American radical cleric Anwar al-Awlaki.³⁰ Bontinck began to spend most of his time with members of Sharia4Belgium while the group deliberately sought to isolate him from his parents.³¹ Bontinck reportedly left for Syria after receiving a call from a neighbor who was now in Syria.³² Bontinck’s story provides a reminder that while online social media in many ways defines recruiting in the West by ISIS and other Syrian militant groups, physical in-person networks continue to operate in some locations.

D. Familial Ties With Other Jihadists

Over a third of the Westerner fighters have a familial connection to jihad, whether through relatives currently fighting in Syria or Iraq, marriage, or some other link to jihadists from prior conflicts or terrorist attacks.

Of those with a familial link, almost one-third are through marriage, many of them new marriages conducted after arriving in Syria.

Almost two-thirds of Western fighters with familial ties to jihad are individuals who have a relative who has also left for Syria. For example, the Deghayes family in the United Kingdom had three sons leave for Syria

where the oldest told their father he joined Jabhat al-Nusra.³³

A much smaller group—fewer than one in 12—were related to jihadists from prior conflicts or attacks. For example: Frenchman Abdelouahab el-Baghdadi, whose brother-in-law Mohammed Merah killed seven people in a 2012 attack on Toulouse and Montauban, was arrested and accused of joining militants in Syria; and Briton ISIS recruit Abdel-Majed Abdel Bary, whose father, Adel Abdel Bary, was convicted for the 1998 U.S. embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania.³⁴

E. The American Profile

The Americans drawn to the Syrian jihad—250 have tried or have succeeded in getting to Syria, according to FBI Director James Comey—share the same profile as the Western fighters overall: Women are well-represented, and volunteers are young, they are active online, and many have family ties to jihad.³⁵

New America examined a broader sample of 83 Americans who traveled to Syria or Iraq to fight, or attempted or plotted to do so, or provided support to others traveling or seeking to travel to Syria.

More than one in six of the Americans were women. Among the women were three teenage girls from Colorado, who reportedly sought to join ISIS but were stopped in Germany and returned to the United States after their fathers reported them missing; Shannon Conley, a 19-year-old also from Colorado who was arrested after plotting to travel to Syria to join a foreign fighter she had met online; and Hoda Muthana, a 20-year-old Alabama woman who succeeded in traveling to Syria and then helped ISIS’s online recruitment efforts.³⁶

The average age of the Americans involved in Syria was 25 and more than a fifth of the sample were teenagers. They include Conley; the three girls from Colorado; Mohammed Hamzah Khan, a 19-year-old who pleaded guilty to attempting to join ISIS in Syria; and his younger brother and sister, who allegedly joined him in the effort but were not charged.³⁷

Online activity was ubiquitous among the Americans, with almost nine in 10 being active in online jihadist circles.

Beyond the increasing representation of women and teens and the ubiquitous online activity, little in the way of a profile ties the Americans in Syria together, posing a fundamental challenge for law enforcement. Those accused of being involved in Syria include Joshua Van Haften, a 34-year-old white man and registered sex offender from Wisconsin; Hoda Muthana, the 20-year-old Alabama woman from a Yemeni-American family; and Tairod Pugh, a 47-year-old African-American convert to Islam who once served in the Air Force.³⁸ Among the 83 American citizens and residents there is no ethnic profile – they are Caucasian, Somali-American, Vietnamese-American, Bosnian-American, and Arab-American, among other ethnicities and nationalities.

Americans drawn to the militant groups fighting in the Syrian conflict hail from all over the United States. According to FBI Director James Comey, the FBI is investigating cases in all 50 states.³⁹ Among the 83 individuals in the United States there were residents of 21 states: Alabama, Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Texas, Virginia, and Wisconsin.

This is in sharp contrast to an earlier wave of jihadist recruitment from the States that began in 2007, in which a cohort of U.S. militants were drawn to the Somalia civil war and fought alongside the Somali terrorist group al-Shabaab. Those militants were overwhelmingly Somali-Americans, most of whom were from Minnesota.

F. Death Rate

For Western militants, the wars engulfing Syria and Iraq have often proven deadly. Almost half of the male fighters and 6 percent of the female recruits have been killed in Syria or Iraq.

In total, more than one-third of the individuals in our dataset have been reported as dead in Syria or Iraq. Few countries report the number of foreign fighters who have died, but among those that do the death rates have generally been around 8 to 18 percent, with some countries having even higher death rates.

The difference in death rates between the genders is unsurprising, as women do not take part in combat. According to an ISIS female recruit: “There is not a single woman fighting in IS. The woman’s place is in

her house looking after her kids and fulfilling her duty to her husband.”⁴⁰ Given that women are not fighting on the front lines for ISIS, that 6 percent of them are still reported to have died illustrates how dangerous Syria is for Western fighters.

There are many contributing factors to the high death toll for individuals fighting in Syria. ISIS reportedly uses foreign fighters as cannon fodder, placing them on the front lines in Syria and utilizing them as suicide bombers.⁴⁹ Coalition airstrikes have reportedly killed 10,000 ISIS fighters.⁵⁰

ISIS has also reportedly executed foreign fighters who sought to return home. In December 2014, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights claimed that ISIS had executed 116 foreign fighters who had sought to return home.⁵¹ In 2015, ISIS released a video showing a child shooting Mohamed Musallam, a 19-year-old Palestinian citizen of Israel who ISIS claimed was an Israeli spy—a claim Musallam’s family denies, saying he was instead a foreign fighter who was killed after he sought to leave the group.⁵²

G. How Many Are at Large?

Few of the Western fighters who have traveled to Syria or Iraq are in government custody. Only one-seventh of the Western militants in New America’s dataset are in custody and over two-fifths of the individuals are still at large. And almost all of the remaining two-fifths have been reported as dead. A small percentage—3 percent—returned home without being taken into custody.









H. How Do They Reach Syria?

The most popular route to Syria is through Turkey. Forty-two percent of the Western foreign fighters made their way to Syria or Iraq via Turkey. Only one of the militants is documented as using an alternative route—via Lebanon. For the rest of the Western militants, it’s not clear from the public record how they arrived in Syria.

I. Who Are They Affiliated With?

Where an affiliation can be determined, the majority of the Western fighters have joined ISIS: Over three-fifths have joined ISIS, while one tenth have joined al Qaeda’s affiliate in Syria, known as the Nusra Front, and 6 percent have joined other smaller militant groups.

Table 1: Foreign Fighter Death Rates

COUNTRY	OFFICIAL DEATH COUNT	OFFICIAL COUNT OF FOREIGN FIGHTERS	DEATH RATE
 AUSTRALIA ⁴¹	20	110	18.2%
 DENMARK ⁴²	19	115	16.5%
 FINLAND ⁴³	6	50	12.0%
 FRANCE ⁴⁴	119	1,450	8.2%
 GERMANY ⁴⁵	100	720	13.9%
 NETHERLANDS ⁴⁶	21	180	11.7%
 NORWAY ⁴⁷	15	80	18.8%
 SWITZERLAND ⁴⁸	8	25	32.0%

IV. WHAT THREAT DO THEY POSE TO THE UNITED STATES?

The threat to the United States from returning fighters is low and will likely be manageable. So far, no returnee from the Syrian conflict has conducted an attack in the United States. However, the United States will have to remain aware of the threat from non-American returnees—many of whom come from countries that are part of the United States' visa waiver program. ISIS-inspired violence will pose the most likely threat to the United States.

Four years into the Syrian civil war, there is little evidence that American foreign fighters pose a significant threat of returning to conduct attacks inside the United States. Of the 83 Americans drawn to the Syrian war, only 23 actually reached Syria. For 46 of the 83 American cases, their attempts to reach Syria did not succeed. In 14 cases the activity consisted of providing support to others fighting in Syria or seeking to fight there.

Of the 23 Americans who managed to reach Syria, nine died there. For example, Floridian Moner Abu Salha died in 2014 conducting a suicide bombing in northern Syria (he made a brief return to the United States before traveling back to Syria to conduct the suicide attack).⁵³ Douglas McAuthur McCain, a Muslim convert from California, was killed fighting for ISIS in a battle against the Free Syrian Army.⁵⁴ A third American, Massachusetts man Ahmad Abousamra was reportedly killed in an Iraqi airstrike while he was fighting for ISIS.⁵⁵

Nine Americans remain at large.

Five Americans have returned and been taken into custody. In only one of these cases, that of Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud, a 23-year-old Ohio man, is the returnee accused of plotting an attack inside the United States. Much remains unclear about Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud's case, complicating efforts to determine how serious the plot was. Court documents allege that Mohamud exchanged communications with his brother Abdifatah Aden, who left in May 2013 for Syria, where he later died

fighting for Nusra. On April 18, 2014, Mohamud left the United States and fought in Syria before returning to the United States two months later.⁵⁶ The government alleges that a cleric in Syria told Mohamud that he should return to the United States to conduct an act of terrorism.⁵⁷ Mohamud allegedly discussed a desire to kill American soldiers execution-style at a military base in Texas, and he went to a firing range to practice shooting, though his defense attorney says there is no evidence that he sought to stockpile weapons.⁵⁸ Mohamud came to the government's attention before he left for Syria and the FBI tried to intervene to prevent him from traveling overseas.⁵⁹ After his return to the United States, he was monitored by an informant, leading to his arrest.⁶⁰ In addition, the owner of the gun range where he practiced shooting reportedly provided a tip to the police.⁶¹ He has pleaded not guilty.

Four years into the Syrian civil war, there is little evidence that American foreign fighters pose a significant threat of returning to conduct attacks inside the United States

Four other American fighters returned to the United States from Syria and were taken into custody. Eric Harroun returned to the United States after discussions with American officials.⁶² He was arrested and charged with conspiring to use rocket-propelled grenades that he claimed to have fired in Syria.⁶³ In a second case, Sinh Vinh Ngo Nguyen, who had returned from Syria where he fought with Nusra, al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate, was arrested in an informant-led operation and pleaded guilty to a terrorism charge in December 2013.⁶⁴

In a third case, Mohamad Saeed Kodaimati was arrested and charged with making false statements involving international terrorism.⁶⁵ According to the complaint, Kodaimati, a naturalized American citizen,

had worked with a sharia court in Syria that involved working with ISIS and other militant groups and had participated in an attack in coordination with Jabhat al-Nusra and then lied about it to American officials.⁶⁶ Kodaimati was interviewed by government officials prior to his return to the United States, monitored after his return, and arrested a month after returning to the United States.⁶⁷ Kodaimati pleaded guilty to lying to the FBI in October 2015.⁶⁸

In a fourth case, Bilal Abood, a naturalized American citizen from Iraq, was arrested and charged with making false statements regarding never having pledged allegiance to ISIS.⁶⁹ Abood had been on the government's radar since at least 2013, when it stopped him from traveling to his native Iraq and in an interview he admitted planning to fight with the Free Syrian Army.⁷⁰ On a subsequent trip in 2013, Abood did successfully travel to Syria, spending time at an armed opposition camp, though he denies supporting either ISIS.⁷¹ In July 2014, the FBI searched Abood's computer, finding a pledge of allegiance to ISIS's leader on Twitter.⁷² Ten months later, in the wake of the attack in Garland, Texas, the FBI arrested Abood.⁷³ Abood pleaded guilty to one count of making a false statement to the FBI in October 2015.⁷⁴

These cases do not paint a picture of a highly organized returnee threat inside the United States. Indeed, speaking before the Council on Foreign Relations in March 2015, Director of National Intelligence James Clapper said that about 40 individuals had returned from Syria, and: "We have since found they went for humanitarian purposes or some other reason that don't relate to plotting."⁷⁵

Floridian Moner Abu Salha managed to travel to Syria and train with Jabhat al-Nusra before returning undetected to the United States in 2013

However, one case in particular does raise real concern regarding existing security measures. Floridian Moner Abu Salha managed to travel to Syria and train with Jabhat al-Nusra before returning undetected to the United States in 2013.⁷⁶ Rather than preparing an attack in the United States, Abu Salha returned to Syria after unsuccessfully trying to recruit a few friends to join him, and died conducting a suicide bombing against the troops of Syrian leader

Bashar al-Assad.⁷⁷ Abu Salha's undetected return presents an important warning sign, particularly as the November 13, 2015 mass-casualty attacks in Paris represent an increased intention on the part of ISIS to emphasize external attacks rather than the acquisition of more fighters to serve in the Syrian civil war.

However, even in the case of Moner Abu Salha, which is certainly not a success story—given his undetected return to the United States after training with an al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria—when he started to try to recruit Americans to go to Syria, a tip put him on the government's radar, revealing the many defenses that undetected returnees must still navigate if they are to plot an attack inside the United States.⁷⁸

In assessing the threat posed by returning American fighters, it is worth putting the current Syrian conflict into historical perspective. While it was the Afghan war against the Soviets and the ensuing civil war that caused thousands of foreign fighters to flock to Afghanistan—and helped launch Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda—much has changed since then that makes it a weak comparison for how "blowback" from foreign jihads might affect Western countries.⁷⁹ For example, on 9/11, there were 16 people on the U.S. "no fly" list.⁸⁰ Today, there are about 48,000 people.⁸¹ In 2001, there were 32 Joint Terrorism Task Force "fusion centers," where multiple law enforcement agencies work together to chase down leads and build terrorism cases.⁸² Now there are 104 centers.⁸³ A decade ago, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, National Counterterrorism Center, Transportation Security Administration, Northern Command, and Cyber Command didn't exist. In 2014, all of these new post-9/11 institutions make it much harder for terrorists to operate in the United States. The U.S. intelligence budget also grew dramatically after 9/11, with Congress giving the government substantial resources with which to improve its counterterrorism capabilities. In 2013, the United States allocated \$72 billion to intelligence collection and other covert activities.⁸⁴ Before 9/11, the budget was around one-third of that figure: \$26 billion.⁸⁵

Perhaps of most relevance to the issue of returning fighters is that prior to 9/11, the law enforcement community demonstrated little interest in investigating or prosecuting individuals who traveled abroad to fight in an overseas jihad.⁸⁶

A post-9/11 American fighter flow to jihadist groups abroad that sparked fears but turned out to be

an exaggerated threat to the United States was al-Shabaab's recruitment of American fighters to wage war in Somalia. According to a review by New America, no American fighter who fought in the conflict in Somalia returned to plot an attack in the United States.⁸⁷ Instead, about one-third of the individuals known to have traveled to fight in Somalia died there, either as suicide bombers or on the battlefield, while others were taken into custody upon their return.⁸⁸

Many fighters from countries other than the United States have traveled to fight in Syria and could pose a potential threat to the United States

There are, however, counterexamples of returning militants to the United States since 9/11 who attempted serious attacks. The United States' experience with Americans fighting or training in Pakistan provides an illustration of what a more serious returnee threat might look like. Najibullah Zazi, Adis Medunjanin, and Zarein Ahmedzay, who all grew up in New York City, traveled to Pakistan, where they ended up receiving training from al-Qaeda, and were sent back to the United States in January 2009 where they were part of a serious plot to bomb the New York City subway in the fall of 2009.⁸⁹ On May 1, 2010, Connecticut-based Faisal Shahzad, who was trained in bomb-making techniques in Pakistan by the Pakistani Taliban, left a car bomb undetected in New York City's Times Square that failed to properly explode.⁹⁰

Threat to the United States by Non-American Returnees

Many fighters from countries other than the United States have traveled to fight in Syria and could pose a potential threat to the United States. So far we have not seen a case of a foreign fighter from another country traveling to the United States to conduct an attack; however, it is not beyond the realm of possibility. Since 9/11, two of the most serious al-Qaeda plots against the United States have been infiltration attacks from abroad—the 2001 attempt to bring down a U.S. airliner by British “shoe bomber” Richard Reid and the 2009 Christmas Day bombing attempt against another U.S. airliner by Nigerian “underwear bomber” Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab.

The large number of foreign fighters traveling to fight in Syria from other countries magnifies the potential threat of an infiltration attack, especially given the high numbers of foreign fighters from countries that enjoy the “visa waiver” program with the United States, such as Australia, Belgium, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. The program allows citizens of participating countries to enter the United States without a visa.

Tracking the many foreign fighters from Western countries who have gone to Syria and have returned to the West poses a greater challenge, given their larger numbers, than tracking the handful of returning American fighters.

The ISIS-Inspired Homegrown Threat

Acts of violence by individuals with no direct connection to the terrorist groups in Syria but who are inspired by them pose a more immediate challenge than attacks by returning fighters. As FBI Director James Comey noted in September 2014 while referring to the arrest of Terry Loewen, who radicalized online and was accused of plotting an attack on Wichita Airport in Kansas: “We have made it so hard for people to get into this country, bad guys, but they can enter as a photon and radicalize somebody in Wichita, Kansas.”⁹¹ At the time, Comey also noted that ISIS lacked the capability for a sophisticated attack in the United States.⁹²

On May 3, 2015, the United States saw its first actual attack inspired by ISIS along the lines of similar ISIS-inspired attacks in Ottawa, Copenhagen, and Paris.⁹³ Two men were killed by police after opening fire at a contest to draw cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed in Garland, Texas. The event was organized by the American Freedom Defense Initiative and featured right-wing Dutch politician Geert Wilders, who had been named on an al-Qaeda hit list. One of the shooters, Elton Simpson, had been convicted in 2011 of making a false statement to the FBI regarding plans to travel to Somalia. Before conducting the attack, Simpson tweeted his allegiance to ISIS.⁹⁴ Simpson, a 30-year-old resident of Phoenix, Arizona, who was born in Illinois and converted to Islam during his youth, was joined in the attack by his roommate Nadir Soofi, a 34-year-old who was born in Garland.⁹⁵

While the United States has had only one possible case of a domestic attack plot by a returned fighter

from Syria (that of Mohamad), it has seen a number of plots that were inspired by ISIS.

- In January 2015, the United States filed a criminal complaint charging Christopher Lee Cornell in relation to an alleged plot to attack the U.S. Capitol.⁹⁶ According to the complaint, Cornell posted material supportive of ISIS online, which led to his eventual arrest.⁹⁷ He has pleaded not guilty.
- In February 2015, the United States charged three Brooklyn men with conspiring to provide material support to ISIS, and in the complaint alleged that the men had discussed potential attacks inside the United States.⁹⁸ Two other men were charged in April and June 2015 for helping to fund other group members' alleged plans to travel to fight in Syria.⁹⁹
- In March 2015, the United States unsealed charges against Hasan Edmonds, a 22-year-old member of the National Guard, and his cousin Jonas Edmonds, alleging that Hasan Edmonds had sought to travel to fight with ISIS and that the two had plotted to have Jonas Edmonds conduct an attack against a military facility in the United States.¹⁰⁰ They have pleaded not guilty.
- In April 2015, the United States charged John T. Booker and Alexander Blair with an alleged plot to bomb Fort Riley, in Kansas, in support of ISIS.¹⁰¹ They have pleaded not guilty.
- The same month, the United States charged two New York City women, Noelle Velentzas and Asia Siddiqui, in relation to a domestic attack plot in support of ISIS.¹⁰² According to the complaint, Siddiqui had regular contact with members of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.¹⁰³ When FBI agents arrested Velentzas and Siddiqui in Queens, they seized propane tanks, soldering tools, a pressure cooker, fertilizer, and bomb-making instructions.¹⁰⁴ They have pleaded not guilty.
- Also in April, the United States filed a complaint charging Miguel Moran Diaz, a 46-year-old resident of Miami, with possessing a firearm as a felon.¹⁰⁵ The complaint alleges that he discussed conducting an attack in support of ISIS.¹⁰⁶ The investigation involved an informant.¹⁰⁷ Diaz pleaded guilty and was sentenced to 10 years in prison.¹⁰⁸
- On June 2, 2015, Boston police shot and killed Usaamah Rahim, a 26-year-old Massachusetts resident who had a knife when the officers approached him.¹⁰⁹ The exact circumstances of the encounter are disputed.¹¹⁰ Rahim had been

under 24-hour surveillance as part of a terrorism investigation into his activity.¹¹¹ On June 3, the United States filed a criminal complaint charging David Wright, a 25-year-old relative of Rahim's, with conspiracy with intent to obstruct a federal investigation by destroying evidence.¹¹² The complaint alleged that Wright and Rahim had plotted to behead Pamela Geller, the organizer of the Garland, Texas, cartoon drawing contest, but that Rahim had become impatient and planned to attack police officers in Massachusetts. On June 12, the United States filed a second criminal complaint adding Nicholas Rovinski, a 24-year-old Rhode Island man who met Wright online last year, to the alleged conspiracy and charging Wright and Rovinski with conspiring to provide material support to ISIS through the plot.¹¹³ Wright and Rovinski have pleaded not guilty.

- On July 4, 2015, the United States arrested Alex Ciccolo, a 23-year-old Massachusetts resident and son of a Boston police captain, and charged him with possessing firearms as a felon.¹¹⁴ Documents filed in the case allege that Ciccolo was inspired by ISIS and was plotting to conduct attacks.¹¹⁵ Ciccolo was monitored by an informant.¹¹⁶ He has pleaded not guilty.
- On July 28, 2015, the United States charged Harlem Suarez, a 23-year-old Floridian, with attempting to explode a backpack bomb at a public beach in support of ISIS.¹¹⁷ Suarez was monitored by an informant.¹¹⁸ Suarez has pleaded not guilty.

In most of the above cases, the alleged plotters were monitored by an informant or undercover officer, which suggests that U.S. law enforcement is doing a good job of staying on top of plots as they develop. However, on July 16, 2015, Mohammad Abdulazeez killed five people in shootings at two military facilities in Chattanooga, Tennessee, demonstrating that the threat of a deadly attack is real. Abdulazeez's motivation is not entirely clear and he reportedly was suicidal and wrestled with drug use.¹¹⁹ However, he also texted an Islamic verse regarding war to a friend before the attacks.¹²⁰ According to the FBI, there is no evidence that Abdulazeez was inspired by ISIS.¹²¹ He did reportedly have material linked to Anwar al-Awlaki, the American cleric who became a leader in Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.¹²² Regardless of Abdulazeez's motivation, his actions, along with the sheer number of alleged plots in the past two years and the attack in Garland, Texas, demonstrate that a deadly attack in the United States inspired by Syrian militant groups is a strong possibility.

V. THE THREAT TO THE WEST MORE BROADLY

Outside of the United States, the threat facing the West is greater, driven largely by the high number of Europeans and other Westerners who have traveled to fight in Syria and the existence of more developed jihadist networks in Europe.

Larger Numbers of Fighters

There are an estimated 4,500 Western fighters in Syria, and the 250 Americans believed to have gone to Syria or attempted to do so account for less than 6 percent of that number.¹²³

- In September 2015, French Prime Minister Manuel Valls told parliament that 1,800 French citizens and residents had been involved in jihadist networks worldwide—almost all in Syria or Iraq.¹²⁴ According to a December 2014 statement by French Interior Minister Bernard Cazeneuve, 60 were dead and 185 had returned to France.¹²⁵ Of those French fighters who returned, he said, 82 were in jail and 36 were under other forms of judicial control.
- More than 750 Britons left for Syria, with about half estimated to have returned to the United Kingdom.¹²⁶
- In August 2015, Hans-Georg Maassen, the head of Germany's domestic intelligence agency, reported that 720 Germans had left for Syria.¹²⁷ An estimated 100 have been killed and another 180 have returned to Germany.¹²⁸
- In November 2014, the Belgian Foreign Ministry estimated that 300 to 350 Belgians had left to fight in Syria.¹²⁹
- In January 2015, Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop placed the number of Australians fighting abroad at 180, with 20 having died in Syria, while intelligence agencies placed the official count at 110 only six months later.¹³⁰
- In the fall of 2014, Canadian security officials estimated that 48 Canadians were fighting with Islamists in Syria and Iraq, and by April 2015, Michel Coulombe, the head of the Canadian

intelligence service, said the number had increased 50 percent over the last three to four months.^{131*}

- Austria: In November 2014, the *Long War Journal's* Benjamin Weinthal reported that an Interior Ministry spokesman told him 150 Austrians were fighting in Syria and more than 60 had returned.¹³²
- Denmark: In August 2015, the Danish Security and Intelligence Service estimated that at least 115 Danes had left for Syria.¹³³ According to CNN's reporting, at least 16 Danes have returned.¹³⁴
- Finland: In November 2014, Finnish Security Intelligence Service Director Antti Pelttari stated that 50 Finns had left to fight in Syria and six to eight of them had died.¹³⁵ However, Finnish security officials note that their count includes some who went for humanitarian reasons.¹³⁶
- Netherlands: In January 2015, Minister of Security and Justice Ivo Opstelten reported that 180 Dutch had left for Syria and Iraq, and of those 21 had died and 35 had returned to the Netherlands.¹³⁷
- Norway: At least 80 Norwegians have left for Syria and Iraq, with at least 25 returning to Norway and 15 reportedly dead, according to the Norwegian Police Security Service in June 2015.¹³⁸
- Sweden: The head of Sweden's security police said in March 2015 that 300 Swedes were fighting in Syria and Iraq.¹³⁹
- Switzerland: There are 25 Swiss fighting in Syria and Iraq, according to estimates from the Federal Intelligence Service in 2014.¹⁴⁰

* Australia and Canada, along with the United States, share a geographic commonality that helps explain their relatively lower numbers—they are all distant from Syria and separated from the conflict zone by oceans, making it more difficult for aspiring militants to reach their intended destination in Syria, let alone return. While most Europeans can drive to the Syrian border, Americans, Australians, and Canadians must take an international flight, providing data that can be used to track and intercept them.

With the large numbers of Europeans traveling to fight in Syria, several nations including France and Germany are reporting strains on their ability to effectively monitor returnees. According to officials interviewed by the *New York Times*, each French individual placed under surveillance requires 25 agents to maintain round the clock monitoring.¹⁴¹ French terrorism expert Jean-Charles Brisard estimates that France has 3,000 to 5,000 people under surveillance and only 3,000 people to do that work.¹⁴² The strain on resources produced by ever increasing numbers of foreign fighters who need to be monitored was in part behind the failure to maintain surveillance of the Kouachi brothers, who conducted the attack on the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris.¹⁴³ Similarly, one of the attackers in the November 13, 2015, Paris attacks was already known to police.¹⁴⁴

In December 2014, German Federal Prosecutor General Harald Range stated regarding the large number of terrorism cases being prosecuted in Germany, “We are at the limits of our capacity,” adding that new cases kept emerging: “What worries me is the speed with which people are radicalizing, or being radicalized. We are facing a phenomenon which needs a broad strategy of prevention.”¹⁴⁵

More Developed Jihadist Networks

Western European countries face a greater threat than the United States because militants can draw upon more established jihadist networks that can give rise to more sophisticated and deadly attacks.

For example, in Belgium, the Sharia4Belgium radical Salafi group actively encouraged and aided members’ travel to Syria. A total of 46 group members were eventually tried in Antwerp and convicted in February 2015.¹⁴⁶ Six returnees (Bilal El Makhoukhi, Elias Taketloune, Hakim Elouassaki, Michael Delefortrie, Mohamed El Youssoufi, and Walid Lakdim) were given sentences ranging from one to five years in prison.¹⁴⁷ Returnee Jejoen Bontinck testified for the prosecution and received a 40-month suspended sentence.¹⁴⁸ An estimated 10 percent of all Belgian fighters in Syria were connected to Sharia4Belgium.¹⁴⁹

In the period prior to the November 13 attack in Paris there has been only one confirmed deadly attack in the West by a returnee. According to European officials, the early stages of the investigation into the November 13 attacks in Paris have revealed that six attackers had traveled to Syria.

In his 2013 study of Westerners who traveled to be foreign fighters in a variety of theaters of conflict, Thomas Hegghammer found that one in nine returned to conduct violence at home.¹⁵⁰ While relatively few foreign fighters tend to return to commit violence, Hegghammer’s examination of previous cases found that most plots involved at least one returnee, providing supporting evidence for the thesis that foreign fighters do increase the threat at home.¹⁵¹ This may help limit the potential for terrorist cells to form around returning foreign fighters—for the time being.

The one confirmed deadly attack in the West by a returnee from Syria until the November 13 Paris attacks was the May 24, 2014 shooting rampage at a Jewish museum in Brussels, Belgium that killed four.¹⁵² Returnee Mehdi Nemmouche was arrested around one week later by customs officials at a train station in Marseille, France, where they discovered in his luggage a Kalashnikov rifle wrapped in a sheet bearing the name ISIS, ammunition, and a tape in which he admitted to the shooting.¹⁵³ Nemmouche currently awaits trial in Belgium for murder and attempted murder.¹⁵⁴ Nemmouche, a French national, left for Syria at the age of 28 in January 2013, around one month after he was released from a five-year French prison sentence for robbery, his seventh conviction—although none were for terrorism-related crimes.¹⁵⁵ Nemmouche, whose nom de jihad was Abu Omar the Hitter, reportedly spent time as an ISIS prison guard in Aleppo where he beat and tortured hostages.¹⁵⁶ He returned to France from Syria in March 2014, despite being on French watch lists, avoiding detection by exploiting Europe’s open borders.¹⁵⁷

Prior to the Paris attacks, a total of seven returnees were either arrested for plotting violence or killed during a police raid in the Europe. Three are Belgian and four are French.

- A French returnee only known as Reda was arrested in August 2015 after spending one week in Syria, where he was instructed to carry out an attack killing as many people as possible, potentially at a concert hall.¹⁵⁸
- In Belgium, a dozen simultaneous raids in multiple cities, including Brussels and Verviers, in January 2015 were linked to a terror cell planning a major attack, and resulted in the arrests of 13 jihadists, including returnee Marouane El Bali, and the deaths of two returnees, Sofiane Amghar and Khalid Ben Larbi.¹⁵⁹ In December 2014, Amghar and Larbi had returned to Belgium after half a year

in Syria fighting with ISIS.¹⁶⁰ The two were under 24-hour surveillance by Belgium's secret service upon their return in an investigation that involved other members of their cell in Belgium, Greece, and Syria, including individuals who had never traveled to Syria.¹⁶¹ When police raided their safe house on January 15, 2015, Amghar, Larbi, and El Bali were in the final stages of planning a major terrorist attack against police, according to a senior Belgian counterterrorism official.¹⁶²

- France arrested Mohamed Ouharani, 20, in Paris in July 2014 for plotting to carry out an attack on Ile-de-France after he returned from Syria via Lebanon, where he initially planned to carry out an attack.¹⁶³
- French national Ibrahim Boudina was arrested in Italy in January 2014 for an imminent attack, and police discovered bomb-making materials in his French apartment building after his arrest.¹⁶⁴
- Frenchman Lyes Darani, 23, was arrested in Lille in October 2013 and was reported to have had on him at that time a manual explaining how to make a bomb and a religious pledge to commit a suicide attack.¹⁶⁵ While it was reported that he was arrested for plotting violence, details of the alleged plot are not available.

Despite the continued participation in terrorist activity by some returnees, 81 percent of returnees who have been arrested have been charged with going to Syria. This indicates that Western security services have adopted a preventative approach, arresting returnees upon their return and before they can engage in plotting or jihadist activity.

ISIS-Inspired Threats

The most significant act of ISIS-inspired violence in the West prior to the November 13 Paris attacks was the series of two attacks conducted by Amedy Coulibaly in Paris, where on January 8, 2015, he shot and killed a Parisian policewoman and the next day killed four people he took hostage at a kosher supermarket.¹⁶⁶ The attacks coincided with the attack on *Charlie Hebdo's* offices by Said and Cherif Kouachi, which killed 12 people, and in his martyrdom video, Coulibaly said he coordinated the attack with the Kouachis.¹⁶⁷ While the Kouachis declared themselves followers of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, Coulibaly declared allegiance to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in the video.¹⁶⁸ Coulibaly was not a veteran returnee of the Syrian conflict but he was inspired by ISIS propaganda.

On February 6, 2015, Omar Abdel Hamid El-Hussein, a 22-year-old born in Denmark, shot and killed two people in Copenhagen, one in an attack on the Krudttoenden Cafe, which was hosting a free speech event that included Swedish artist Lars Vilks, who had been targeted by jihadists because of his drawings of the Prophet Mohammed, and the second in a later attack at a synagogue.¹⁶⁹ According to the Danish government, El-Hussein had never been to Syria.¹⁷⁰ Despite not being a returnee, El-Hussein pledged fealty to ISIS in a Facebook post before the attacks, writing that he gave his "allegiance to Abu Bakr in full obedience in the good and bad things. And I won't dispute with him unless it is an outrageous disbelief."¹⁷¹ He had been previously active in Denmark's violent gang scene, was known to police as a result, and had been released from prison two weeks before the attacks.¹⁷² Denmark's prison service had sent a warning regarding El-Hussein's potential for radicalization to Danish intelligence.¹⁷³

On December 15, 2014, Man Haron Monis took dozens of people hostage in a Lindt Cafe in Sydney, Australia, triggering a 16-hour siege that resulted in the deaths of two hostages in addition to himself.¹⁷⁴ Monis displayed a black Islamic flag—not the ISIS flag—and demanded a proper ISIS flag during his attack; he further demanded that politicians call his action an ISIS attack.¹⁷⁵ Monis also pledged allegiance to ISIS in a post on his website just days before his attack.¹⁷⁶

Other alleged plots inspired by or linked to ISIS have reportedly been broken up in the West. For example, on February 11, 2015, two Australian men, Omar Al-Kutobi, 24, and Mohammad Kiad, 25, were arrested for allegedly plotting an attack to take place later that day that Australia Prime Minister Tony Abbott said was inspired by ISIS.¹⁷⁷ On March 10, 2015, Spanish authorities announced that they had arrested two men who were plotting an attack in Spain or neighboring countries.¹⁷⁸ The men apparently had contact with ISIS members online and were involved with four men arrested in January who were preparing an attack.¹⁷⁹ Even teenagers have been inspired to commit violence by ISIS. In October 2014, a 14-year-old Austrian boy was arrested for planning to bomb a major Vienna train station in the name of ISIS.¹⁸⁰ According to the charging document, the boy made "concrete enquiries into about buying ingredients" for a bomb and planned to travel to Syria to join ISIS after the bombing.¹⁸¹ The boy was convicted in May 2015 of belonging to a terrorist organization and sentenced to eight months in jail, with a suspended jail sentence of an additional 16 months.¹⁸²

VI. WHY DO THEY LEAVE FOR SYRIA?

What motivates many of these Western fighters to travel to a dangerous war zone that most have no prior connection to? A review of both ISIS propaganda and reporting on the individual cases in New America’s dataset suggests the answer is a diverse mix of motivations and themes that ISIS has picked up on as part of its recruiting strategy. These include: opposition to Assad; religious invocations of the spiritual benefit of participating in jihad; the jihadi thinking that religious duty requires living under a so-called caliphate; a desire to be part of a grander project; anger at and alienation from Western society; and for a few, the simple “coolness” factor of participating in the war.

As discussed previously, recruitment, radicalization, and mobilization drawing upon these themes and conducted via direct communication online is common. However, ISIS also conducts less personalized outreach, disseminating its propaganda over social media and other public sites. In July 2014 ISIS began publishing an online, English-language magazine, *Dabiq*, which is now in its 11th iteration.¹⁸³

Articles in *Dabiq* report on the group’s military activities as well as aim to reassure readers that ISIS is an actual state that provides social services and maintains infrastructure. The magazine has asserted that administrators govern towns after the main ISIS fighting force moves on. One issue of *Dabiq* included photos with captions showing “services for Muslims,” including street cleaning, electricity repairs, care homes for the elderly, and cancer treatment centers for children.¹⁸⁴ The first issue of *Dabiq* even had a sort of classified ad for “all Muslim doctors, engineers, scholars, and specialists” to come and join ISIS. ISIS also went to great lengths to highlight how *normal* life was in its Islamist utopia—releasing, for instance, a video in March 2015 that showed smiling kids taking fairground rides at the Dijla city fairground, near Mosul. *Dabiq* is only the flagship English-language magazine for ISIS. It has also launched magazines in Russian, French, and Turkish.¹⁸⁵

Beyond *Dabiq* and similar magazines, ISIS has disseminated several guidebooks. In 2015, ISIS published its how-to guides *Hijrah* and *How to Survive in the West*. *Hijrah* provides potential fighters

with detailed packing lists; advice on how to get to Turkey and dupe customs officials into issuing visas; lists Twitter accounts of fighters living in Syria to follow; and even suggests assessing your personality strengths and weaknesses before leaving home to better prepare yourself for jihad.

How to Survive in the West, which is more consistent with al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula’s *Inspire* (a propaganda magazine notorious for including bomb-making instructions and encouraging attacks in the West), is a guide on how to “be a secret Agent” in a non-Muslim country. It gives readers tips on making Molotov cocktails, bombs, and cell phone detonators; hiding weapons in secret compartments of vehicles in the same fashion as gangs; and how to identify and evade police surveillance, even suggesting that readers watch the Jason Bourne film series for tips on employing evasion tactics.¹⁸⁶

In addition to publications, ISIS has disseminated a variety of propaganda videos, often featuring foreign fighters calling in English upon others to join them in Syria and Iraq

In addition to these publications, ISIS has disseminated a variety of propaganda videos, often featuring foreign fighters calling in English upon others to join them in Syria and Iraq. For example, in a video titled “There Is No Life Without Jihad,” fighters identified as “Brother Abu Muthanna al Yemeni—from Britain,” “Brother Abu Bara’ al Hindi—from Britain,” “Brother Abu Yahya ash Shami—from Australia” (real name Zacharia Raad), “Brother Abu Nour al Iraqi—from Australia,” and “Brother Abu Dujana al Hindi—from Britain” (real name Reyaad Khan) call upon their “brothers” to join them.¹⁸⁷ In a video released after his death, Andre Poulin, a Canadian foreign fighter, calls on Canadians to travel to join ISIS.¹⁸⁸ Another ISIS video, which shares a *nasheed* [Islamic chant] in French and subtitled in English, features images of an individual packing and traveling while lyrics include “Extend your hand to pledge allegiance, And

immigrate to your land.”¹⁸⁹ In the video, a French fighter states that he has a message “from your French brothers who have made hijrah,” continuing, “What are you waiting for?”¹⁹⁰ In another ISIS video, released in April 2015, 29-year-old Australian doctor Tareq Kamleh urges medical professionals to travel to ISIS territory, echoing the call for doctors made in *Dabiq* and helping broadcast ISIS’s desired imagery of normalcy within its territory.¹⁹¹

Dutch fighter Omar Yilmaz told CBS News: “I felt the need as a person, as a human, and, of course, as a Muslim... I had to stand up and do stuff”

ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi himself has lent his voice to the effort to recruit foreign fighters. In May 2015, ISIS released an online audio recording of Baghdadi in which he called for all Muslims to make hijrah to ISIS’s territory, saying there is no excuse for any able Muslim not doing so.

Several foreign fighters expressed the role of opposition to Assad in their decision to join. Dutch fighter Omar Yilmaz told CBS News: “I felt the need as a person, as a human, and, of course, as a Muslim. Because it was the Muslims that were getting crushed in Syria, that I had to stand up and do stuff.”¹⁹² Amer Deghayes, a 20-year-old British foreign fighter whose 16- and 18-year-old brothers also left to fight in Syria, told *Vice*: “I came to Syria to answer the call of duty and that is to give victory to the religion of Allah and the way to do that is to help the oppressed Syrians here and make sure they receive justice.”¹⁹³ Deghayes explained that before going he had watched videos online, saying, “Before you make a step like this you do research,” and continuing: “In some of the videos you hear the people call out for help. They say where is the Muslim nation? Where are the youth? Where are the men?”¹⁹⁴ Another thing that pushed him to go to Syria, he said, was “the things which are happening here as everybody knows—I don’t even think it happens as bad anywhere else.”¹⁹⁵ Deghayes’s father recalls, “With Amer, he went with a convoy, but he was talking about going to Syria and helping out. And I thought I convinced him to stick to aid work.”¹⁹⁶

It is hardly surprising that opposition to the Assad regime would motivate people to fight against it. The Assad regime has repeatedly used chemical weapons, including as recently as March 2015.¹⁹⁷ It has engaged in systematic torture and, according to

documents smuggled out of Syria by a defector, killed at least 11,000 detainees.¹⁹⁸ Stephen Rapp, the State Department’s former ambassador at large for war crimes and director of its Office of Global Criminal Justice, has stated: “This is solid evidence of the kind of machinery of cruel death that we haven’t seen frankly since the Nazis.”¹⁹⁹

Other foreign fighters discussed religious motivations. Abdul Raqib Amin, a 26-year-old British fighter, told *Good Morning Britain*: “I left the U.K. to give everything I have for the sake of Allah.... One of the happiest moments in my life was when the plane took off from Gatwick Airport. I was so happy, because, as a Muslim you cannot live in the country of Kuffars [disbelievers].”²⁰⁰ Abdi Nur, a 20-year-old Minnesotan, tweeted: “Jihad Is The Greatest Honor For Man So Come On And Join Dawla Ya Iqwa [you brothers of the Islamic State].”²⁰¹ Nur later explained to his sister: “If I didn’t care I wouldn’t have left but I want jannah [paradise] for all of us.”²⁰²

For some foreign fighters, the declaration of the caliphate played an important role in motivating them to join ISIS. One propaganda video, providing greetings for the Eid holiday and released by ISIS, shows multiple foreign fighters praising life in the caliphate alongside images of allegedly happy children and backed by soft music with the lyrics, “The Shari’ah of our Lord is light, by it we rise over the stars. By it we live without humiliation, a life of peace and security.”²⁰³ An individual identified as a Moroccan foreign fighter states that “hijrah is now obligatory upon every Muslim.”²⁰⁴ An individual identified as a Belgian fighter states: “In my whole life I never felt like a Muslim as I do now living among the Muslims and under the shade of the Khilafah [Caliphate].”²⁰⁵ Though the statements cannot be taken as necessarily authentic, as they are scripted parts of a propaganda video, they appear to resonate with some attempting to travel to join ISIS. Alabamian Hoda Muthana told her father in a phone call from Syria that she traveled there for missionary work because the caliphate had been declared and every Muslim was required to travel there in order to get to heaven.²⁰⁶ Before attempting to travel to Syria, Chicago teen Mohammed Hamzah Khan left a letter for his parents in which he explained that “there is an obligation to ‘migrate’ to the ‘Islamic State’ now that it has ‘been established.’”²⁰⁷ Virginia teen Reza Niknejad called his mother on February 5, 2015, after having reached Syria to join ISIS, telling her about how well he was being treated in the “Khalifah.”²⁰⁸

Some fighters have also made more general comments regarding being part of a grander project or even the simple excitement of being in combat. A 32-year-old British fighter said in a radio interview aired by the BBC that fighting for ISIS was “actually quite fun, better than, what’s that game called, Call of Duty? It’s like that, but really, you know, 3D. You can see everything’s happening in front of you, know. It’s real, you know what I mean?”²⁰⁹

Others have cited feelings of alienation or oppression in Western society. For example, in a Skype interview with *Vice*, Farah Shirdon, a Canadian, replied to the question of why he had become a foreign fighter by

citing oppression and lack of religious freedom at home, saying “Give us our freedom” and continuing, “If we want sharia law, leave us alone.”²¹⁰ Mohammed Hamzah Khan’s 17-year-old sister wrote a letter to her parents before attempting to travel to Syria, saying: “I could not bear to live in ... the land who’s people mock my Allah, my beloved Prophet....”²¹¹ Muthenna Abu Taubah, a 24-year-old fighter from central London who later died in an accident at a bomb-making factory in Raqqa, the de facto ISIS capital, commented to a BBC reporter: “Look at China—men aren’t allowed to grow beards and Muslims aren’t allowed to fast. Look at France—women can’t wear niqab. Look at the USA and U.K.—you can’t even talk about jihad.”²¹²

VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Enlist defectors from ISIS to tell their stories publicly.²¹³ Nothing is more powerful than hearing from former members of the group that ISIS is not creating an Islamist utopia in the areas it controls, but a hell on earth. The flow of “foreign fighters” to ISIS from around the Muslim world is estimated to be about 1,000 a month. Reducing that flow is a key to reducing ISIS manpower.
2. Amplify voices such as that of the ISIS opposition group Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently, which routinely posts photos online of bread lines in Raqqa, the de facto capital of ISIS in northern Syria, and writes about electricity shortages in the city.²¹⁴ This will help to undercut ISIS propaganda that it is a truly functioning state.
3. Amplify the work of former jihadists like the Canadian Mubin Shaikh, who intervenes directly with young people online who he sees are being recruited virtually by ISIS.²¹⁵
4. Support the work of clerics such as Imam Mohamed Magid of Northern Virginia, who has personally convinced a number of American Muslims seduced by ISIS that what the group is doing is against Islam.²¹⁶
5. Keep up pressure on social media companies such as Twitter to enforce their own Terms of Use to take down any ISIS material that encourages violence. Earlier this year, Twitter quietly took down 2,000 accounts used by ISIS supporters, but the group continues to use Twitter and other social media platforms to propagate its message.²¹⁷
6. Keep up the military campaign against ISIS. The less the ISIS “caliphate” exists as a physical entity, the less the group can claim it is the “Islamic State” that it purports to be. That should involve more U.S. Special Forces on the ground embedded with Iraqi and other coalition forces and more U.S. forward air controllers calling in close air support strikes for those forces.
7. Applaud the work that the Turks have already done to tamp down the foreign fighter flow through their country to ISIS in neighboring Syria, and get them to do more.
8. Provide “off ramps” to young ISIS recruits with no history of violence, so that instead of serving long prison terms for attempting to join ISIS—as they presently do in the United States—they would instead serve long periods of supervised probation. This will help families that presently face a hard choice: If they suspect a young family member is radicalizing and they go to the FBI, that person can end up in prison for up to 15 years on charges of attempting to support ISIS; but if they don’t go to the authorities and their child ends up traveling to Syria, he or she may well end up being killed there. Providing off-ramps would offer families a way out of this almost impossible choice.
9. Educate Muslim-American parents about the seductive messages that ISIS is propagating online.
10. Relentlessly hammer home the message that ISIS positions itself as the defender of Muslims, but its victims are overwhelmingly fellow Muslims.
11. Build a database of all the foreign fighters who have gone to Syria to fight for ISIS and Nusra. This is one of the recommendations of the House Homeland Security Committee’s September 2015 report on foreign fighters in Syria and it is a very good one. How can you prevent an attack by returning foreign fighters if you are not cognizant of their names and links to ISIS? Right now INTERPOL has a list of some 5,000 foreign fighters, but that is simply dwarfed by the estimated 30,000 foreign fighters who have gone to fight in Syria.
12. Stay in Afghanistan beyond 2016. One only has to look at the debacle that has unfolded in Iraq after the withdrawal of U.S. troops at the end of 2011 to have a preview of what could take place in an Afghanistan without some kind of residual American presence. Without American forces in the country, there is a strong possibility Afghanistan could host a reinvigorated Taliban allied to a reinvigorated al-Qaeda—not to mention ISIS, which is also gaining a foothold in the region. This U.S. military presence in Afghanistan doesn’t have to be large, nor does it need to play a combat role, but U.S. troops should remain in Afghanistan to advise the Afghan army and provide intelligence support past 2016.

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