

## When Jihadis Come Marching Home

### The Terrorist Threat Posed by Westerners Returning from Syria and Iraq

Brian Michael Jenkins

**A**lthough the numbers of Western fighters slipping off to join the *jihadist* fronts in Syria and Iraq are murky, U.S. counterterrorism officials believe that those fighters pose a clear and present danger to American security. Some will be killed in the fighting, some will choose to remain in the Middle East, but some will return, more radicalized, determined to continue their violent campaigns at home. Their presence in Syria and Iraq also increases the available reservoir of Western passports and “clean skins” that terrorist planners could recruit to carry out terrorist missions against the West.

**How many Americans have gone to Syria?** It is estimated that as many as 15,000 foreigners have gone to Syria and Iraq to fight against the Syrian or Iraqi governments, including more than 2,000 from Western nations.<sup>1</sup> As of October 2014, 20 Americans had been publicly identified as having attempted to go or having gone to Syria or Iraq to join in the fighting. (For a list of the names and further details, see the Appendix.) This certainly is not the

total number. U.S. intelligence sources indicate that 100 or more Americans have been identified. In an interview on October 5, 2014, Federal Bureau of Investigation Director James Comey said that the FBI knew the identities of “a dozen or so” Americans who were fighting in Syria on the side of the terrorists (Comey, 2014). His comment surprised many who were familiar with the intelligence reports, but he was probably referring to a narrowly defined category of persons who at the time of his statement were known to be currently fighting with particular terrorist groups in Syria. If we include all of those who went to or tried to go to Syria or Iraq to join various rebel formations, some of whom were arrested upon departure, some of whom were killed in the fighting, and some of whom have returned, the larger number would apply.

The United States has prior experience in dealing with Americans headed for other jihadist fronts. Apart from those who went to or have tried to go to Syria since 2012, between the year 2000 and October 2014, about 100 Americans are known to have connected

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with or tried to connect with jihadist groups in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, Yemen, and elsewhere. Their history provides some clues about the threat posed by those going to Syria and Iraq. Europe, too, has experience with fighters who returned from jihadist fronts. This has been largely ignored in current discussions.

To be sure, the current cohort of jihadist volunteers may differ from previous cohorts in the level of their commitment to jihadist ideology and their attraction to unlimited violence as a motive for volunteering, as well as in the level of military skills they may acquire. The acquisition of bomb-making and combat skills in Syria and Iraq is cited as a cause of particular concern, but the importance of combat skills in carrying out terrorist attacks should not be exaggerated. Hardly any of the 9/11 attackers had combat experience. An Army psychiatrist, Major Nidal Hassan, a home-grown terrorist who shot 44 of his fellow soldiers at Fort Hood, Texas, killing 13 of them, had no combat training or experience (nor have most of those responsible for other mass shootings in the United States). Hands-on training in making explosive devices is more relevant.

**What can be done to reduce the threat?** A number of measures to interrupt the flow of Western volunteers to the Middle East and interdict their return have been implemented or are being considered here and abroad. These include efforts to enlist Muslim diaspora communities in reducing jihadist recruitment, passing

new laws that criminalize even attempting to join jihadist groups, canceling the passports of those who go abroad to fight, persuading frontline nations such as Turkey to block their passage to or from Syria and Iraq, and improving cooperation and coordination of intelligence efforts to identify and intercept returning fighters.

The United States already makes it a crime to provide material support to a terrorist organization, and that includes joining or even attempting to join such a group. Although the executive branch has the authority to do so for national security reasons, it is not clear how aggressive the administration will choose to be in suspending U.S. passports to prevent U.S. citizens who go abroad from returning to the country, an idea floated in Europe. However, some in the United States have called for a suspension of the visa waiver program, which allows those with European and some other passports to enter the United States without a visa.

Whether these measures will be adequate remains a matter of debate. Some argue that unless promptly crushed, the Islamic State will inevitably go global and attack Americans at home. Proponents of this view contend that intelligence efforts will not suffice to intercept new terrorist attacks.

**Is military action necessary to prevent terrorist attacks by returning fighters?** Identifying returning fighters is an intelligence priority in both Europe and the United States, but relying on interception alone may be risky.<sup>2</sup> As the number of Western volunteers going to Syria and Iraq increased, some argued that military action was necessary to prevent the jihadists from creating safe havens that inevitably would become launching pads for future terrorist missions. Fears of new terrorist sanctuaries were underscored by the dramatic jihadist advance across northern Iraq during the summer of 2014 and the declaration of an “Islamic State.” This prompted

the United States to launch airstrikes against jihadist forces in Iraq in August 2014.

The bombing campaign began as a unilateral humanitarian effort to prevent further massacres of religious minorities fleeing the advancing jihadist forces. In September, it expanded into an international effort, which has been joined by both Arab and Western nations, that is intended to “degrade, and ultimately destroy” the most brutal and fastest-growing jihadist force, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), and, more generally, all groups that are fighting to carve out an Islamist state of Syria and Iraq. Success in this mission would eliminate a major threat to the security of the region. However, the threat of future terrorist attacks carried out by returning Western nationals who are now fighting with the jihadists in Syria and Iraq was given as the principal justification for military action and was a major factor in gaining public support.<sup>3</sup> Although the beginning of military action would seem to have settled the debate about military force, some believe the current air campaign is not enough and that, to be effective, it must be accompanied by the introduction of ground forces.

Others challenge this depiction of the threat, pointing out that the number of Americans fighting with jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq is very small, the number likely to return is even smaller, and the number who return undetected is smaller still. And anyway, as we have seen, terrorist attacks do not necessarily require foreign fighters.

Critics of military action further argue that foreign military intervention only provokes terrorist retaliation. At present, the flow of fighters is from west to east, which has the positive effect of reducing the population of would-be warriors resident in Europe and the United States. Military intervention could reverse this flow,

scattering Western volunteers thirsting for revenge. As a consequence of the bombing, ISIL and other jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq now view the United States as their principal foe and impediment to the achievement of their goals. They can be expected to counterattack. American military intervention may also inspire other jihadists abroad and in the United States to carry out terrorist attacks.

Clearly, the sheer volume of Western volunteers—Europeans, Australians, Americans—who have joined jihadist fronts in Syria and Iraq adds a level of risk to security concerns that have existed since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. To better understand the nature of this added risk, this report begins by reviewing how the terrorist threat has evolved since 9/11 and then examines current concerns about returning fighters, including some potential terrorist scenarios. It goes on to review America’s experience with past would-be warriors who tried to join jihadist fronts abroad or succeeded in doing so and their actions upon their return, comparing them with the handful of those who have more recently gone to Syria and Iraq. The report then compares recent American and European experience (Europe faces a bigger problem). We conclude with a discussion of what can be done to address the threat.<sup>4</sup>

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It is a necessarily complex assessment of events in motion. The reader is forewarned of an abundance of “ifs,” “buts,” and “howevers,” reflecting uncertainties and cautions. Every conclusion comes with a caveat. Every bottom line has an asterisk.

### **The Evolving Threat**

As the global terrorist campaign inspired by al Qaeda's ideology of violent jihad has evolved over the years, perceptions of the terrorist threat have changed. In the anxious days immediately after 9/11, fears focused on the possibility of more centrally directed, large-scale terrorist attacks—new 9/11s. Some worried about the possibility that al Qaeda might have already infiltrated an army of “sleepers” into the United States—an underground reserve ready to be activated by coded instructions contained in Osama bin Laden's periodic public messages. As it turned out, there was no army of sleepers, although several al Qaeda operatives were in the country, but given that the 9/11 hijackers had spent months in the United States observing security measures, attending flight schools, and preparing their attack, it was not an unreasonable assumption.<sup>5</sup>

The attempted sabotage of a U.S.-bound flight by the so-called “shoe bomber” later in 2001 and another by the “underwear bomber” eight years later heightened fears of individual suicide attackers equipped by terrorist bomb-makers with sophisticated explosive devices that could evade detection. Recent calls for

increased scrutiny of mobile phones and other electronic devices at certain airports abroad indicate continuing concern.

The U.S.-led campaign against al Qaeda scattered its training camps, chased the group out of Afghanistan, and decimated its leadership, while intense U.S. intelligence efforts and unprecedented international cooperation among intelligence services and law enforcement organizations worldwide made al Qaeda's operating environment more hostile. By 2006, al Qaeda was no longer able to mount a major terrorist attack in the West. The counterterrorist campaign, however, did not dent al Qaeda's determination. The jihadist terrorist enterprise altered its structure and strategy to meet the new circumstances. The organization became more decentralized, more dependent on what it could recruit or inspire others to do.

Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), al Qaeda's affiliate in Yemen, was behind the 2009, 2010, and 2012 attempts to sabotage U.S.-bound commercial airliners. And Anwar al-Awlaki, an American-born AQAP leader who fled to Yemen, played a major role in radicalizing a number of homegrown American terrorists, including Nidal Hassan. AQAP also launched *Inspire*, a slick, English-language online magazine, which provided inspiration and instruction to homegrown terrorists. *Inspire* was the creation of Samir Khan, a young Saudi who had been raised in America.<sup>6</sup>

Counterterrorist attention correspondingly shifted from centrally directed attacks to al Qaeda's intense efforts to recruit homegrown terrorists, which the news media and some in Washington insist on calling “lone wolves.” In the United States, however, al Qaeda's online exhortations mustered only a tiny turnout of would-be warriors, most of whom proved to be remarkably incompetent, although, on occasion, still lethal. Although al Qaeda's affiliates in

Yemen and North Africa remained active, its central command was reduced to incitement, and that seemed to be yielding poor results.

The Arab uprisings gave al Qaeda another chance—an opportunity to establish new footholds throughout North Africa and the Middle East, but especially in Syria, where new al Qaeda fronts joined the rebellion against the government of Bashir al-Assad.<sup>7</sup> The rebellion soon began attracting volunteers from other countries, raising concerns about the eventual return of those who have gone to Syria to fight.

### The Current Concern

By mid-2014, it was estimated that 12,000 to 15,000 foreign fighters had joined rebel groups in Syria, most of them drawn to offshoots of al Qaeda. Some of them, however, migrated to al Qaeda's rival, ISIL.<sup>8</sup> ISIL's recent declaration of the Islamic State has caused excitement among Salafist militants around the world and is attracting additional foreign recruits. A recent United Nations report puts the total at 15,000 (Ackerman, 2014).

Most of the volunteers come from Arab countries, but included among them are many would-be jihadists from Europe, Australia, and the United States. The Western fighters include anywhere from a few dozen to more than 100 Americans (Horowitz and Goldman, 2014; Merchant, 2014). As always, the numbers are slippery.

Overall, there are now more Westerners in Syria and Iraq than there were in Afghanistan during the war against Soviet occupation in the 1980s or in Somalia following Ethiopia's invasion of that country. The number of Americans, however, is not greater than the total number of Americans who have gone abroad to join various jihadist fronts since 9/11.

From the perspective of jihadist strategists, every new front guarantees another generation of fighters, ensuring that the global jihad inspired by al Qaeda's ideology will go on. This, in turn, raises security concerns for Western governments. Some of the fighters will eventually return to their home countries as trained and experienced veterans, increasing the likelihood of new terrorist plots and raising the attackers' level of competence.

The migration of Western volunteers to Syria appears to be mostly a spontaneous phenomenon rather than the result of an organized recruiting effort. This is particularly true for volunteers coming from Western nations, who are able to follow the course of the conflicts in Syria and Iraq through the news and social media. Leaders of various fighting fronts, including ISIL's Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, issue pronouncements and call for foreign volunteers. Most of the recruiting, however, is done by foreign volunteers who are already in the country rather than through the formal information channels of the fronts. Using social media, these volunteers provide detailed information about what is happening on the ground, document their own experiences, urge others to join them, and provide helpful information about how to get there. Influential jihadist sympathizers provide spiritual pressure and psychological reinforcement via the Internet but are not involved in facilitating

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the passage of volunteers to the front. This is a technology-driven development that dilutes the communications role of central authorities while empowering a host of individual communicators. However, evidence has surfaced of more-organized facilitation, although this still appears to be incipient.

Entering Syria is not difficult. Western volunteers travel to Turkey and cross its southern border directly into rebel-held Syrian towns. Dedicated to bringing down the government of Bashar al-Assad, Turkey has done little to impede the flow of these volunteers. The travelers may have preferences, but many of them come without advance arrangements with any group. Jihadists already inside Syria advise travelers against arriving in the country without a preexisting connection, but reports indicate that many make their connections in Turkish border towns or Syrian towns just across the border, where spotters for the jihadist groups troll among the new arrivals. Membership appears to be fluid, and fighters from several groups may at times participate in a single battle, making it possible to change groups.

Among the Syrian rebel fronts, the more-secular Free Syrian Army (FSA) initially grew in strength largely through defections from the regular Syrian Army. Volunteer fighters from Syria and neighboring Arab countries swelled its ranks. It attracted few Western fighters. The upswing in Western fighters came after the jihadist groups took the field and quickly came to be seen as the

most ferocious combatants, which suggests that jihad ideology and the prospect of adventure were the major attractions. Geography was another factor. The major jihadist fronts, Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIL, filled their ranks with local and foreign volunteers, including many of the Western travelers, owing in part to the fact that these groups controlled the border towns on the Turkish frontier.

While the West's initial enthusiasm for the rebellion waned, the jihadist groups could count on continuing financial support from private donors in the Gulf monarchies. To attract foreign patrons, fighting groups displayed their conservative Muslim credentials. This led to a migration of fighters from the more-secular groups to the jihadist groups where the money and weapons were. ISIL differed from the other jihadist groups in that most of its revenue came from its control of oil fields it seized in the fighting and organized plunder. This made it less dependent on external support.

ISIL, ideologically the most extreme jihadist group, exults in displays of brutal violence, which has attracted the most violence-prone foreign recruits. Their presence in large numbers may also influence ISIL's future behavior—ideologues rule, but thugs influence decisions. While ISIL is making attempts to more systematically govern the territory it has declared to be the Islamic State, it has not abandoned the mass executions, beheadings, and crucifixions it employs to frighten its foes and attract recruits.

The incorporation into ISIL of a large number of bloodthirsty foreign fighters who seem to have little future in any peaceful society will have long-term consequences. It means that the Islamic State can never be stable. Either the thugs are killed off or they find new killing fields on its frontiers or beyond.

## Motives for Going Abroad

Volunteers from other countries have gone to Syria and Iraq for many reasons. Some may have been motivated by the desire to provide humanitarian assistance—especially to the victims of the Syrian government’s brutal campaign against the rebellion. As ISIL and other jihadist organizations have come to dominate the resistance, that motive probably has diminished. Some volunteers might be called “jihadi tourists”—they cross the border into Syria, but they stay away from the fighting, take selfies, and brag to friends at home on social media. Again, this may be a diminishing portion as the fighting has intensified and ISIL has taken control of most of the border towns.

Now, more of the volunteers are likely to be inspired by jihadist ideology and an opportunity to live in what they see as an authentic Muslim caliphate. Preliminary information indicates that this motive appears to drive most Western volunteers. Others have been attracted by the opportunities for unlimited violence that ISIL promises. Jihadist fronts in other countries also have sent members to Syria and Iraq to obtain training and combat experience and to make contacts that could be useful in their future struggles.

These are diverse reasons. An earlier review of all of those arrested in the United States since 9/11 for carrying out or plotting attacks on behalf of al Qaeda’s ideology or providing material support to jihadist terrorist organizations, including attempts to join jihadist fronts abroad, showed equal diversity. Those arrested offered expressions of religious faith, acceptance of and commitment to al Qaeda’s ideology of armed jihad as an individual duty for all Muslims, and a determination to defend their native country against foreign invaders or all Islam against infidel aggression or to punish attacks by Western infidels. In many cases, it was possible

to infer unspoken motives, including the desire to participate in an epic struggle, a thirst for adventure, and the desire to prove oneself as a warrior. Some would-be jihadists appear to have been pulled in by a desire for camaraderie (Jenkins, 2011). Personal crises also figured prominently in their biographies. Many could be described as misfits. Some clearly were dissatisfied with their lives. Except for those responding to the more overt appeal of unlimited violence, the current volunteers joining ISIL do not appear very different from the earlier volunteers in terms of motives.

People enter the realm of violent jihad for personal reasons. Somalis returned to Somalia to fight Ethiopian invaders, their historical enemies. That cause had some support in Somali diaspora communities. It is also an exception. There is no evidence that American Muslim communities encourage recruiting. It is a clandestine activity that often begins on the Internet or in discussions with like-minded friends. Volunteers conceal their intentions. Families, when they suspect something, usually try to prevent departures. Friends are surprised. True of would-be warriors in the past, it also appears true of those now going to Syria or Iraq.

Some of the foreign volunteers have no intention of returning to their country of origin. Others may dream of opening new jihadist fronts upon their return. Many will gain military skills and combat experience and also a taste for bloodshed. Some will

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return disillusioned. Many may be psychologically damaged by what they see and do.

### **The Importance of Protected Space**

Terrorists are usually obliged to operate underground in hostile environments where they must assume that they are under surveillance, have to keep their regular jobs to survive, can get together only in small groups, cannot trust anyone they meet, are unable to easily obtain access to explosives without potentially arousing suspicion, and certainly cannot detonate practice bombs.

In safe havens, however, terrorists are not isolated by fear and suspicion and can meet and communicate freely, although electronic communications are still dangerous, especially for identified leaders in countries where the United States can operate drones or carry out special operations. Infiltrators remain a threat even in safe havens, but there are fewer potential informants and no nearby federal agents ready to swoop in and make arrests. Terrorists can fire weapons and acquire and practice bomb-making skills. Perhaps the most important utility of safe havens is that large numbers of terrorists can congregate with each other, reinforcing their commitment and developing contacts that that will be useful in later operations.

Although still subject to attack, the swaths of territory now dominated by al Qaeda's offshoots in Syria and Iraq provide jihad-

ist terrorists with a measure of safety. However, Syria and Iraq are not the jihadists' only safe havens. Ongoing conflicts give terrorists a number of havens that offer varying degrees of safety in much of Somalia, parts of Yemen, Pakistan's tribal areas, and portions of Afghanistan and Algeria, which have been jihadist strongholds for many years. In addition, Libya, parts of the Sahel, and northern Nigeria have become new terrorist badlands. But there are many more foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq.

Proponents of immediate U.S. military intervention in Iraq argue that the United States has to destroy ISIL before the jihadists can "consolidate" their new strongholds. This could mean a number of different things. It could mean that the jihadists will better organize themselves to hold recently captured terrain. It could mean that with time, they will fortify their military positions, as Hamas has done in Gaza. It could mean killing off or driving out minority populations, leaving behind only those the jihadists calculate they can ultimately persuade to share their fanaticism. It could mean that the jihadists will increasingly impose their authority over the local population, although in the past, this has often provoked negative reactions. It could mean that jihadist groups will acquire the trappings of a sovereign state, which will be harder to attack, although that provided little protection for the Taliban government of Afghanistan.

### **Terrorist Scenarios That Concern Western Governments**

Returning Western fighters who have trained in Syria and Iraq pose several different threats. Of greatest concern would be a 9/11-type scenario in which a group of Western volunteers who initially went to fight in Syria or Iraq is turned around, trained, and supported



for a major terrorist operation in the West. In 2009, al Qaeda officials authorized a terrorist attack to be carried out by three Americans who had come to Pakistan to join the Taliban in Afghanistan. Al Qaeda provided Najibullah Zazi, the leader of the group, with weapons and bomb-making instructions for the attack, which, if successful, would still have been orders of magnitude below the scale of the 9/11 attacks. Upon his return to the United States, Zazi built the explosive devices, which he intended to use in a suicide attack on New York's subways. The plot was uncovered, and the three would-be attackers were convicted.

Another possible threat could take the form of a shoe-bomber scenario, in which one or more individuals are selected and equipped for a suicide mission aimed at the West. Recent concerns about aviation security were motivated by the possibility of a joint effort between bomb-makers belonging to al Qaeda and jihadists in Syria to carry out suicide missions. In fact, in May 2014, an American volunteer from Florida carried out a suicide mission in Syria on behalf of Jabhat al-Nusra, al Qaeda's affiliate in that country.

The attack demonstrated that Americans could be recruited for suicide bombings, but it was directed against a Syrian target, reflecting Jabhat al-Nusra's focus on the local struggle, while al Qaeda's central command remains committed to attacking the United States and other Western nations. To ensure that al Qaeda's "far enemy," in accord with the group's ideology, would remain the principal target, al Qaeda dispatched the Khorasan group, a cell of al Qaeda veterans from Afghanistan and Pakistan, to Syria with the mission of identifying and recruiting Westerners for strategic terrorist strikes against the West. It set up shop in the area controlled by Jabhat al-Nusrah. Concern that al Qaeda was exploiting the flow of Western fighters

prompted the U.S. bombing of the Khorasan group in September. The bombing was aimed at Khorasan's leadership, but subsequent reports indicated that they were still at large after the attack. They remain a top concern of U.S. policymakers.

The third type of scenario is exemplified by the July 7, 2005, suicide bombings in London, in which four suicide bombers killed 52 people and injured more than 700. At least one of the bombers had received terrorist training in Pakistan. This appears to be a plausible threat for which there are ample precedents. It has been reported that British officials are now worried that as many as 50 of those who have returned from Syria and Iraq are planning further attacks on this scale. Unlike the shoe bomber or the underwear bomber, the July 7 bombers were not equipped by their trainers with explosive devices. One of the bombers was provided with instructions and left to plan and carry out the attacks. British authorities reportedly are concerned that a number of the fighters who already have returned are plotting to replicate those attacks. Other Europeans fear an increase in low-level terrorist attacks but also worry about more-ambitious efforts.

The most-likely scenarios are individual low-level attacks in the form of random shootings of civilians, attacks on uniformed personnel, recruiting stations, or military families, which ISIL

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has called for. Homegrown terrorists already have provided examples of these. Weapons are readily available. ISIL has suggested that if guns are not available, individuals use their vehicles as weapons.

Recent attacks on uniformed personnel in Canada and the United States are examples of this scenario, although the assaults were carried out by homegrown terrorists rather than jihadi veterans returning from Syria or Iraq. Combat experience is not a prerequisite for running down someone with an automobile, shooting a ceremonial guard at a public monument, or attacking policemen with an axe.

There also may be future Lackawanna scenarios, in which individuals, initially attracted to armed jihad, are frightened or turned off by their experience and simply sneak home and try to lie low. They may not involve themselves in any terrorist plotting, but even if they can be monitored, the authorities may decide not to accept the risk of letting them remain at large.

Finally, whether or not returning fighters carry out attacks, they return with the prestige of warriors and credibility on the street. They are able to recruit other fighters to go to the Middle East and they can gather like-minded groups around them.

## **America's Experience to Date**

### **Returnees from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Yemen**

Thus far, only two Americans are known to have returned to the United States from the new jihadist fronts in Syria and Iraq. One was arrested after his return, was subsequently released, and died soon after, reportedly from a drug overdose. The other remained in the United States only briefly (and apparently unknown to authorities) before returning to Syria and killing himself in a suicide bombing.

Since 9/11, however, Americans have returned from jihadist fronts or terrorist training camps in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia. This experience has been largely ignored in current discussions about the threat posed by those returning from Syria or Iraq. The total number of returnees is small, but their history still offers some insights about the phenomenon and the future threat.

Between 9/11 and October 2014, authorities identified 124 U.S. citizens or legal permanent residents who went abroad to join jihadist fronts or seek training from terrorist groups (Their names and details about them are given in the Appendix.) A few of them had done so before 9/11, but they were identified only later. There may be others—the numbers are slippery, and there is still some uncertainty about exactly how many volunteers went to Somalia to fight. We know that 34 persons tried to go to Somalia, four of whom were arrested before leaving the United States and two of whom were arrested abroad, leaving 28 who went. However, some sources report that as many as 40 Americans went to Somalia to fight.

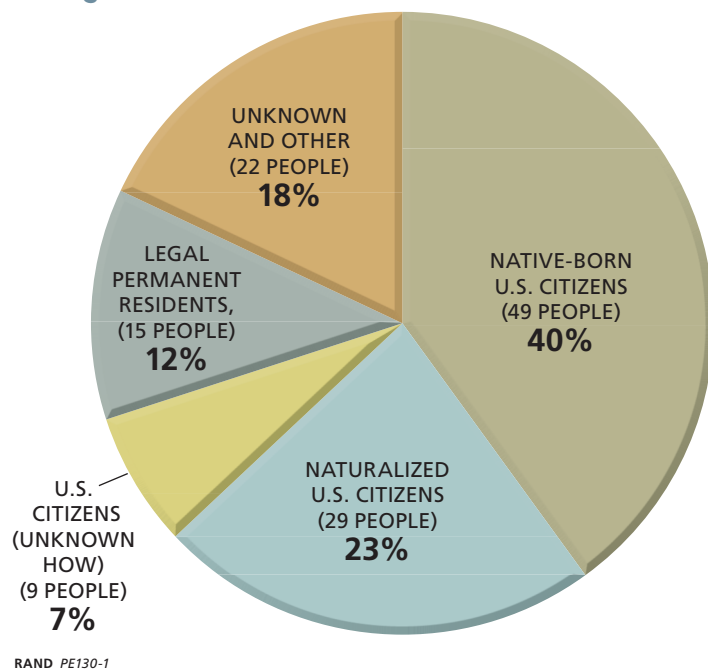
Forty of the identified would-be jihadists were arrested before they left the United States (another one joined a group abroad, returned, and was arrested before he could depart a second time);

80 of them (plus the one who went and returned) managed to connect with jihadist groups overseas. Two more spent time in places where jihadists were active, but they are not known to have connected with any group. Only 35 of them returned to the United States. (The returnees include Carlos Bledsoe and Tamerlan Tsarnaev, who went abroad but for whom there is no evidence of a connection with any jihadist group.) Twenty-four were killed while abroad—six in suicide bombings, two as a result of American airstrikes, and two as a consequence of internal disputes within the terrorist groups. The others were reported killed or simply as dead. Eleven more were arrested while abroad, three of whom were extradited and prosecuted in the United States. Eleven are still at large.

Twenty-two of the 37 who went to or tried to go to Pakistan sought training; 34 went to or tried to go to Somalia; 20 to Syria; 17 to Afghanistan; and 11 to Yemen. The remainder went to Mauritania, Saudi Arabia, or other countries. Forty-two wanted to join al Qaeda or one of its affiliates, 34 wanted to join al Shabab, and eight joined or wanted to join Lashkar-e-Taiba. Twelve intended to join ISIL, three wanted to join Jabhat al-Nusra, and another four sought the Taliban. Some were ready to join any jihadist group.

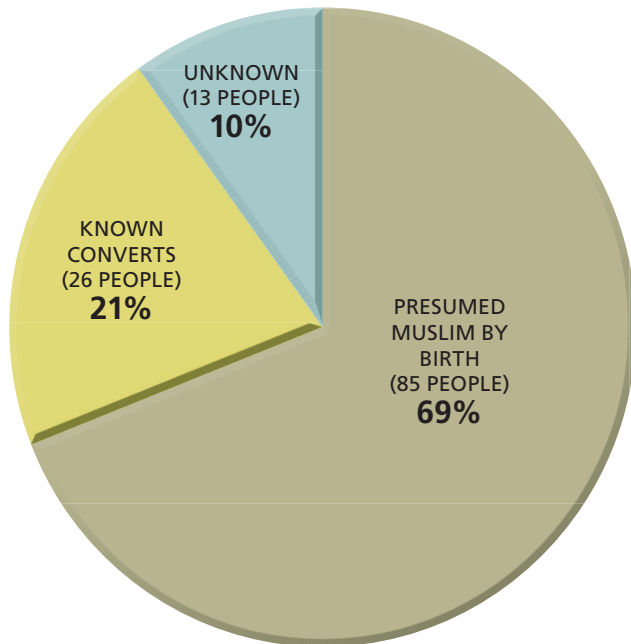
These numbers are displayed in Figures 1 through 6. Figure 1 shows that 70 percent of the would-be jihadists for whom citizenship information is available are U.S. citizens, most of them citizens by birth. It suggests that America's jihadist problem is not driven by a population of unassimilated immigrants, although some problems did emerge among members of the Somali community. Figure 2 shows that about 21 percent of those going abroad to join jihadist fronts are converts to Islam.

**Figure 1. The Citizenship Status of Would-Be Jihadists Traveling Abroad**



This conforms to previous studies of persons providing material support to jihadist groups abroad or inspired by jihadist ideology to plot terrorist attacks in the United States. If we exclude those who headed for Syria, 18 percent of those for whom information is available are converts. The numbers are still very small, but 50 percent of those who have traveled to Syria to fight in the past three years are converts. Figure 3 shows that Pakistan has been the preferred destination, followed by Somalia, with the number going to Syria rising rapidly since 2012. Figure 4 shows that most of the would-be jihadists have intended to join al Qaeda or one of its affiliates other than those in Syria. Al Shabab was the second most-favored affiliation. However, ISIL is now the preferred

**Figure 2. Converts to Islam**

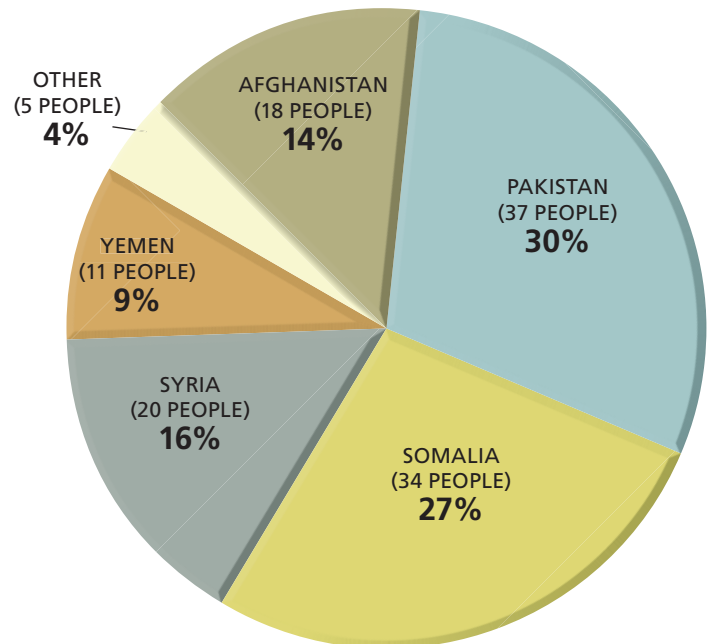


NOTE: Numbers shown are numbers of foreign volunteers.

RAND PE130-2

group. Figure 5 shows that most of those who attempt to leave the country to join a jihadist group are arrested on the way. Of those who escape arrest before departure, 40 percent eventually return, excluding those at large. All of those who have returned were arrested (one was killed in a shootout with police). Figure 6 shows how the preferences for destinations have changed over time. Until 2001, Afghanistan, where volunteers went to join al Qaeda or the Taliban (or the Mujahedin in the 1980s), was the principal destination. That changed with the U.S. overthrow of the Taliban government, and Pakistan became the preferred destination.

**Figure 3. The Intended Destinations of Would-Be Jihadists**



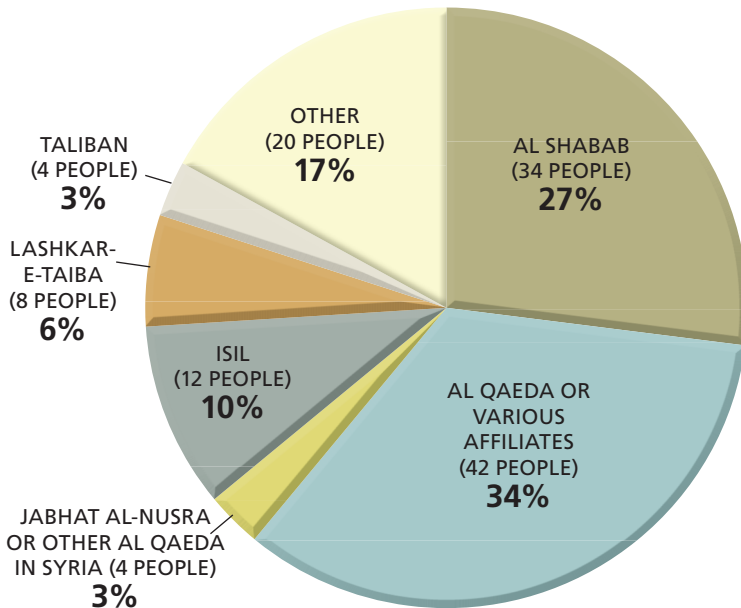
NOTES: Numbers total 125 because one person went to Syria twice. The number of would-be jihadists going to Syria has risen rapidly since 2012.

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Events in Somalia made it the preferred destination in 2007 and 2008. This began to decline in 2009. The civil war in Syria began to attract foreign fighters in 2012, with the number increasing in 2013 and 2014.

Some European analysts make a distinction between those who go abroad to train and return and those who go abroad to fight. It is a difficult distinction to make, as motives are not always clear, and some who go abroad with the intention of fighting may instead be selected for terrorist training and a mission at home, as was the case with a group that left Germany to go to Afghanistan

**Figure 4. The Intended Group Preferences of Would-Be Jihadists**



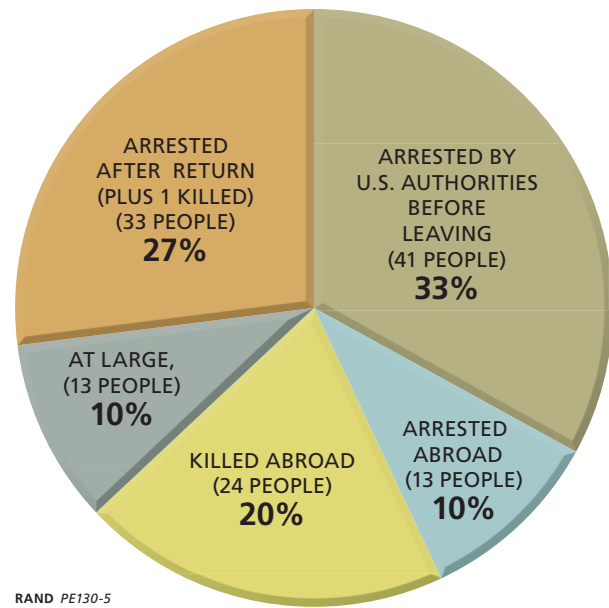
NOTE: Despite the lower percentage shown here, ISIL is now the preferred group for would-be jihadists.

RAND PE130-4

but were then recruited to lead the 9/11 attacks. In some cases, however, the objective is clearly training. It appears that 82 of the Americans went abroad to fight, while 30 wanted or received only training; the intentions of the others are unclear.

Training abroad does not appear to have been a significant factor in motivating post-9/11 terrorist attacks because many of the 33 returnees were promptly arrested. But nine Americans who fought or received training abroad were accused of plotting terrorist attacks after their return to the United States (José Padilla, Iyman Faris, Ali Saleh Kahlah al-Marri, Daniel Boyd, Hamid Hayat,

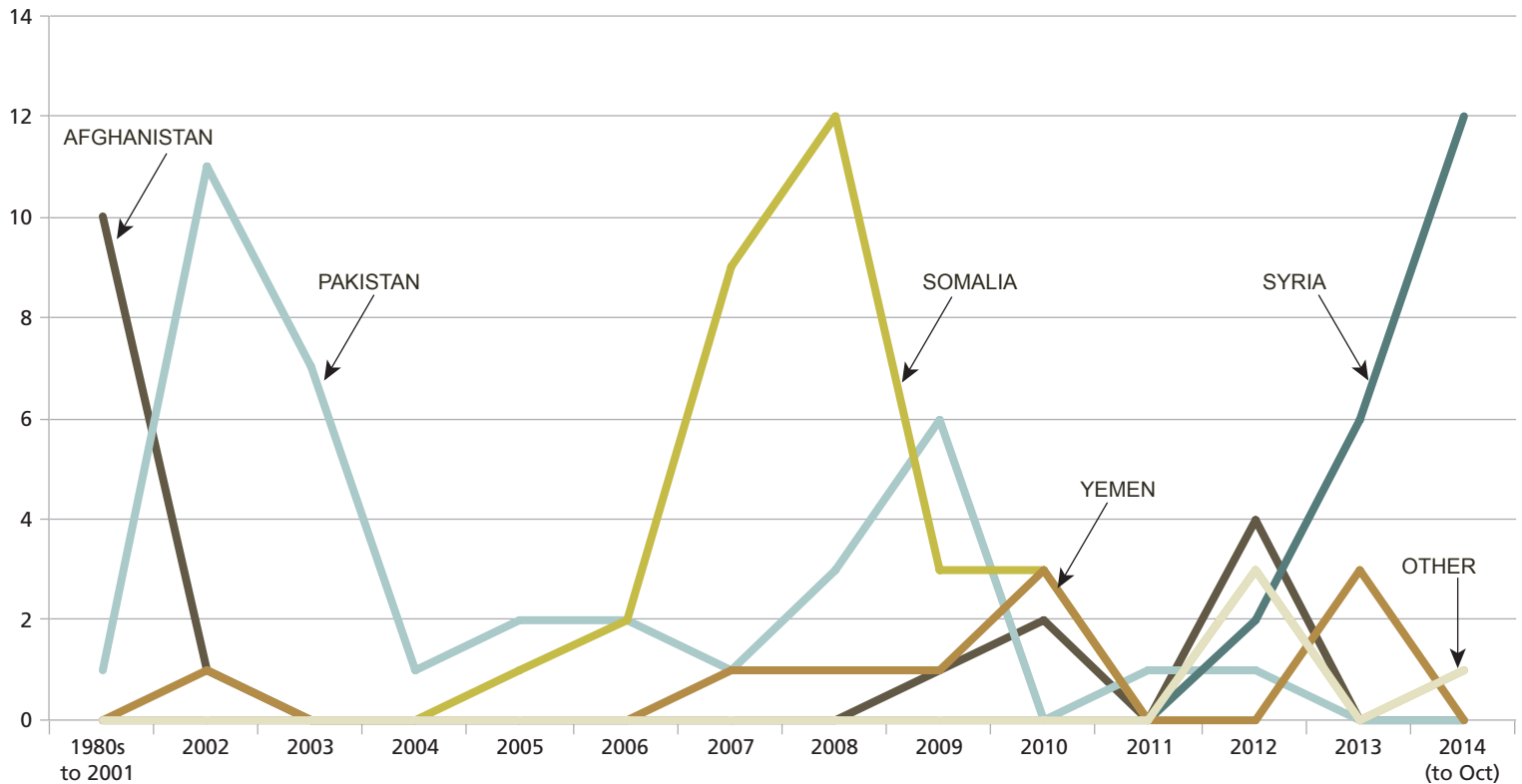
**Figure 5. The Fate of Those Who Have Joined or Attempted to Join Jihadist Fronts Abroad**



RAND PE130-5

Najibullah Zazi, Adis Medunjanin, Zarein Ahmedzay, and Faisal Shazad). Padilla, Faris, and al-Marri were convicted of being al Qaeda operatives who were selecting targets for a second wave of terrorist attacks following 9/11. They did not get very far in their planning. Boyd, who fought in Afghanistan with the Mujahedin, was arrested in 2009 for plotting terrorist attacks in the United States, but the plots had not gone beyond reconnaissance. Hayat's plot was embryonic at most. Zazi, Medunjanin, and Ahmedzay were far along in their plot to carry out suicide bombings on New York's subways when they were arrested. Only one of the return-

**Figure 6. Intended Destinations of Would-Be Jihadists Over Time**



RAND PE130-6

ees—Shazad, the Times Square bomber—actually carried out an attack, and that attack failed.

Two deadly terrorist attacks were carried out in the United States by individuals who spent time abroad that may have contributed to their continuing radicalization, but they are not known to have hooked up with any terrorist group or received any terrorist training while overseas. Carlos Bledsoe, who spent time in

Yemen, returned to the United States, where he later opened fire on an Army recruiting office in Little Rock, Arkansas, killing one soldier and wounding another. Tamerlan Tsarnaev spent time in Russia and returned to carry out the 2013 bombing of the Boston Marathon with his brother. Their two bombs killed three persons and wounded 264. On the run, the two brothers later also killed a police officer. The deadliest terrorist attack in the United States

since 9/11 was the shooting at Fort Hood carried out by Nidal Hassan, whose only connection with terrorists was through the Internet.

Putting this into the context of the broader phenomenon of homegrown terrorism, homegrown jihadists have devised more than 40 plots to carry out terrorist attacks in the United States since 9/11, of which the authorities uncovered and interrupted 39, some of them through undercover operations. Seven of the plots involved at least one person who had received some kind of experience or terrorist training abroad. The only three homegrown-jihadist attacks that resulted in fatalities were carried out by individuals who are not known to have received any terrorist training abroad. However, one bombing attempt and the most serious bomb plot involved individuals who had trained abroad.

The number of homegrown-jihadist terrorist plots suggests that such plots will continue to be a problem regardless of events in Syria, and that terrorist training abroad may increase the terrorists' basic skills.

In addition to the homegrown-terrorist plots, al Qaeda and its affiliates abroad continued to target the United States after 9/11. In 2001, the group recruited the shoe bomber to sabotage a U.S.-bound flight. Authorities learned of an aborted 2003 plot to disperse deadly chemicals in New York's subways, a plan revived in 2004 to bomb financial centers in New York, another 2004 plot to carry out terrorist attacks on the West Coast, a 2006 plot to plant liquid explosives aboard U.S.-bound flights, another 2006 plot to bomb the subway tunnel under the Hudson River, the 2009 attempt to sabotage a U.S.-bound flight by the underwear bomber, another attempt in 2010 to bomb U.S.-bound cargo flights, and a 2012 plot to blow up U.S. airliners.

## Returnees from Somalia

Although Pakistan was the intended destination of 37 would-be jihadists, 15 were arrested before they left the United States, and five from Northern Virginia were arrested soon after their arrival in Pakistan. Twenty-eight Americans went to Somalia—more than to any other country. Another six were arrested on the way (four in the United States and two abroad). Most of the volunteers who went to Somalia were Somali-Americans recruited in Minnesota, where there is a large community of recent Somali refugees with continuing close connections to their homeland. It is also a troubled community, many of whose young men have had difficulty integrating into American society. A number of those who went to Somalia were members of street gangs, and some had criminal records.

The invasion of Somalia in 2007 by Ethiopia, its historic enemy, aroused local passions, and the Somali diaspora mobilized to support the homeland. Local sentiments were clearly on the side of those fighting the invaders. The Somali case is the only one in which there was a semblance of an organized recruiting effort and pipeline. In addition to recruitment activities, a number of Somali-Americans were involved in fundraising and other forms of support.

Nationalism, clan ties, and war stories told by veterans of Somalia's earlier conflicts appear to have been more important to the supporters than jihadist ideology, at least for those who went to Somalia in late 2007 and early 2008. (The United States did not declare al Shabab a terrorist organization until October 2008.) Nevertheless, jihadist ideology may have been the primary draw for some, certainly the later volunteers and those who were not of Somali origin. It clearly motivated Omar Hammami, who traveled from Alabama to Somalia to become an effective spokesman for al Shabab until he was reportedly killed as the result of an internal dispute in the group.

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*No one knows exactly how many Americans are fighting alongside jihadist groups in Syria or Iraq. The numbers are constantly on the move, and it is not always clear what the estimates include.*

All 34 of the volunteers who supported Somalia intended to fight, not train for action elsewhere. This is evident in the fate of the 28 who succeeded in getting there. Americans in Somalia account for five of the six Americans who have been killed abroad carrying out suicide bombings. In all, 15 of the 22 Americans who have been killed abroad (not counting two killed in Yemen by U.S. airstrikes) died in Somalia. Nine of those who made it to Somalia are believed to be still at large abroad. Only four of the 28 returned to the United States, where they lay low until they were arrested. None were involved in any subsequent terrorist activity.

Although al Qaeda encouraged al Shabab to attack the United States, and the United States has carried out military operations against the group's leaders, al Shabab remains focused on its local struggle, extending its operations beyond Somalia's borders only to neighboring Uganda and Kenya, two nations that deployed troops in Somalia as part of the African Union Mission, which is assisting the Somali government in its conflict with al Shabab.

Alarmed by the disappearance of its young men, the Somali-American community actively worked with authorities to halt the recruiting. Only a few Somali-Americans have gone to Somalia since 2009, and none have gone since 2012.

What does the Somali experience tell us about the volunteers going to Syria and Iraq? Jihadist motives would appear to weigh more

heavily in the decisions of travelers to Syria. There is no evidence of recruitment aimed particularly at Syrian-Americans, the majority of whom are Christians or Jews. While there may be considerable sympathy toward the suffering of Syria's Sunni population, there is no evidence of community support for the jihadists. Like the Somali volunteers, those heading to Syria or Iraq are going there to fight, and that will mean higher casualties and fewer returnees. The few Somali volunteers who returned did not bring the war with them. Whether the Western fighters in Syria and Iraq follow the same pattern will depend on circumstances.

### **American Volunteers in Syria**

No one knows exactly how many Americans are fighting alongside jihadist groups in Syria or Iraq. The numbers are constantly on the move, and it is not always clear what the estimates include. In June 2014, estimates of the total number of Americans who had gone to or tried to go to Syria ranged between "a handful" and 20 (Hosenball, 2014). In August 2014, the total was reported to be somewhere between 70 and 100 ("New ISIS Video Recruits Westerners," 2014; Altman, 2014). By September, estimates had risen to 130. These estimates included those who were with the jihadist groups as well as other rebel formations like the FSA.

The number who had joined Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIL was a fraction of this. Again, estimates varied from "a small handful" to a dozen or so. Asked on October 5, 2014, how many Americans were "fighting in Syria on the side of the terrorists," FBI Director James Comey answered, "In the area of a dozen or so." He added that their identities were known to the FBI (Comey, 2014). In an earlier interview, Comey explained that he was referring only to those who



were believed to be currently fighting in Syria, not others who had been arrested on the way, had gone and were killed while fighting in Syria, or had returned and been arrested.<sup>9</sup>

The compilation prepared for this report shows that 20 of the 124 publicly identified Americans who have gone abroad or attempted to go abroad to join jihadist fronts have gone or tried to go to Syria, and in some cases, from there to Iraq—too few to enable us to draw firm conclusions. Authorities arrested ten individuals who planned or attempted to go there, and ten others went. Al Qaeda’s or ISIL’s ideology appears to have motivated most of them. One volunteer was a member of a non-jihadist rebel group, but he claimed that in the confusion of battle, he briefly ended up in Jabhat al-Nusra. One of the 20 intended to join Hezbollah in Syria. Nine of the 17 about whom there is information (excluding the one who wanted to join Hezbollah) were converts to Islam.

Of the ten who made it to Syria, one returned to the United States briefly but then went back to Syria a second time and killed himself in a suicide bombing ordered by Jabhat al-Nusra. In a videotaped message addressed to America made before the mission, the suicide bomber burned his American passport and warned, “We are coming for you” (Wagner, 2014). Five others, including one of two women, were killed while fighting with an al Qaeda–linked group. Another one returned to the United States, where he was arrested for having provided assistance to a jihadist terrorist organization, not for plotting attacks in the United States. The case for the prosecution fell apart when it became clear that the defendant had never actually joined a jihadist group. He died shortly thereafter, possibly of a drug overdose. Three of those publicly identified remain at large, along with others who have not been identified.

The history of these 20 individuals illustrates several issues. The numbers are still small. Assuming 100 or so Americans have tried to go, or have made it, to Syria or Iraq, the total for the four-year period (2011–2014) would be roughly equal to the total number of Americans who have joined or tried to join other jihadist fronts abroad since 2001. That would be a spike, although nothing like the increase in the number of fighters traveling to Syria from Europe.

The fact that there are Americans fighting with ISIL adds a new layer to the current terrorist threat. A successful terrorist operation requires only a few competent and determined individuals. However, this threat would seem to be a manageable problem for federal and local law enforcement authorities. Some of those who have gone to Syria probably will be killed in the fighting; others will not want to return. The authorities know the identities of many.

Jihadist ideology figures predominantly as a motive for the Americans fighting with ISIL, as is the case for most of those going to other jihadist fronts. However, nine of the 18 who can be positively identified were converts to Islam. That is a difference.

Only half of the 20 individuals seeking to fight with ISIS in Syria were of Arab or South Asian ethnicity, underscoring the inadequacy of any ethnic or national-origin profile as a means of

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*Anywhere from the high hundreds to several thousand fighters have traveled from Europe to Syria since the Syrian uprising began in 2011.*

identifying returning fighters. The ability of one returnee to come back to the United States and then leave the country for a second time without being intercepted by the authorities is also worrisome. While there is no evidence to support claims that ISIL has already infiltrated an army of sleepers, that ISIL fighters are just across the border with Mexico, or that some have already entered the United States, America's borders are porous. It is not impossible for individuals to secretly return.

All returning American volunteers are likely to be prosecuted, although authorities may face some legal challenges in attempting to sort out which group a returning fighter actually served with in Syria—not all are jihadists; not all of the groups in the field are designated terrorist organizations—some are in Syria to fight against ISIL; and the U.S. government is supporting non-jihadist rebels fighting against Assad's government, although it does not envision recruiting American fighters for this activity. Neutrality laws that prohibit Americans from serving in foreign forces may be invoked selectively.

While authorities understandably focus on jihadist groups, veterans of Hezbollah (a proscribed terrorist organization with a history of attacks on Western targets) or other yet-to-be-identified militia groups in what promises to be a very long conflict may return with similar experiences, skill sets, and possible motives to attack the United States.

## **Europe's Experience with Returnees from Syria**

Anywhere from the high hundreds to several thousand fighters have traveled from Europe to Syria since the Syrian uprising began in 2011. According to one 2013 study, most of them come from the United Kingdom, which accounts for 18 percent of the total, followed by France, Germany, Sweden, and Belgium; however, the authors of that study believe their dataset underrepresents France and Belgium but over-represents Sweden (Carter, Maher, and Neumann, 2014). Other accounts of European foreign fighters identify France as the greatest source, followed by the United Kingdom, Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands.

A study of the British fighters describes them as almost all males of South Asian ethnic origin who are in their twenties, many with links to higher education. The demographics would likely differ in France and Germany, owing to the composition of the local Muslim communities in those countries.

Approximately 55 percent of the British foreign fighters joined ISIL, while 15 percent joined Jabhat al-Nusra. Only 2 percent joined the FSA or other groups. The ultimate affiliation of the remaining 29 percent is unknown. Another study suggests that as many as 80 percent joined ISIL.

Germany's experience is similar in several respects. Numbers are foggy, but German authorities believe that around 400 Germans went to fight in Syria.<sup>10</sup> Forty were killed, 100 returned. Of those, approximately 25 percent had some combat experience. Others were there to deliver humanitarian aid or were in support roles to the various groups. Most of those with combat experience served as low-level fighters with Salafi or jihadist groups. Seven became suicide bombers. Others were assigned to support or propaganda roles. None held command roles or served in technical positions.

Although ages ranged from the teens to the forties, the typical German volunteers were 20 to 25 years old and had a secondary-school education. In Germany, they worked at temporary jobs or were trainees. They had what authorities described as “weak social backgrounds,” with divorced parents and absent fathers. Some were converts to Islam. Many were part of a pop subculture in which radical rappers blurred with Salafi extremists. Muslims were portrayed as “oppressed.” The German volunteers went to Syria to assist fellow Muslims, support jihad, live in a caliphate, seek camaraderie and adventure, and acquire prestige.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to those coming primarily from Western Europe, between 800 and 1,500 Chechens and other Caucasians have gone to fight in Syria. Some are experienced veterans of Chechnya’s wars who were stranded outside of Chechnya along with others fleeing the Caucasus. Others are young Chechens coming from the diaspora in Europe and the Middle East, primarily Austria, Belgium, and Poland. They have no prior combat experience, and some are Georgian Chechens.

Many of them are “homeless” in the figurative sense—displaced (*depayse*). Often they are unemployed, poor, and purposeless. The veterans of Chechnya’s wars have nothing to lose. They fight and train in Syria in order to eventually fight in Russia. They are recruited primarily through messages from friends on social media. The primary appeal is masculinity, weapons, a warrior ethos, pride, honor, and power.

In contrast to the volunteers from Western Europe who are integrated into jihadist forces, the Chechens often serve in their own military units with their own leaders, who are experienced combat veterans—some were noncommissioned officers in the Russian army. They will not take up arms against fellow jihadists.

Several hundred fighters are believed to have returned to Europe from Syria, although the exact number is unknown. British authorities believe that about 250 British jihadists have returned—a number that seems high. Given proximity and ease of travel to Syria, Europe also seems to have more jihadist commuters, i.e., individuals who go back and forth to and from Syria. To date, the returning jihadists have not produced a wave of terrorism, but authorities are worried. One French returnee carried out a shooting that left four dead at a Jewish museum in Belgium. Another arrested in France was believed to be preparing a terrorist attack. According to a publicized report, British officials feared that a group of 50 British jihadists who returned from Syria were planning terrorist attacks (Hughes, 2014; Malik and Gardham, 2014). Several others were arrested by German authorities, but they were not believed to be actively plotting any attacks.

History suggests that those now fighting in Syria and Iraq would pose an increased risk upon their return. A study by Thomas Hegghammer focusing on Westerners who participated as fighters on jihadist fronts between 1990 and 2010 concludes that one out of four jihadist terrorists in the West had foreign experience. The study further concludes that only about “one in nine foreign fighters [in these earlier cases] returned for an attack in the West” (Hegghammer, 2013). This implies that if 2,000 European fighters joined jihadist fronts in Syria and Iraq, more than 200 of them would eventually become involved in subsequent terrorist plotting.

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*History suggests that those now fighting in Syria and Iraq would pose an increased risk upon their return.*

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## *Jihadist fighters returning to Europe would find a potentially more favorable reception in its marginalized immigrant communities and could exploit already existing Islamist assertions.*

Jeanine de Roy Zuijdewijn, a Dutch scholar, challenges these findings. She claims that the ratio is much lower—that only about one in 11 jihadist terrorists in the West had previously fought with or received training from jihadist groups abroad (de Roy van Zuijdewijn, 2014). However, her data also show that of 26 terrorist plots in Europe, five “contained at least one individual who can be categorized as a genuine foreign fighter whereas eight plots . . . had a link to a Western individual who went to a terrorist training camp.” In other words, experience abroad figured in half of the plots. However, she points out that most of the plotters were not former foreign fighters but individuals who could be best categorized as foreign trainees.

Europe may face a different sort of a threat. ISIL’s declaration of an Islamic State has created excitement among Islamists worldwide. It has brought the group a remarkable amount of public support. According to a recent public opinion poll, 2 percent of those surveyed in Germany said they had a favorable view of ISIL. The figure was 7 percent in the United Kingdom and a remarkable 16 percent in France. Among 18- to 24-year-olds, the figures increase to 3 percent in Germany, 4 percent in the United Kingdom, and 27 percent in France (Fisher, 2014). The numbers reflect at least in part the sentiments of angry young Muslims in immigrant communities. The declaration of an Islamic State also has emboldened

some extremists in Europe to declare their own ministates where vigilantes will enforce Sharia law.

At the same time, far-right groups are growing in strength in Germany, the United Kingdom, France, and elsewhere. They oppose immigration and are outraged by any assertions of special privileges for diverse immigrant communities. The extremist fringes are hostile to Muslims as well as Jews.

Jihadist fighters returning to Europe would find a potentially more favorable reception in its marginalized immigrant communities and could exploit already existing Islamist assertions. They could easily become the catalysts for resistance to state authority. This will almost certainly provoke a backlash on the far right, which could lead to ugly scenarios. That makes the issue of returning foreign fighters as much a societal problem as a law enforcement challenge.

## **How Western Fighters in Syria and Iraq May Differ from Previous Cohorts of Volunteers**

One of the reasons why so many Westerners have gone to fight in Syria is that it is easy to get there, especially from Europe. Still, making the trip to a conflict zone suggests a level of commitment higher than that of their stay-at-home brethren. Western volunteers going to Afghanistan in the 1980s or Bosnia in the 1990s saw themselves as being there to defend Islam against Soviet invaders or Serb ethnic cleansing. By now, al Qaeda’s ideology and intentions are manifest. Some of the cohort of volunteers may have gone to Syria to help bring down a despised tyrant, but recent volunteers appear to be going because of jihadist sentiments. Joining a jihadist front abroad means joining a war on the West; moreover, it is a crime in Western countries. That underscores ideological commitment and a willingness to accept the risk of prosecution at home.

Observers have spoken about “jihadist cool,” suggesting that the lure of joining a jihad front has acquired an appeal that goes beyond religious duty or ideological conviction. The numbers are too small, and the evidence is sketchy, but there are indications that violent jihad is entering popular culture, that it may transcend its religious and ideological precepts and become the expression of a broader rejection of today’s society and resistance to the existing establishment. But that also could mean that jihad will ultimately be reduced to a rap video and a fashion statement—another fad of a fickle and fast-changing youth culture.

Those who make it to Syria chronicle their experience on social media. Their messages often include defiant threats against their home country, although some of this is bravado. An individual who posts his identity at the same time that he is making terrorist threats is not thinking clearly about how he might then sneak back home to carry out such threats. Of course, not all jihadists exhibit clear thinking.

Homeland-security officials in the West worry about increased terrorist skills, and hands-on experience can make a significant difference. Hegghammer points out that “individuals who have received training and direct combat experience abroad tend to carry out deadlier attacks than those who have not” (Hegghammer, 2013). The evidence, however, is mixed. In her study, de Roy van Zuijdewijn argues that less than 12 percent of the individuals involved in plots that resulted in injuries or fatalities could be categorized as Western fighters or trainees. While this may be true, only one or two of the participants in any plot need to be technically competent. Two of the four terrorists who carried out the deadly bombings in London on July 7, 2005, had training abroad. In the United States, Zazi was the sole bomb builder; his two companions were needed only to detonate

the devices aboard subways. Of course, foreign training does not guarantee competence. The bomb made by Shazad, who received training in Pakistan, did not work, while the bomb made by Tsarnaev, who had no such training, did work.

Time in Syria and Iraq will give the Western volunteers combat experience that they could not otherwise obtain. There is a tendency in jihadist groups to use the highly motivated foreign fighters as suicide bombers or cannon fodder, so many of them will be killed. But if they rise above the level of expendable foot soldiers, the Western volunteers can acquire basic operational and leadership skills, which have been clearly lacking in most of the homegrown-terrorist plots seen thus far. Some of the returnees may have acquired on-the-job training in the construction of improvised explosive devices, which could be applied to future terrorist activities.

### **What Would Reverse the Flow of Jihadists?**

For the time being, Western volunteers are going to Syria and Iraq; far fewer are coming back. The initial fear was that once the fighting in Syria ended, presumably with the overthrow of the Assad regime, the volunteers, now seasoned veterans, would return. But the fighting in Syria and Iraq seems likely to continue, keeping the flow from west to east. If, for some reason, the opportunities for combat in Syria and Iraq were to diminish, those who were attracted by the violence to begin with could be expected to move on to other fronts or flow back. That does not appear likely for the foreseeable future.

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Osama bin Laden made a calculation that al Qaeda's strategic interests would be served by launching increasingly ambitious terrorist attacks on the United States, culminating in a direct attack on U.S. territory on 9/11. Despite threatening rhetoric, neither Syrian nor Iraqi jihadist leaders seem to have reason to provoke external military intervention. Implementing al Qaeda's priorities of attacking the West could come later, but for the immediate future, jihadists in Syria and Iraq have their hands full fighting local government forces and each other. The threatening rhetoric established credentials, satisfied hardliners in the ranks, and attracted recruits, but ISIL's leader called for doctors and engineers to come and help build the Islamic State. Provoking foreign military attacks would seem to contradict this goal.

The military campaign against ISIL may change these strategic calculations, giving the group cause for direct attacks on the West. Some say that this is inevitable anyway. They argue that al Qaeda's notion of a global jihad is in the DNA of all jihadist groups and that they all eventually go global.

The evidence is mixed. AQAP has on several occasions tried to carry out terrorist attacks on the United States. Osama bin Laden thought that al Shabab could exploit its contingent of American fighters to carry out such attacks. However, while the group has launched terrorist operations beyond Somalia's bor-

ders, they have only been in Africa and only against countries that contributed troops to United Nations forces in Somalia. Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb has remained focused on extending its operations to neighboring African countries. Other veterans of al Qaeda's training camps in Afghanistan have attacked foreign targets in their home countries. ISIL's predecessor, the Islamic State of Iraq, fought with American forces during the American occupation of Iraq and carried out terrorist operations in Jordan, but not in Europe or the United States. Whether this reflected strategic self-restraint or other pressing priorities is difficult to say.

Assemblies of fanatics are difficult to control. Regardless of strategic calculations made by leaders, returning fighters or hardliners still in the ranks may launch attacks on their own initiative. These could be aimed at provoking military retaliation and a global showdown that leaders initially might have wanted to avoid but cannot easily disown.

This situation led to the earlier debate about strategy: Should the United States attack the jihadists in Syria and Iraq now to prevent their consolidation on the presumption that they would eventually create terrorist sanctuaries and launch attacks on the West? Or should the United States avoid intervention for the time being, in the belief that these groups will remain locally preoccupied and will eventually be weakened by local government counteroffensives, will provoke the locals to rise against them, or will kill each other off in internal quarrels?

The debate ended with the initiation of American bombing in August 2014. Although initially aimed at preventing a massacre of Yazidi refugees fleeing almost certain massacre by advancing ISIL fighters, the air campaign quickly expanded to prevent ISIL

forces from seizing certain strategic targets in Iraq. The military effort was further broadened through the creation of an international coalition of regional and external forces that would join the bombing campaign while providing military assistance to the government of Iraq. The objective of this campaign was to “degrade and ultimately destroy” ISIL. American aircraft, along with those from several coalition members, began bombing ISIL targets in Syria in September 2014.

### What Can Be Done to Deal with The Threat?

There is no exodus to Syria. As the preceding discussion shows, while estimates of the number of Americans believed to have gone to Syria or Iraq are imperfect, and the numbers will grow as the conflict continues, thus far, the current total is probably few more than 100—not hundreds, not thousands. Not all will return. Of those who return, not all will have obtained useful experience while abroad. Some will return disillusioned, with no desire to engage in terrorism. Most will be promptly arrested. In sum, returning fighters from Syria and Iraq add another layer to the terrorist threat we already confront, but one that can be managed within existing resources and rules.

On the other hand, the threat posed by returning fighters cannot be dismissed. The large number of Europeans who have gone to Syria creates additional problems. Military action against ISIL has provided a motive for revenge by ISIL or individuals on their own. Not all returning fighters will be immediately detected. Some may return with useful experience—competence counts. And it takes only one or two determined individuals to carry out a deadly terrorist attack. What more can be done?

The U.S. federal government, in cooperation with local authorities and community organizations, has launched a new effort aimed at reducing radicalization and identifying those who cannot be dissuaded from pursuing a destructive and self-destructive path. There is much to build on. The small numbers of those leaving the United States to join jihadist fronts abroad or plot terrorist attacks in the United States suggest that there is little support among American Muslims for jihadist ideology. No doubt there are unreported interventions by family members and friends that have persuaded or prevented some potential jihadists from taking action. Tips about terrorist plots or those planning to join jihadists abroad come from the communities.

The identification of organized recruiting networks would provide a valuable source of intelligence about volunteers going to jihadist fronts and, potentially, about those coming back. For most American jihadists, going abroad appears to be an individual decision. Outside of the Somali experience, there is no evidence of organized recruiting in the United States or support from the Muslim community. Radicalization and self-recruitment in the United States reflect personal circumstances and motives. The travelers make their own way to Somalia, Pakistan, Yemen, or, now, Syria and Iraq. That increases the intelligence challenge.

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Joining a jihadist front abroad may take a person out of the country for a long time—months, even years. The passage of time alone should not require closing cases so that an identified subject of interest who returns to the United States months or years later is no longer subject to scrutiny. An effort can be made to develop a list of attributes other than a long period outside of the country that might cause immigration authorities to look more carefully at certain returning individuals. Added scrutiny of certain categories of individuals will inevitably raise concerns about profiling, but there is an intelligence predicate.

U.S. intelligence sources in the Middle East and Southwest Asia are gradually going dark. There is no American military presence in Syria, whose government the United States opposes; there is no longer a large American military presence in Iraq; and American soldiers are coming home from Afghanistan, effectively shutting down the intelligence effort that accompanies intervention. The absence of Americans on the scene makes it harder to recruit local human sources. And owing to political developments, the United States can no longer expect to receive the kind of intelligence it received in the past from a number of governments in the region, including Egypt, Iraq, and Pakistan. The need for accurate intelligence to support the current bombing campaign and the deployment of some U.S. forces to Iraq to increase protection and assist in the effort against ISIL may gradually open up some new sources, but this will take time.

Domestic intelligence efforts have proved effective in uncovering homegrown jihadist terrorist plots. The danger posed by returning jihadist fighters is recognized and has been made an intelligence priority. American intelligence officials also express greater confidence that they are now more likely to detect a major international terrorist plot on the scale of 9/11. Smaller-scale attacks involving tiny conspiracies are more difficult to uncover, although the record in such cases is also impressive. That is not a new problem.

Domestic intelligence programs are currently under assault. In part, this reflects a growing sense of security, enabling the pendulum to swing back. Indeed, pointing to the threat posed by returning foreign fighters has risked allegations that this was nothing more than cynical threat-mongering calculated to preserve budgets or provide an excuse for maintaining oppressive security measures. Continuing revelations about intelligence operations encourage this negative view. At the same time, Americans are not abandoning their expectation that authorities should be able to prevent *all* terrorist attacks. And videos of gruesome murders by jihadists in Syria and Iraq have caused anxiety and anger, which translates into support for efforts to ensure that such events do not happen here.

Maintaining the capacity to identify and disrupt terrorist plots against the West requires continued international cooperation. Here again, recent revelations about some American intelligence activities abroad have strained relations and complicate cooperation. It is to be hoped that most governments will see preventing terrorist attacks as a matter of mutual self-interest, but preserving the fragile sinews of cooperation among intelligence services will require some repair and confidence-building. Again, ISIL's rapid expansion in Iraq, accompanied by horrific images of mass executions and other atrocities by the group, reminds the world of the



nature of the terrorist adversary. The spread of Salafist and jihadist groups across Africa and the Middle East, the flow of foreign fighters to jihadist fronts in Syria and Iraq, and the galvanizing effect that the creation of the Islamic State has had on dispirited and dormant jihadists around the world also underscore the necessity of international cooperation.

Intelligence efforts will focus on reducing the flow of foreign volunteers to Syria and Iraq, identifying those who have gone, and picking up or monitoring those who return. In 2008, when American authorities uncovered an organized effort to recruit Somali-Americans, they alerted Somali diaspora communities to the problem and reduced the flow. This effort continues.<sup>12</sup> The campaign to reduce recruiting in the Somali communities, which combined federal agencies, local police assisting one another, and members of the local communities, merits close study for lessons learned.

In dealing with returning fighters, the United States holds to a law enforcement approach. The Justice Department can now arrest those who intend to join jihadist groups and will want to arrest and prosecute nearly all of them, except some who will be left to run as part of intelligence operations. Both France and the United Kingdom have recently passed legislation to facilitate prosecution of those going abroad to fight, but many Europeans view prosecution of all returning fighters from Syria and Iraq as impractical and politically difficult (Hegghammer, 2013). They believe that emphasis should be placed on measures to stem the flow of recruits to jihadist fronts, including prosecution of recruiters and facilitators, while prosecuting only those returnees who have committed unlawful acts of violence. According to this view, society must leave open a doorway to those who, disillusioned by their experience abroad, want to return. Efforts must therefore focus on deradi-

calization and reintegration. (Given ISIL's calculated brutality, one might add rehumanization.)

This approach raises two problems. First, it is extremely difficult to document the actions of those who have traveled to Syria or Iraq unless they have documented their own activities through social media, as many do. Second, it will be very difficult to assess which returnees pose a terrorist threat and which do not. Returning fighters left at large will have to be closely monitored, which, given the expected numbers of European returnees, could place an overwhelming surveillance burden on intelligence authorities. As a recent study by Richard Barrett pointed out, "National resources in most countries are insufficient to monitor more than a handful of returnees" (Barrett, 2014). And surveillance of such individuals may have to continue for months or years. Whether all returning fighters should be promptly arrested or dealt with more discriminately is a topic of debate in Europe.

In the United States, dealing with returnees will be a responsibility of both federal and local law enforcement authorities. Large numbers of returnees could easily stretch FBI resources. Local law enforcement will have to take up the burden. While the Joint Terrorism Task Forces have worked well in investigating terrorist plots, problems have arisen with returnees. Local police were unaware of Shazad's return to Connecticut after his long stay in Pakistan. Three months later, he attempted to detonate a car bomb in Times Square. Boston police were unaware that the FBI, acting on a Russian tip, had interviewed Tsarnaev (although the interviewers

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concluded that he was not involved in any terrorist activity at the time), nor were local authorities aware that he had gone to Russia and returned. Nine months later, he and his brother detonated explosive devices at the finish line of the Boston Marathon. Police and federal officials will want to review their protocols of cooperation, specifically as they apply to surveillance of returning fighters. This will require true sharing, enabling a more effective utilization of state and local police.

Current U.S. law appears to be adequate—providing material support to a terrorist organization, which includes joining or attempting to join a terrorist group, is already a crime. Rather than being treated as enemy combatants, returning fighters can continue to be dealt with in ordinary courts, where prosecutions have been successful. However, as mentioned above, it may be difficult to determine with whom a particular returning fighter may have fought.

The U.S. Neutrality Acts, which make it a crime for American citizens or residents to fight against a government with which the United States is not at war, have been used to prosecute Americans who joined armed groups abroad, even when these are not designated terrorist organizations. The Neutrality Acts are broader than the laws that make it a crime to join or provide other material support to

designated terrorist groups. Despite this flexibility, the United States may want review how it wishes to treat Americans returning from Syria or Iraq who have not joined proscribed terrorist organizations. Prosecution could become awkward when the United States supports a rebellion but is not officially at war with a country.

Returning jihadists themselves are potentially valuable sources of intelligence. They can provide information about the groups they served in and can help identify other foreigners who joined. Their credibility also makes them magnets for would-be warriors. Like undercover operations to identify willing recruits for foreign terrorist organizations, intelligence operations involving the employment of returning jihadists as informants could provide information about others wanting to go abroad or carry out attacks in the United States. And public knowledge that some returning fighters were being utilized as informants would have the beneficial effect of isolating other returning fighters within the extremist community.

Such efforts would raise questions of intelligence and prosecution strategy. Are U.S. counterterrorist efforts best served by chalking up arrests of returning veterans, thereby taking them out of circulation while discouraging others from going or returning, or by pursuing a more flexible approach in which returning jihadists who promptly identify themselves and cooperate will be treated more leniently and will be provided with assistance—including, as has already been provided in some cases, witness protection?

### **The Bigger Question**

The bigger question is whether a more ambitious American military intervention in Iraq and Syria is required. Some argue that depending entirely on the ability of intelligence efforts to identify fighters returning from Syria before they arrive in the United States or to

detect their terrorist plots during the time between their arrival in the United States and the execution of an attack is playing too close to our own goalposts. Those holding this view believe that purely defensive strategy is too dangerous and that the United States has to attack ISIL's leadership in Iraq and Syria, disrupt its command and control, scatter its militants, and destroy its operational capability. Proponents of this forward strategy believe that the current air campaign will not suffice.

Limited airstrikes, by themselves, will not be enough to cripple ISIL, certainly not in the near future. The air campaign makes the United States the principal impediment to the achievement of ISIL's objectives, thereby increasing the group's incentives to target the United States with terrorist attacks. Unless the Islamic State is quickly destroyed, and that will necessitate the deployment of ground forces, it poses both a near-term and far-term danger.

Putting "boots on the ground," to use the popular phrase, is often presumed to mean large numbers of American conventional combat troops. That is not necessarily the case. It could take the form of advisers, forward observers to better coordinate air strikes, or special forces, working with ground units provided by Iraq, Kurdish fighters, or other sources.

The air campaign has only just gotten off the ground. Initial reports indicate that hundreds of ISIL fighters have been killed,

but ISIL continues to press its military offensives in both Syria and Iraq. It is unclear how its leadership will assess the situation and react. ISIL could attack U.S. targets directly in an effort to provoke the United States into deploying combat forces on the ground. Such deployment would be portrayed as an assault on Islam itself and a summons to the final battle.

Or ISIL could decide that it can ride out and outlast the air campaign, embedding itself among civilians in cities it now controls, luring its foes into killing large numbers of noncombatants while continuing to wage a long campaign of attrition against its enemies, ultimately gaining the *de facto* existence of the Islamic State. After all, after being chased out of Afghanistan by American forces in 2001, and despite continuing military pressure by NATO air and ground forces, the Taliban were able to survive and gradually reestablish themselves in strongholds across the country to await the withdrawal of the last U.S. combat units. ISIL's response therefore would be calibrated to discourage members of the coalition from continuing their campaign while avoiding provoking an all-out retaliation.

Whatever the ISIL decides, history suggests that U.S. military intervention abroad can inspire jihadist recruitment and may incite further attacks by homegrown terrorists. And any major terrorist attack, whether ordered by ISIL or inspired by events in Syria and Iraq, will reinforce arguments for American escalation.

## Appendix

### Americans Who Have Left to Join Jihadist Fronts Abroad

**Ali Salah Kahlah al-Marri** (38), a legal permanent resident of the United States, attended an al Qaeda training camp in Pakistan. He returned to the United States and was arrested in 2001. His status was changed to “enemy combatant” in 2003, and he was held in military custody until 2009, when he was returned to the federal court system for prosecution. He was convicted in 2009 of providing material support to a terrorist organization, although he confessed to having been sent to the United States by al Qaeda to plan further terrorist operations to follow the 9/11 attacks. He had arrived in the United States the day before 9/11 and was arrested in December 2001, so he had little time to plot anything.

**José Padilla** (32), a convert to Islam, attended an al Qaeda training camp in Afghanistan sometime in the fall of 2000. In early 2002, a senior al Qaeda planner provided Padilla with training and sent him back to the United States to target high-rise buildings with gas explosions. Padilla was taken into custody as he stepped off the airplane in Chicago in May 2002. He was later convicted of plotting to attack U.S. citizens overseas. His indictment makes no mention of his mission in the United States.

**John Walker Lindh** (20), a convert to Islam, traveled to Afghanistan in early 2001 to assist the Taliban in their fight against the Northern Alliance. He was captured in 2002. He pleaded guilty to the charge of assisting the Taliban and al Qaeda and carrying an explosive and was sentenced to 20 years.

**Sahim Alwar** (26), **Yahya Goba** (25), **Yasein Taher** (24), **Faysal Galab** (25), and **Shafal Mosed** (23), Yemeni-Americans from Lackawanna, New York, all born in the United States, and **Muktar al-Bakri** (21), a naturalized citizen, traveled to an al Qaeda training camp before 9/11. Disillusioned by their experience, the six returned to the United States. They were not involved in any terrorist plot but were arrested in 2002 and convicted of training at an al Qaeda camp.

**Patrice Lumumba Ford** (31), **Jeffrey Leon Battle** (31), **Muhammad Ibrahim Bilal**, **Ahmed Ibrahim Bilal** (22), all native U.S. citizens; **Maher Hawash** (38), a naturalized citizen from Jordan; and **Habis Abdulla al Saoub** (37), a legal permanent resident from Jordan, known as the “Portland Seven,” were arrested for attempting to join al Qaeda and the Taliban and were convicted. The group traveled to China but were turned back. All but al Saoub returned to the United States. Al Saoub managed to go on to Pakistan and join al Qaeda. He was reportedly killed by Pakistani forces in 2003. Lewis was released from prison in 2006.

**Anwar al-Awlaki**, (40), a native U.S. citizen, traveled to Yemen in 2002, where he later joined AQAP. He was killed by a U.S. missile in 2011.

**Adnan Gulshair el Shukrijumah** (27), for whom an arrest warrant was issued in 2003, is suspected of plotting to carry out terrorist attacks in the United States. At some point, he fled the country and is currently believed to be a high-ranking official in al Qaeda, probably in Pakistan.

**Iyman Faris** (34), a naturalized U.S. citizen, returned to Pakistan in 2000 and then traveled to Afghanistan with a friend who was an al Qaeda operative. At an al Qaeda training camp there, Faris met with Osama bin Laden, for whom he did some research. He returned to the United States and in 2002, still acting under al Qaeda’s instructions, he became involved in a terrorist plot to simultaneously derail a train in Washington, D.C., and destroy the Brooklyn Bridge in New York. Faris was assigned to reconnoiter how the destruction of the bridge might be accomplished. Federal agents arrested him in 2003, reportedly having persuaded him to act as a double agent, but he was later prosecuted and convicted of providing support to a terrorist organization and assisting in a terrorist conspiracy.

**Randall Todd Royer** (39), a native U.S. citizen; **Muhammed Aatique** (30), a legal permanent resident of the United States; **Seifullah Chapman** (31), a native U.S. citizen; and **Khwaja Mahmood Hasan** (27), a naturalized U.S. citizen, were among 11 men arrested in 2003 as part of the Northern Virginia Cluster. They had received four days of training from jihadists in Pakistan in 2002, while the other seven who were arrested were attempting to go abroad to join Lashkar-e-Taiba. They include **Ali Asad Chandia** (26), a citizen of Pakistan; **Sabri Benkhala** (27), a native U.S. citizen; **Ibrahim al-Hamdi** (25), a Yemeni national; **Donald T. Surratt** (30), a native U.S. citizen; **Massoud Ahmad Khan** (33), a naturalized U.S. citizen; **Hammad Abdur-Raheem** (34), a U.S.-born citizen; and **Yong Ki Kwon** (27), a naturalized U.S. citizen. They were not involved in plotting any attacks in the United States.

**Ahmed Omar Abu Ali** (22), a native U.S. citizen, was arrested in 2003 by Saudi authorities for terrorism-related crimes. He was later returned to the United States and was convicted of assisting al Qaeda and participating in a plot to assassinate President George W. Bush.

**Adam Yahiyeh Gdahn** (26) traveled abroad in 2004 to join al Qaeda in Pakistan. He later became one of al Qaeda's principal spokesmen.

**Mahmud Faruq Brent** (32), a native U.S. citizen, was one of three defendants arrested in New York for planning to assist terrorist groups abroad. He had attended a Lashkar-e-Taiba training camp in Pakistan and was arrested in 2005 for assisting terrorism abroad. After his return, he was not involved in any plots to carry out attacks in the United States.

**Hamid Hayat** (22), a naturalized U.S. citizen, attended an al Qaeda training camp in Pakistan. He was arrested upon his return in 2005 and was charged with planning to carry out terrorist attacks in the United States, although there was no evidence of any specific plot.

**Daniel Maldonado** (27), a native U.S. citizen and convert to Islam, joined al Shabab in Somalia in 2006. He was arrested by the Kenyan armed forces and returned to the United States, where he was convicted of assisting a foreign terrorist organization.

**Kobie Diallo Williams** (33), a native U.S. citizen, and **Adnan Babar Mirza** (29), a Pakistani national who overstayed his visa, were arrested in 2006 for planning to join the Taliban to fight U.S. forces overseas.

**Ruben Shumpert** (26), a native U.S. citizen and convert to Islam, traveled to Somalia to join al Shabab in 2006. He was reportedly killed there in 2008.

**Omar Hammami** (23), a native U.S. citizen, traveled to Somalia and joined al Shabab in 2007. He became a spokesman for the group but was later murdered by other al Shabab members as the result of an internal factional dispute.

**Dahir Gure** (age unknown), a Somali-American, left for Somalia in October 2007 as part of the first wave of Somali-Americans leaving Minnesota to fight overseas. He was reported to have been killed in Somalia.

**Khalid Mohamud Abshir** (27), a legal permanent resident, was a member of the first wave of Somali-Americans who traveled from Minnesota to Somalia in late 2007. He is still at large in Somalia.

**Ahmed Ali Omar** (24), a legal permanent resident, was a member of the first wave of Somali-Americans who traveled from Minnesota to Somalia in late 2007. He is still at large in Somalia.

**Salah Osman Ahmed** (27), a naturalized U.S. citizen, was a member of the first wave of Somali-Americans who traveled from Minnesota to Somalia in late 2007. He returned to the United States before the U.S. government declared al Shabab to be a terrorist group. He was not involved in any subsequent terrorist plots in the United States, but he later pleaded guilty to providing material support to a terrorist group and was sentenced to three years in prison.

**Abdifatah Yusuf Isse** (23), a member of the first wave of Somali-Americans who traveled from Minnesota to Somalia in late 2007, later returned to the United States. He was not involved in any terrorist plotting, but he later pleaded guilty to providing material support to a terrorist group and was sentenced to three years in prison.

**Kamal Said Hassan** (24), a naturalized U.S. citizen, was a member of the first wave of Somali-Americans who traveled from Minnesota to Somalia in December 2007. He stayed with al Shabab until 2008. Although he was not involved in any terrorist plotting after his return to the United States, he continued to follow the group's orders and in 2013 was sentenced to ten years in prison.

**Jaber Elbaneh** (41), a member of the Lackawanna group, joined al Qaeda and was later arrested in Yemen. He escaped prison in Yemen but later turned himself in to Yemeni authorities in 2007 and served a five-year sentence.

**Muhamud Said Omar** (38), a legal permanent resident, was a member of the second wave of Somali-Americans who traveled from Minnesota to Somalia in January 2008, when he joined al Shabab. He did not train or fight in Somalia but returned to the United States to recruit and assist others in going there. He was arrested in the Netherlands and extradited to the United States where he was convicted in 2012 and sentenced to 20 years in prison.

**Zakaria Maruf** (29), a legal permanent resident, was a member of the second wave of Somali-Americans who traveled from Minnesota to Somalia in early 2008. He joined al Shabab and is believed to have been killed in 2009.

**Omar Mohamed Mahamud** (age unknown), left Seattle to join al Shabab in 2009. He reportedly died in a suicide bombing in Mogadishu in September 2009.

**Abdirashid Ali Omar** (19), a member of the second wave of Somali-Americans who traveled from Minnesota to Somalia in 2008, is believed to have been killed in 2010.

**Mohamed Abdullah Hassan** (22), a member of the second wave of Somali-Americans who traveled from Minnesota to Somalia in 2008, was indicted at the age of 18 in 2009 and is believed to be still at large.

**Mustafa Ali Salat** (17), a legal permanent resident, was a member of the second wave of Somali-Americans who traveled from Minnesota to Somalia in August 2008. He was indicted in 2009 and is believed to be still at large.

**Burhan Ibrahim Hassan** (17), a member of the second wave of Somali-Americans who traveled from Minnesota to Somalia in 2008, is reported to have been executed by al Shabab.

**Mohamoud Ali Hassan** (18), a legal permanent resident, was a member of the second wave of Somali-Americans who traveled from Minnesota to Somalia in 2008. He is believed to have been killed in 2009.

**Abdislan Hussein Ali** (21), a naturalized U.S. citizen, was a member of the second wave of Somali-Americans who traveled from Minnesota to Somalia in 2008. He is reported to have been killed in a suicide bombing in Somalia in 2011.

**Jamal Bana** (20), a member of the second wave of Somali-Americans who traveled from Minnesota to Somalia in 2008, is believed to have been killed in 2009.

**Troy Kastigar** (27), a U.S.-born citizen and convert to Islam, traveled from Minnesota to Somalia in 2008. He is believed to have been killed in 2009.

**Abikar akar Ali Abdi** (19), a U.S. citizen, was a member of the second wave of Somali-Americans who traveled from Minnesota to Somalia in 2008. He was indicted in 2010 and remains at large.

**Christopher Paul** (43), a native U.S. citizen and convert to Islam, received instruction at al Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan and Pakistan in the 1990s. From there, he went to Germany, where he helped train terrorists for attacks on U.S. targets in Europe. He returned to the United States in 2002 and was arrested and charged with plotting to carry out terrorist attacks against U.S. targets in Europe and the United States.

**Bryant Neal Vinas** (26), a native U.S. citizen and convert to Islam, traveled to Pakistan in 2007 and joined al Qaeda. He was captured by Pakistani forces and returned to the United States, where he was arrested. He later admitted that he had suggested targets in the United States to al Qaeda planners.

**Sharif Mobley** (26), a native U.S. citizen of Somali origin, traveled to Yemen in 2008 to join al Qaeda or al Shabab. He was arrested by Yemeni authorities.

**Carlos Bledsoe** (or **Abdulahakim Mujahid Muhammad**) (23), a native U.S. citizen and convert to Islam, traveled to Yemen in 2007 to study Islam. He was arrested by Yemeni authorities in 2008 and was deported back to the United States. In 2009, he shot and killed one man and wounded another at an Army recruiting center in Little Rock, Arkansas. While his stay in Yemen may have contributed to his continuing self-radicalization, and despite his own claim following his arrest that he was an al Qaeda operative, he was not a member of al Qaeda and received no military or terrorist training while in Yemen.

**Daniel Boyd** (39), a native U.S. citizen and convert to Islam, fought against the Soviets in Afghanistan in the late 1980s. He returned to the United States and was arrested in 2009 along with six other members of the so-called "North Carolina Cluster." He reportedly was reconnoitering the Marine Corps base at Quantico for a possible terrorist attack.

**Betim Kaziu** (21), a native U.S. citizen, traveled to Egypt and other countries while attempting to join al Qaeda. He was arrested in Albania in 2009 and was extradited to the United States for trial on charges of providing support to a terrorist group.

**Najibullah Zazi** (25), a legal permanent resident of the United States; **Adis Medunjanin** (24), a naturalized U.S. citizen; and **Zarein Ahmedzay** (25), a naturalized U.S. citizen, traveled to Pakistan in 2008, where they received training and instructions to carry out a terrorist attack in the United States. They had planned to carry out suicide bombings in New York's subways, and Zazi built the bombs. The three conspirators were arrested and later sentenced to life imprisonment.

**David Headley** (49), a native U.S. citizen, made several trips to Pakistan between 2002 and 2005 for training under the auspices of Lashkar-e-Taiba. As a Lashkar-e-Taiba operative, He had reconnoitered targets in Mumbai, India, which the group attacked in 2008, but he was not involved in plotting attacks in the United States. He was arrested by U.S. authorities in 2009 for his part in the Mumbai attacks and was later convicted.

**Umar Farooq** (25), a naturalized U.S. citizen from Pakistan; **Ramy Zamzan** (22), a naturalized U.S. citizen from Egypt; **Waqar Hassan Khan** (22), a naturalized U.S. citizen from Pakistan; **Ahmad Abdullah Mimi** (20), a naturalized U.S. citizen from Eritrea; and **Aman Hassan Yemer** (18), a naturalized U.S. citizen from Ethiopia, Muslim Americans from Virginia who were labeled the "Pakistan Five," were arrested in Pakistan in November 2009 for trying to obtain terrorist training and planning terrorist attacks in Pakistan. They were sentenced to ten years in prison.

**Cabdulaahi Ahmed Faarax** (30), a naturalized U.S. citizen, was a member of the first wave of Somali-Americans who traveled from Minnesota to Somalia in 2007. He returned to the United States, and after being questioned by the FBI, he fled back to Somalia in 2009, where he reportedly blew himself up in a 2011 suicide bombing.

**Abdiweli Yassin Isse** (25), a member of the third wave of Somali-Americans who traveled from Minnesota to Somalia in 2009, was indicted in the United States in 2010 and is believed to be at large.

**Faisal Shazad** (30), a naturalized U.S. citizen, traveled to Pakistan in 2009, where he received training from Tehrik-i-Taliban. He returned to the United States to plot a car bombing in New York's Times Square in 2010. His bomb failed to detonate, and he was arrested and sentenced to life imprisonment.

**Wesam el-Hanafi** (33), a native U.S. citizen, and **Sabirhan Hasanoff** (34), a dual U.S. and Australian national, traveled to Yemen in 2010, where they provided technical assistance to al Qaeda. When they returned to the United States, they were arrested for providing material support to a terrorist organization.

**Mohamed Mahmood Alessa** (20), a native U.S. citizen, and **Carlos Eduardo Almonte** (24), a naturalized U.S. citizen and convert to Islam, were arrested in 2010 on their way to Somalia, where they planned to join al Shabab.

**Barry Walter Bujol, Jr.** (29), a native U.S. citizen and convert to Islam, was arrested in 2010 as he attempted to leave the United States and travel to Yemen, where he expected to join al Qaeda.

**Samir Khan** (24), a naturalized U.S. citizen who ran a jihadist website, left the United States in 2009 and turned up in Yemen in 2010, where he started publishing an online magazine dedicated to recruiting young men in the West to carry out terrorist attacks. He was killed by a U.S. missile strike in 2011.

**Zachary Chesser** (20), a native U.S. citizen and convert to Islam, was arrested in 2010 on his way to Somalia, where he intended to join al Shabab.

**Shaker Masri** (29), a native U.S. citizen, was arrested in 2010 just before departing the United States to join al Qaeda in Afghanistan or al Shabab in Somalia.

**Jehad Serwan Mostafa** (31), a native U.S. citizen, left the United States in 2005 and was reportedly with al Shabab in Somalia between 2008 and 2009. He was indicted in the United States in 2010 but is believed to be still at large.

**Abdel Hamed Shehadeh** (23), a native U.S. citizen, was arrested in 2010 on his way to join the Taliban in Afghanistan.

**Shirwa Ahmed** (26), a naturalized U.S. citizen, was a member of the first wave of Somali-Americans who traveled from Minnesota to Somalia to join al Shabab. He blew himself up in a suicide bombing in Somalia in 2011.

**Farah Mohamed Beledi** (26), a member of the third wave of Somali-Americans who traveled from Minnesota to Somalia in 2009, blew himself up in a suicide bombing in Somalia in 2011.

**Agron Hasbajrami** (27), a legal permanent resident of the United States, was arrested in 2011 on his way to join a jihadist group in Pakistan.

**Abdisalan Hussein Ali** (21), a U.S. citizen, was a member of the second wave of Somali-Americans who traveled from Minnesota to Somalia in 2008. He blew himself up in a suicide bombing in Somalia in 2011.

**Craig Braxman** (age unknown), of Laurel, Maryland, was arrested in January 2012 in Kenya while on his way to Somalia, where he planned to join al Shabab.

**Mohamed Guled Osman** (19), a member of the fourth wave of Somali-Americans who traveled from Minnesota to Somalia to join al Shabab in 2012, is still at large.

**Omar Ali Farah** (21), a member of the fourth wave of Somali-Americans who traveled from Minnesota to Somalia in 2012 to join al Shabab, is still at large.

**Mohammad Abdul Rahman Abukhdair** (25) and **Randy Lamar Wilson** (25) were arrested in 2012 on their way to Mauritania, where they intended to join a jihadist group.

**Sohiel Omar Kabir** (34), a naturalized U.S. citizen; **Ralph Deleon** (23), a legal permanent resident of the United States; **Miguel Alejandro Santana Vidriales** (21), a legal permanent resident of the United States; and **Arifeen David Gojali** (21), a U.S. citizen, members of the so-called "Riverside Four," were arrested in 2012 on their way to Afghanistan to join al Qaeda or the Taliban.

**Jamshid Muhtarov** (36), an Uzbek refugee living in the United States, was arrested in 2012 for planning to travel to Pakistan to join the Islamic Jihad Union, a group fighting against the secular government of Uzbekistan.



**Tamerlan Tsarnaev** (26), a legal permanent resident of the United States, traveled to Russia in 2012. He returned to the United States, where, with his brother Dzhokar, a legal permanent resident, he carried out a bomb attack at the 2013 Boston Marathon finish line, killing three persons and injuring 264 others. The two brothers later killed a police officer in Boston. Tamerlan was killed in a shoot-out with police, and Dzhokar is currently on trial for his part in the bombing. Although Russian authorities warned the FBI that Tamerlan planned to join a jihadist group in Russia, there is no evidence that he received any terrorist training while there.

**Shelton Thomas Bell** (19), a native U.S. citizen, was arrested with an unidentified juvenile in Jordan, on their way to Yemen. Bell planned to join AQAP and was deported to the United States, where he was indicted in July 2013 for providing material support to a terrorist group.

**Eric Harroun** (30), a native U.S. citizen and convert to Islam, traveled to Syria in 2013 to join a faction of the SFA rebels. He was separated from this group during a firefight and was picked up by Jabhat al-Nusra, which he joined for a period of nearly a month. He later returned to the United States, where he was arrested in March 2013 for having joined a foreign terrorist organization. He pled guilty to a lesser charge and was sentenced to time served. He died in 2014, possibly of a drug overdose.

**Nicole Lynn Mansfield** (33), a U.S. citizen and convert to Islam, in May 2013 became the first woman to be reported killed fighting alongside al Qaeda-linked rebel forces in Syria.

**Amir Farouk Ibrahim** (32), a native U.S. citizen, was reportedly killed in Syria in July 2013 while fighting as a member of ISIL.

**Abu Dujama al Amriki.** Little is known about this American using an obviously adopted *nom de guerre*, which means Abu Dujama the American. He left the United States for Syria, where he joined ISIL and was reportedly killed in 2013.

**Ahmed Mohamed Isse** (22) of St. Paul, Minnesota, **Abdifatah Osman Keenadiid** (24) of Minneapolis, Minnesota, and **Mustafa Noorudiin** (27) of Kansas City, Missouri, were among the attackers at the Westgate Mall

in Nairobi, Kenya, according to a message on Twitter from al Shabab. Members of the Somali community in Minnesota denied al Shabab's claim, saying that the names were fake and no such persons were known in the community. The case remains unresolved. (These names are not included in the statistical calculations.)

**Justin Kaliebe** (18) and **Marcos Alonso Zea** (25), both U.S. citizens, were arrested in October 2013 on their way to Yemen, where they allegedly planned to join al Qaeda.

**Sinh Vinh Ngo Nguyen** (24), a U.S. citizen and convert to Islam, was arrested in October 2013 for plotting to go to Pakistan to join al Qaeda. In 2012, he briefly joined rebel forces in Syria, and he bragged about killing a person while there. He said that he had tried to join al Qaeda while in Syria but was rejected.

**Moner Mohammad Abusalha** (22), a U.S. citizen, traveled to Syria in 2012, where he joined al Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra. He briefly returned to the United States, then left the country again. In May 2014, he reportedly became the first American to carry out a suicide bombing in Syria.

**Akba Jihad Jordan** (21) and **Avin Marsalis Brown** (21), both converts to Islam, were arrested in March 2014 on their way to Syria, where they planned to join a jihadist group.

**Nicholas Michael Teasant** (20), a native U.S. citizen and convert to Islam, was arrested in March 2014 on his way to join ISIL in Syria. After his arrest, he spoke to authorities about his previous involvement in plots to carry out terrorist attacks in the United States.

**Mohammad Hassan Hamdan** (22), a naturalized U.S. citizen, was arrested in March 2014 on his way to Syria, where he planned to join Hezbollah.

**Michael Todd Wolfe** (23), a native U.S. citizen, was arrested in June 2014 for planning to join ISIL in Syria.

**Rahatul Ashikin Khan** (23), a naturalized U.S. citizen, was arrested in June 2014 for planning to join al Shabab in Somalia.

**Sharon Maureen Conley** (19), a native U.S. citizen and convert to Islam, was arrested in July 2014 for planning to travel to Syria, where she intended to join ISIL.

**Adam Dandach** (or **Fadi Fadi Dandach**), (20) a native U.S. citizen, was arrested in California in July 2014 on his way to Syria, where he intended to join ISIL.

**Donald Ray Morgan** (44), a U.S. citizen, was arrested in New York in August 2014 as he returned from Lebanon. The charges against him relate to a sale of weapons he arranged while in Lebanon, but what brought him to the attention of authorities were his tweets pledging loyalty to ISIL.

**Basit Javed Sheikh** (29) was arrested in November 2013 before departing the United States for Turkey, where he planned to cross the border into Syria to join Jabhat al-Nusra. He was charged with providing material support to a terrorist organization.

**Abdirahmaan Muhumed** (29), a Somali-American, left his home in Minnesota to join ISIL. He was believed to have been killed while fighting in Syria sometime in the first half of 2014.

**Douglas McArthur McCain** (33) left for Syria to join ISIL in early 2014. In August 2014, he was reportedly killed while fighting.

**Ahmad Abousamra** (32), who has dual American-Syrian citizenship, was born in France but brought up in Massachusetts. He allegedly sought military training during trips to Yemen and Pakistan. He was indicted in 2009 for providing material support to al Qaeda; in 2013, he was added to the FBI "most wanted" list. In September 2014, he was reported to be in Syria, coordinating social media for ISIL.

**Abu Abdurahman al-Trinidad**. Little is known about this individual who used the *nom de guerre* al-Trinidad, which suggests that he is from or spent time in Trinidad. In October 2014, he appeared in an ISIL video in which he identified himself as a U.S. fighter.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>“Foreign Fighters Flow to Syria” (2014). Other estimates range between 10,000 and 12,000. These totals include Iraqis as well as members of Hezbollah fighting in Syria.

<sup>2</sup>It is remarkably difficult to identify all the Americans who have joined or tried to join jihadist fronts abroad. The names and details of 114 individuals who have been identified since 9/11 as seeking to sign up with jihadist groups, or at least obtain terrorist training abroad, are presented in the Appendix; however, we make no claim that this list is complete.

<sup>3</sup>In his address to the nation on September 11, 2014, authorizing air strikes against ISIL in Iraq and Syria, President Obama said, “Our intelligence community believes that thousands of foreigners—including Europeans and some Americans—have joined them in Syria and Iraq. Trained and battle-hardened, these fighters could try to return to their home countries and carry out deadly attacks.”

<sup>4</sup>This publication is part of a series analyzing the dynamics of the current conflicts in the Middle East. See Jenkins (2014a, 2014b, 2014c); “Air Campaign Is Just Getting off the Ground” (2014), “What Are ISIL’s Options Now?” (2014); and “What Could U.S. Boots on the Ground Do in Iraq and Syria?” (2014).

<sup>5</sup>Several factors may explain why sleeper cells were not established. Al Qaeda sent its own operatives into countries where it planned to carry out operations, but these were active planners, not sleeper cells. Veterans of the fighting in Afghanistan and graduates from its training camps returned to their home countries when they could, and some became part of a broader jihadist network, but the number of Westerners involved was very small, with only a handful from the United States. Al Qaeda still tends to affix itself to established local groups rather than create new ones from scratch. There also may have been little time to create an underground. Osama bin Laden declared war on the United States in 1996. A second declaration called for direct attacks on Americans in 1998, which was followed by major terrorist operations in 1998 and 2000. By then, planning was well under way for the 9/11 attacks. Attempts to recruit followers in the United States or infiltrate al Qaeda operatives other than those involved in the planned operation could have alerted U.S. security authorities and risked uncovering the 9/11 plot.

<sup>6</sup>Both Anwar al-Awlaki and Samir Khan were killed by American airstrikes in 2011.

<sup>7</sup>For a more detailed review of observations on al Qaeda’s trajectory, see Jenkins (2011, 2012, 2014a, 2014b).

<sup>8</sup>ISIL also appears in many accounts as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). In either case, the name implies the group’s ambition to dominate the geographic area of the Levant, or Greater Syria, which includes Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Israel, and a portion of southwestern Turkey.

<sup>9</sup>“About 12 Americans Are Fighting in Syria”( 2014). “When I use a number of more than 100, that means people who have gone and come back, people who have attempted to go and we locked them up, people who have gone and stayed,” Comey said.

<sup>10</sup>U.S. intelligence sources estimate the number of Europeans as follows: Germany, 400; France, 400; United Kingdom, 350; Belgium, 200; Netherlands, 90; Spain, 75; Sweden, 65; Denmark, 55; Norway, 40; Austria, 30; Ireland, 30; Italy, 25; and Finland, 10—a total of 1,770. A *Washington Post* compilation gives somewhat different figures: United Kingdom, 488; Belgium, 296; Germany, 240; Netherlands, 152; Albania, 148; France, 112; Spain, 95; Denmark, 84; Sweden, 80; Austria, 60; Bosnia, 60; Italy, 50; Ireland, 26; Finland, 20; and Norway, 10—a total of 1,921. In addition, according to the Post’s sources, 250 have come from Australia, 130 from the United States, and 70 from Canada, bringing the total number of Western fighters to 2,371 (“Foreign Fighters Flow to Syria,” 2014).

<sup>11</sup>These observations come from private discussions in September 2014 with researchers at the Institute for Security Policy at Kiel University, in Germany.

<sup>12</sup>“Minnesota Law Enforcement Helps Somali Community Fight Radicalization, Terror Recruiting” (2014).

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Commissioned in the infantry, Jenkins became a paratrooper and a captain in the Green Berets. He is a decorated combat veteran, having served in the Seventh Special Forces Group in the Dominican Republic and with the Fifth Special Forces Group in Vietnam. He returned to Vietnam as a member of the Long Range Planning Task Group and received the Department of the Army's highest award for his service.

In 1996, President Clinton appointed Jenkins to the White House Commission on Aviation Safety and Security. From 1999 to 2000, he served as adviser to the National Commission on Terrorism and in 2000 was appointed to the U.S. Comptroller General's Advisory Board. He is a research associate at the Mineta Transportation Institute, where he directs the continuing research on protecting surface transportation against terrorist attacks.

## About This Perspective

This perspective seeks to examine the scope of the threat posed by Western fighters who return to their homes after fighting in Syria and Iraq; what can be done to reduce the threat, and whether military action is necessary in combating it.

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