



# COMBATING TERRORISM CENTER

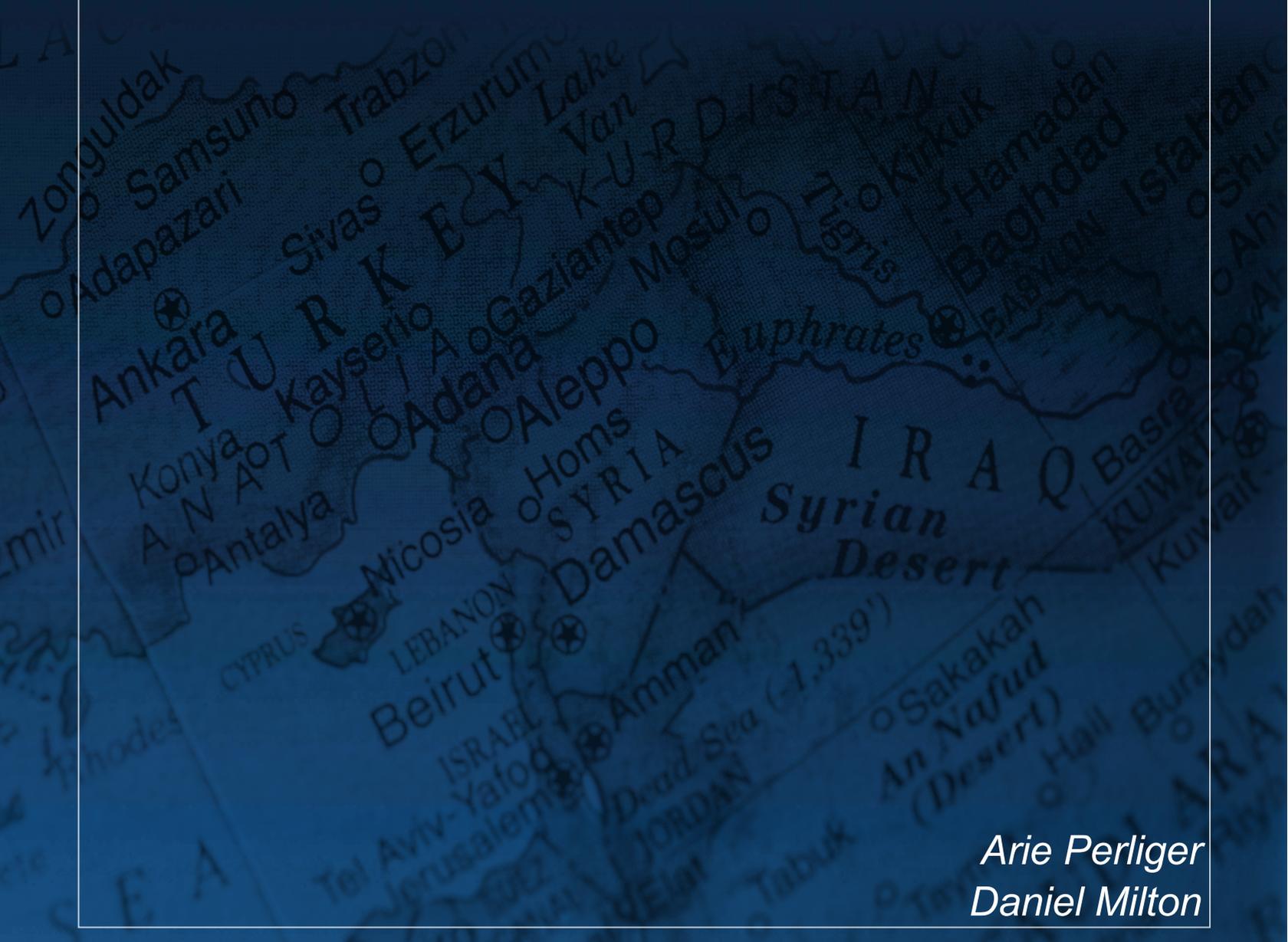
at West Point



## ***From Cradle to Grave:***

*The Lifecycle of Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria*

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*Arie Perliger  
Daniel Milton*



# **From Cradle to Grave: The Lifecycle of Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria**

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Arie Perliger and Daniel Milton

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## Executive Summary

The recruitment, radicalization, travel, and return of opposition foreign fighters to Syria and Iraq pose unique challenges at home and abroad in both the short and long term. In an effort to shed more light on the nature of this problem, the Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) at West Point collected a large dataset of open source information on individuals who attempted or successfully traveled to Syria and Iraq from 2012-2015 to join one of the many groups opposing the Bashar al-Assad regime, with a focus on fighters coming from Western countries.\* The goal of this collection was not to create a master list of all foreign fighters, but to see how information in the open source could shine light on the three stages of what the CTC refers to as the “foreign fighter lifecycle”: pre-departure, in theater, and return. In examining the entire lifecycle, the goal was to paint a picture of the depth and nuance of the overall threat. In doing so, several key findings emerged. Some of these findings reinforce existing understanding of the foreign fighter problem, while others provide new insights into the challenging nature of this issue.

### Key Findings

- **Foreign fighters: a diverse group.** The findings eschew the existence of a single “profile” of foreign fighters. Although broadly speaking there appear to be some trends related to age, education, and immigration status, there is large diversity of backgrounds among the individuals in the dataset.
- **Religiosity is not the strongest explanatory factor.** Less than 15% of fighters coded by religious background had any formal religious education. Additionally, individuals who made the decision to become a foreign fighter tended not to be lifelong strict adherents to Islam, but also rarely appeared to be recent converts. Those who were Muslims since childhood (but not overly religious), as well as those who were converts (but not too recent), were well-represented in the data.
- **Foreign fighters are dying, but not from suicide operations.** There is tremendous uncertainty regarding the actual death rate of foreign fighters. A very high rate of the fighters in our dataset died, although media bias may have played a role in that conclusion. Of those who died, however, very few (less than 10%) appear to have died from suicide operations.
- **Foreign fighter recruits tend to cluster.** Although foreign fighters as a whole are a diverse group in terms of socio-demographics, the individual recruits themselves tend to cluster in terms of geography. Approximately 70% of foreign fighters came from the same city as at least one other fighter. This suggests that a geographically-targeted approach to countering violent extremism is more likely to succeed than a “shotgun” strategy.
- **Religious figures may not matter as much as some think.** Despite the emphasis placed on mobilizing prominent religious figures to speak out against radicalization, intervention through these figures may not yield the desired results. Most of the fighters appeared less connected to these types of figures and were very isolated from their communities.
- **Training camps are alive and well.** This remains a nearly obligatory part of the experience of all foreign fighters entering Syria and Iraq. Training camps represent critical choke points where interdiction could be very effective at limiting the forces these groups can put onto the battlefield, as well as the potential threat of returnees.
- **Role assignment in the organization is not random.** Leaders are likely to be older with prior military/security experience, while the more educated are likely slotted into support roles—but almost all fighters take part in violence at some point. The implications of violent experience re-

\* *This dataset is completely distinct from the CTC’s work on Islamic State personnel records, found in its April 2016 report, The Caliphate’s Global Workforce.*

main unclear when it comes to hardening views or fostering disillusion.

- **While some fighters return quickly, most stay in theater.** Only 10% of fighters in the CTC dataset returned. Of the 10% who returned, 87% did so within a year. Fighters who return in such short order are more likely to have left with an unfavorable impression and could be used to deter other potential fighters from traveling. Most fighters, however, appear to remain in theater for a substantial time. Whatever the rate of return has been up until this point, it will likely only increase as time passes.
- **The returnee threat resembles a hydra rather than a snake.** There are a variety of ways that returnees could pose a threat: some return to a country other than their country of origin, some become part of existing logistical networks, and others may become foreign fighter “vagabonds.” In other words, the challenge of dealing with returnees requires international cooperation and vigilance over the long term.

## Introduction

The tragic attacks in Paris on the evening of November 13, 2015, illustrated vividly how foreign fighters who have returned home can be utilized by militant organizations to strike at state actors.<sup>1</sup> They also reflect the gap between awareness to a threat and the ability to develop effective countermeasures. This is especially true when considering that it was not the first time in which a foreign fighter was responsible for the planning and execution of an attack in Europe, while exploiting the open borders between European Union (EU) countries, and particularly between Belgium and France.

In recognition of the importance of understanding the threat posed by foreign fighters, this report breaks the foreign fighter problem down into three distinct phases: pre-departure, in theater, and return. Taken together, these stages comprise the “lifecycle” of a foreign fighter. Using a newly collected open source dataset of foreign fighters, this report finds that, prior to departure, aspirant fighters tend to be isolated from their communities. Once on the battlefield, almost all fighters undergo training and gain battlefield experience. Those who end up in leadership positions tend to be older and have prior operational experience. Fighters with higher education serve in supportive roles at greater rates. Finally, returning fighters pose a diverse threat. While a small number in our data return from the battlefield, those who left Iraq and Syria did so after a short stay. Some returnees reengage in terrorist networks, but not necessarily terrorist attacks. Others avoid returning home, but instead travel to other countries. Regardless of who goes, what experience they gain, and how many return, the challenges posed by foreign fighters only seem to be increasing.

The first recorded instance of an attack by a returning foreign fighter from Iraq and Syria occurred more than a year prior. Early in the afternoon of Saturday, May 24, 2014, Emanuel and Mira Riva were about to visit the Jewish Museum of Belgium in Brussels. Like many other Israelis traveling in Europe, they did not want to skip an opportunity to learn more about the history of the local Jewish community. As they approached the museum’s entrance, they likely did not notice a man who approached them quickly from behind, withdrew a .357 Magnum from his bag, and fired several bullets that hit both Emanuel and Riva in the back of their heads. They both died instantaneously. The shooter then dropped the pistol and pulled an MK47 from his bag, which he aimed at Dominique Sabrier, one of the museum’s tour guides. Dominique was also struck in the head and died immediately. The last victim of the attack was Alexander Strens, who worked for the museum’s communications department. He was shot in the head as well and died from his wound shortly thereafter. The shooter then collected his bag and exited the museum.<sup>2</sup> Six days after the attack, French authorities arrested Mehdi Nemmouche in Marseille in connection with the shooting. A couple of months later, after authorities uncovered more evidence that conclusively identified him as the shooter, he was extradited to Belgium for trial.

From the early stages of the investigation, law enforcement officials identified that this was a different kind of attack and perpetrator. This was not another attack by an inspired “lone wolf” with limited operational capabilities. The Belgium deputy prosecutor, for example, indicated that the perpetrator was “well prepared,” and an examination of the various phases of the attack illustrated that he was trained, efficient, and skillful.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, as authorities uncovered the history of Mehdi Nemmouche, the better he fit this description.

Mehdi Nemmouche was born in Roubaix. The city, once the center of French socialism, is currently one of the poorest towns in France and a hub for immigrants from North Africa. His father, a shopkeeper, refused to recognize him as his son, and his mom suffered from depression. At the age of three,

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1 Although this attack serves as a clear illustration of the potential danger posed by returning foreign fighters, historical evidence suggests these attacks may not be as frequent as feared. Hegghammer, Thomas, “Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists’ Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting,” *American Political Science Review* 107:1 (2013), pp. 1-15.

2 Marc Weitzmann, “Who Is Mehdi Nemmouche, and Why Did He Want To Kill Jews?,” *Tablet*, July 15, 2014.

3 “Belgian police in appeal to public over gunman identity,” *BBC*, May 25, 2014.

Nemmouche was transferred to a foster family where he was the only Muslim child.<sup>4</sup> After turning 17, he was taken in by his grandmother.<sup>5</sup> It was then that he started to engage in various criminal activities, including robberies. This led to multiple arrests and time in prison. Nemmoche was released from prison after serving a five-year sentence in December 2012. Three weeks later, he traveled to Syria and joined the Islamic State.

Nemmouche's knowledge of the French language was probably one of the reasons that Islamic State leaders assigned him to "take care" of Western journalists who were held hostage (including one from France) by the organization in early 2013. Hostages knew Nemmoche as "Abu Omar the hitter" because of his tendency to torture them as well as brag about his involvement in the Islamic State's past operations, which included the raping of women and killing of babies.<sup>6</sup> Some experts suggest that Nemmoche's extreme behavior (or at least his discussion of such) was one of the reasons that Islamic State leaders concluded he was unreliable and eventually decided to "let him go."<sup>7</sup> While the exact reason for Nemmoche's return to Europe is not clear, his actions reflect that he was determined to employ the operational experience he gained while fighting in Syria. Upon Nemmoche's capture following his attack in Brussels, authorities found in his belongings ammunition, weapons, and a Go-Pro camera, which he planned to use in future operations and for recording his own version of Islamic State propaganda videos. Possession of a French passport helped facilitate his movements prior to the attack, allowing him to move freely across the EU without significant interruption.

Beyond the tragic consequences of his actions in Belgium, the case of Mehdi Nemmoche further intensified existing perceptions among policymakers and counterterrorism practitioners regarding the potential threat of skilled and trained foreign fighters returning to their home countries to continue their violent struggle. For example, the head of Britain's Office for Security and Counter-Terrorism, Charles Farr, described the issue of foreign fighter returnees as the "biggest challenge to UK security services since 9/11."<sup>8</sup> In the United States, the Department of Justice's National Security Division assigned a special prosecutor to focus on cases of American foreign fighters who are returning to the United States after involvement in military operations in Syria and Iraq. The rationale for such a focus is simple: "We want to make sure that individuals in the counterterrorism section and the U.S. Attorneys throughout the country are focused on this threat."<sup>9</sup>

The growing interest in the phenomenon of foreign fighters among academics, practitioners, and policymakers has resulted in a surge of studies. Taken together, these studies attempt to explain the factors that lead seemingly ordinary individuals to abandon their homes and travel to new places to risk their lives in the name of an ideology that they knew little about before their radicalization. These efforts, however, have been mostly limited to a small sample of foreign fighters from specific countries and have usually ignored important aspects of the foreign fighter's lifecycle, such as his activities in the conflict zone and his role in the organizational hierarchy of the group.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, these studies have yielded an incomplete understanding regarding the environment in which these fighters emerge, their activities on the battlefield in Iraq and Syria, and the actual threat they pose upon their return.

To that end, the CTC has assembled a large dataset on foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria with the goal

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4 Weitzmann (2014).

5 "Brussels Shooting Suspect Trained in Syria, Paris Prosecutor Says," *France 24*, June 1, 2014.

6 David Chazan, "Brussels museum shooting suspect 'beheaded baby,'" *Telegraph*, September 7, 2014.

7 Christopher Dickey, "French Jihadi Mehdi Nemmoche Is the Shape of Terror to Come," *Daily Beast*, September 9, 2014.

8 James Lyons, "Brit fanatics returning from the Syria conflict pose the biggest terror threat since 9/11," *Mirror*, February 25, 2014.

9 Mark Hosenball, "U.S. steps up scrutiny of American fighters in Syria," *Reuters*, May 22, 2014.

10 See for example - Cerwyn Moore and Paul Tumelty, "Foreign Fighters and the Case of Chechnya: A Critical Assessment," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 31:5 (2008), pp. 412-433; Dann Weggemans, Edwin Bakker, and Peter Grol, "Who Are They and Why Do They Go? The Radicalization and Preparatory Processes of Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighters," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 8:4 (2014).

of filling these existing gaps. We defined foreign fighters as individuals who left or attempted to leave their home country and participated in actual fighting in the ranks of a local sub-state entity. As a result of the CTC's collection effort, researchers compiled an open source list of close to 1,200 individuals. This project was initiated prior to the CTC's acquisition of over 4,000 Islamic State personnel records, and due to the different source and scope of the data a decision was made to keep this effort completely distinct from the CTC's work on those documents, which can be found in its April 2016 report, *The Caliphate's Global Workforce*.<sup>11</sup> Where relevant, this report provides comparisons between the two datasets. The individuals in the CTC dataset, who traveled, attempted to travel, or expressed substantial desires to travel from their home countries between 2011-2015 to join one of the many militant organizations currently active in the civil war in Syria and Iraq (mostly jihadi groups), represent more than 30 countries, although the focus of the data collection was on Western countries. Using these 1,200 names, researchers attempted to find a variety of open source information on each individual. This information includes variables not just about the individual's socio-demographic background, but also about their activities in the conflict areas and upon their return home, and it allows us to explore aspects of the phenomenon that move beyond the radicalization phase. This was a difficult task. Although the overall database contained approximately 1,200 names, in some cases coders could only find scattered information on each of the variables. Sample sizes for the analysis that follows indicate such cases. Despite this difficulty in the collection process, the data can still shed light on the following sets of questions:

1. What are the factors that facilitate the radicalization and decision of individuals to travel to areas of conflict and join violent groups?
2. Do contextual factors, such as the nature of the foreign fighter's home country, trigger different dynamics of radicalization? Is the profile of foreign fighters different from that of other types of jihadi fighters?
3. How are the host organizations employing foreign fighters? Does the background of the foreign fighters play a role in the way their host organizations employ them?
4. What are the specific contributions of foreign fighters to the operational capabilities of the organizations they join?
5. Are specific types of foreign fighters more likely to attempt participation in terrorist activity upon return to their home countries?

The subsequent chapter provides both a theoretical and conceptual review of the foreign fighter phenomenon. We also review the existing literature on this topic. We then outline the methodological procedures that were used for compiling the data, as well as introduce some general trends in the foreign fighter population. We also discuss some of the limitations inherent in our data collection, as well as the general challenges of collecting data on foreign fighters. The subsequent three sections explore the pre-departure, in theater, and return phases of the foreign fighters' lifecycle and attempt to provide answers to the questions presented above. We conclude with a summary of our findings and conclusions regarding potential policy implications.

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11. Brian Dodwell, Daniel Milton, and Don Rassler, *The Caliphate's Global Workforce: An Inside Look at the Islamic State's Foreign Fighter Paper Trail* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2016).

## Chapter 1: The Phenomenon of Foreign Fighters – Conceptualization and Review of Existing Explanations

### Conceptualization

Despite the abundance of emerging research and policy discussion regarding foreign fighters, it is important to recognize that the phenomenon of political actors mobilizing recruits and supporters from various geographical regions in the name of a universal ideology is not new. A number of well-known individuals participated as fighters in foreign conflicts. The physician Samuel Howe and the poet Lord Byron were two of many foreigners who participated in the Greek struggle for independence during the 1820s in the name of self-determination. Ernest Hemingway and George Orwell supported Republican forces during the Spanish Civil War like many other volunteers from Western countries to defend democracy from the spread of fascism. Of course, beyond famous fighters, these conflicts have also provided an opportunity for larger mobilizations of individuals to frontlines. For example, the leaders of what was termed by historians as the “Arab Revolt” (an insurgency campaign by Palestinians against the British forces in Palestine during 1936-1939) recruited a significant number of pan-Arabists and Islamists from outside Palestine. In sum, the phenomenon of foreign fighting has touched a wide range of individuals and conflicts.

A closer evaluation of the examples above reveals that most of the political struggles that have attracted foreign fighters in the past share several similar characteristics: (1) a nationalistic dimension, at least in the sense that the objective was to change the socio-political order in a specific polity; (2) the political struggle led to a civil war which reflected a clash between what can be characterized as universal ideologies (see the cases of Spain or the Russian Civil War) or transnational issues (the Arab Revolt of 1936 and the legitimacy of colonial policies),<sup>12</sup> and; (3) the violence was restricted to a specific territory. More recent cases of political struggles that attract foreign fighters, however, seem to have different dynamics.

First, many contemporary groups that recruit foreign fighters reject the concept of the nation-state and nationalism and aspire to engage in a global, violent struggle. Second, since these groups promote an ideology with strong religious components and are exclusive in nature (in terms of their constituency), they are open mainly to foreign fighters from specific religious communities (selective recruitment). Third, the transnational nature of the current jihadi struggle, and the response to it, lead to a situation in which many of the foreign fighters need to fight against their home countries, or in opposition to their home countries’ declared interests. In the past, rarely have foreign fighters had to deal with such contradictory commitments. Lastly, the transnational nature of contemporary groups that are recruiting foreign fighters seems also to contribute to what can be described as “conceptual stretching” or vagueness of the concept of foreign fighter. For example, there are different views regarding the question of whether individuals who are fighting in a neighboring country or in “border wars” should be considered foreign fighters (for example Pakistanis who fight in Afghanistan or the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA)). There are also different views regarding the question of when an individual ceases to be considered a foreign fighter and instead becomes a “local/native fighter.” In other words, do we consider someone who has served as a foreign fighter for one year to still be a foreign fighter? What about after three or four years?

Considering the confusion that characterizes the discourse on foreign fighters, it is important to pro-

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12 Barak and Cohen (2013) define Universal ideology as “a cultural system that emphasizes supranational and suprastate values such as liberty, anti-colonialism, anti-imperialism, Communism, and jihad.” Oren Barak and Chanan Cohen, “The ‘Modern Sherwood Forest’: *Theoretical and Practical Challenges*,” in *Nonstate Actors in Intrastate Conflicts* eds. Dan Midownik and Oren Barak (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), pp. 12-33.

vide a clear conceptualization of the phenomenon we intend to explore in this study.<sup>13</sup> Most existing definitions of foreign fighters emphasize a lack of affiliation to the country where the fighting is occurring, the joining to a non-state entity, and the role of transnational ideology as a motivating factor.<sup>14</sup> Thomas Hegghammer tries to provide a more nuanced definition by distinguishing between foreign fighters and mercenaries.<sup>15</sup> He indicates that foreign fighters must be unpaid and not residents of neighboring countries (thus excluding what Salehyan terms “transnational-insurgency”<sup>16</sup>). But David Malet, who proposed one of the most elaborate typologies of foreign fighters, distinguishes between the following classes of fighters:

- (a) Transnational insurgent - members of groups that extend operations across borders into states external to the civil conflict.
- (b) Foreign-trained fighters - individuals who have traveled abroad to receive paramilitary training or participate in an insurgency and then return to their home countries to participate in a civil war or commit a terrorist attack.
- (c) Foreign terrorists - individuals who travel to another state in order to perpetrate a terrorist attack.
- (d) Foreign fighters - individuals who travel to another country (where they are not citizens) to join an insurgency.<sup>17</sup>

In the current study, we combine several elements from the above-mentioned definitions to define our research population. Since we are interested mainly in the role of foreign fighters in the civil war in Syria or Iraq, we collected information on foreign fighters who traveled, attempted to travel, or expressed substantial desires to travel to Syria or Iraq to join and fight with an organization active in the civil war. To be clear, our definition excludes the following types of individuals:

- 1) Individuals who expressed a desire to emigrate to Iraq and Syria to live within the borders of the Islamic State’s so-called “Caliphate,” but not specifically to fight.
- 2) Individuals who, upon their arrival in the Middle East, decided eventually not to join any of the organizations (since it is a strong possibility that their motivation for traveling is different than the motivations of those who eventually participated in military operations).
- 3) Individuals who solely participated in the facilitation of foreign fighters into the conflict zone, without actually fighting themselves.

We decided not to distinguish between paid and unpaid fighters for several reasons. From a practical standpoint, it is difficult to identify relevant documentation of compensation mechanisms within existing groups. Moreover, in many cases the groups provide material benefits that are outside of the conventional organizational payroll, thus making it more difficult to distinguish between paid and unpaid foreign fighters. As also indicated by Malet, all foreign fighters are provided some basic benefits for their service, whether these are meals, pocket money, or coverage of other daily expenditures.<sup>18</sup>

13 David Malet, “Foreign Fighter Mobilization and Persistence in a Global Context,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 27:3 (2015), pp. 454-473; Barak Mendelsohn, “Foreign Fighters—Recent Trends,” *Orbis* 55:2 (2011), pp. 189-202.

14 Kristen M. Bakke, “Copying and learning from outsiders? Assessing diffusion from *transnational insurgents in the Chechen wars*,” in *Transnational Dynamics of Civil Wars* ed. Jeffrey T. Checkel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 31-62; Ian Bryan, “Sovereignty and the Foreign Fighter Problem,” *Orbis* 54:1 (2010), pp. 115-129; David Malet, *Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identity in Civil Conflicts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Moore and Tumelty (2008).

15 Thomas Hegghammer, “The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: *Islam and the Globalization of Jihad*,” *International Security* 35:3 (2010/11), pp. 53-94.

16 Idean Salehyan, *Rebels without borders: transnational insurgencies in world politics* (Cornell, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009).

17 Malet (2013).

18 Malet (2015).

Lastly, the fact that foreign fighters receive financial compensation does not necessarily mean that they are exclusively or primarily motivated by the possibility of future material benefits. Hence, from an analytical perspective, we do not think it is necessary to distinguish between paid and unpaid foreign fighters in this context.

While the subsequent empirical analyses in this report focus on the entire lifecycle of a foreign fighter, the literature examining the latter two stages (in theater activities and returnees) is relatively minimal. This is most likely due to the lack of data on these stages of the foreign fighter lifecycle. Consequently, the subsequent subsection of this chapter only explores the comparatively better-developed literature on individuals' motivations for becoming foreign fighters. As the report discusses the latter segments of the foreign fighter lifecycle, references will be drawn to the relevant literature.

### Explaining the Motivations of Foreign Fighters

The literature on political violence and radicalization presents three major theoretical approaches for explaining why individuals join violent sub-state groups. The first approach assumes a correlation between human and material capital and the tendency to join militant political groups. Some scholars, such as Charles Tilly, argue a positive correlation, asserting that high human capital (in terms of education, political, and social efficacy) as well as material wealth facilitate better understanding and internalization of political information and public policies,<sup>19</sup> which help overcome obstacles that may impede political activism<sup>20</sup> and increase the likelihood of joining militant groups. Yet, some scholars hold the opposite view, asserting a negative correlation between an individual's resources and the tendency to join radical groups. They argue that individuals from lower social status have less to lose when they engage in political activism and stand to gain the most from a shift in the status quo.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, if, as some argue, political violence is an expression of frustrations resulting from the gap between reality and expectations, as argued by Ted Robert Gurr,<sup>22</sup> it is logical to assume that individuals with limited human capital and material resources will be more vulnerable to such frustrations. This is not always the case, as some literature has found that societal and community concerns can also factor into an individual's calculation of the costs and benefits of violent action.<sup>23</sup>

The second approach asserts that ideology and identity play crucial roles in the individual's tendency to join a terrorist group. Under this approach, strong and early familiarity with the ideological principles of the group (such as from early childhood), existing affinity and attachment to the values and norms that are at the core of the group's ideology (including perceived religious or ethnic identity), or effective indoctrination all serve to facilitate the decision to join a terrorist group.<sup>24</sup> Thus, the "ideological" approach sees the existence of an emotional connection to a specific set of norms and practices, and/or what they symbolize, as an important pre-condition to the individual's radicalization process since it allows the individual to relate his personal experiences to the group's (or related constituency)

19 Steven J. Rosenstone and John Mark Hansen, *Mobilization, Participation, and Democracy in America* (London: Pearson, 2002).

20 Alan B. Krueger and Jitka Malecková, "Education, Poverty and Terrorism: Is There a Causal Connection?" *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* 17:4 (2003), pp. 119–144; Efraim Benmelech and Claude Berrebi, "Human capital and the productivity of suicide bombers," *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* 21:3 (2007), pp. 223–238.

21 Ethan Bueno De Mesquita, "The Quality of Terror," *American Journal of Political Science* 49:3 (2005), pp. 515–530; Alexander Lee, "Who Becomes a Terrorist?: Poverty, Education, and the Origins of Political Violence," *World Politics* 63:2 (2011), pp. 203–245.

22 Tedd Robert Gurr, *Why men rebel* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1970); Fathali M. Moghaddam, "The staircase to terrorism: a psychological exploration," *American Psychologist* 60:2 (2005), p. 161.

23 Jean-Paul Azam, "Suicide-bombing as Inter-generational Investment," *Public Choice* 122:1 (2005), pp. 177–198; Ami Pedahzur, Arie Perliger, and Leonard Weinberg, "Altruism and Fatalism: The Characteristics of Palestinian Suicide Terrorists," *Deviant Behavior* 24:4 (2003), pp. 405–423.

24 Thomas Hegghammer, "Terrorist recruitment and radicalization in Saudi Arabia," *Middle East Policy* 13:4 (2006): pp. 39–60; Assaf Moghadam, *The globalization of martyrdom: Al Qaeda, Salafi Jihad, and the diffusion of suicide attacks* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008); Jessica Stern, "Mind over martyr," *Foreign Affairs* 89:1 (2010), pp. 95–108.

goals and ideological framework.<sup>25</sup> Studies that have adopted this approach in the context of religious or jihadi terrorism build on Tilly's relational approach for radicalization.<sup>26</sup> This approach emphasizes the affiliation of the individual to a dense and homogeneous social network, which helps to further instill and maintain a transnational or religious identity and facilitates processes of radicalization.<sup>27</sup>

The last approach adopts a more instrumental perspective regarding the factors that impact the process of joining a violent radical group. Its major argument is that the groups tend to engage in what can be described as "differential recruitment." Thus, for high-skilled positions the group will recruit more educated individuals because of their greater potential to fill these positions successfully,<sup>28</sup> while for positions that demand fewer skills or are short term in nature (i.e., suicide bombers), the group will prefer to recruit individuals with more limited human capital. This approach shifts the focus to the organizational decision-making process and offers a more symmetric approach to the recruitment and joining process. In other words, it is not just or mainly about the radicalization of the recruits, but about the group's ability to identify a specific set of skills that it needs, individuals who possess those skills, and then apply various techniques to recruit the identified individuals.

Studies that specifically examined different aspects of radicalization and mobilization among foreign fighters usually adopt one of the above theoretical approaches. Stenersen, for example, claims that while foreign fighters who fought in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region between 2002 and 2006 came from various socio-economic backgrounds, they usually had prior military experience. Once part of the organization, however, most of them did not reach leadership positions. These findings seem to be consistent with the instrumental approach, as they reflect the selective recruitment of groups who needed individuals to provide immediate help in fighting against Western military forces<sup>29</sup> and who could be mobilized to specific field positions within the groups.

Hegghammer, on the other hand, developed an explanation more closely aligned to the ideological approach. After analyzing a dataset of Middle Eastern foreign fighters, he argued that "they are the product of a pan-Islamic identity movement that grew strong in the 1970s Arab world from elite competition among exiled Islamists in international Islamic organizations and Muslim regimes."<sup>30</sup> In this explanation, young Muslims become foreign fighters since this is an effective path for them to express their belonging and commitment to an imagined transnational community whose borders are shaped by jihadi ideologists. Mustapha identified similar processes among foreign fighters in the Balkans.<sup>31</sup> In a more recent study, Hegghammer continued with the same line of argument by stipulating that young Muslims prefer to become foreign fighters and not perpetrate attacks in their home countries because the former option is more ideologically legitimate.<sup>32</sup> Recent studies by Nillson, Holman, and Moore provide support for Hegghammer's argument. While Nillson found that socialization to global jihadi doctrine was instrumental in the recruitment of Swedish foreign fighters, Holman and Moore found that Belgian and French foreign fighters between the years 2003-2005, as well as foreign fighters from the North Caucasus, were recruited via various social or kinship networks that promoted pan-Islamic sentiments, further emphasizing issues related to cultural and social affiliation to specific communities

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25 David Malet, "Why Foreign Fighters?: Historical Perspectives and Solutions," *Orbis* 54:1 (2010), pp. 97-114. Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000).

26 Charles Tilly, "Terror as Strategy and Relational Process," *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 46:1-2 (2005), pp. 11-32.

27 Arie Perliger and Ami Pedahzur, "Counter Cultures, Group Dynamics and Religious Terrorism," *Political Studies* (2014), pp. 1-18.

28 Bueno De Mesquita, Diego Gambetta and Steffen Hertog, "Why are there so many Engineers among Islamic Radicals?" *European Journal of Sociology* 50:2 (2009): pp. 201-230.

29 Anne Stenersen, "Al Qaeda's Foot Soldiers: A Study of the Biographies of Foreign Fighters Killed in Afghanistan and Pakistan Between 2002 and 2006," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 34:3 (2011): pp. 171-198.

30 Hegghammer (2011).

31 Jennifer Mustapha, "The Mujahideen in Bosnia: the foreign fighter as cosmopolitan citizen and/or terrorist," *Citizenship Studies* 17:6-7 (2013): pp. 742-755.

32 Hegghammer (2013).

rather than socio-economic factors.<sup>33</sup>

Some studies, however, seem to contradict the ideological approach and put more weight on personal circumstances, tending to link socio-economic status and radicalization. Shapiro and Byman, for example, highlighted the limited ideological awareness of many foreign fighters, their specific circumstances, and their mainly adventure-seeking attitudes.<sup>34</sup> They also cite an intelligence official who argued that very few of the recruits had basic theological knowledge. Venhaus's analysis of al-Qa`ida's foreign fighters found similar trends.<sup>35</sup> Some studies have been more specific and indicated that the great majority of foreign fighters came from low socio-economic backgrounds in terms of their education, employment, and criminal history. Some foreign fighters even had to rely on monthly state benefits.<sup>36</sup>

While the approaches mentioned above focus on the motivating factors that determine the transformation of an individual to a foreign fighter, some experts strive to provide more concrete models of the radicalization process.

### Models of Radicalization

A review of existing models of radicalization reveals that most have a similar structure of three general stages:

- (1) the first stage includes an increase in political awareness and political knowledge and efficacy. In this stage, the individual develops political and social perceptions usually related to his own sense of political or social deprivation that trigger him to look for viable answers to perceived injustice or deprivation. These answers, in many cases, are provided by his close social network.
- (2) The second stage usually includes the growing affinity of the individual to a specific religious or ideological framework that seems to provide answers and channel his growing frustration into actual political activism. This is manifested in his growing interest in the activities of a specific group, increasing interest in the group's ideology, and seeking of opportunities to become more politically active, including the decision to travel to areas of conflict in the case of foreign fighters.
- (3) The next stage relates to actually joining a militant group, further internalizing its ideology, and the increasing willingness to engage in extreme activities, including violent ones.<sup>37</sup>

Some models are more detailed in terms of their description of the indoctrination process, while others tend to distinguish between different stages that lead to the actual involvement in violence. Nonetheless, most follow the general path described above. The only exception seems to be the model recently developed by Byman and Shapiro, which specifically pertains to foreign fighters, in which the authors extend the general models described above to include the return (to home country) and plot-

33 Timothy Holman, "Belgian and French Foreign Fighters in Iraq 2003–2005: A Comparative Case Study," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 38:8 (2015): pp 603–621; Cerwyn Moore, "Foreign Bodies: Transnational Activism, the Insurgency in the North Caucasus and "Beyond"" *Terrorism and Political Violence* 27:3 (2015): pp. 395–415; Marco Nilsson, "Foreign Fighters and the Radicalization of Local Jihad: Interview Evidence from Swedish Jihadists," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 38:5 (2015), pp. 343–358.

34 Daniel Byman and Jeremy Shapiro, *Be Afraid. Be a Little Afraid: The Threat of Terrorism from Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 2014).

35 John M. Venhaus, *Why Youth Join Al-Qaeda* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, 2010).

36 Jasper L. de Bie, Christianne J. de Poot, and Joanne P. van der Leun, "Shifting Modus Operandi of Jihadist Foreign Fighters From the Netherlands Between 2000 and 2013: A Crime Script Analysis," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 27:3 (2015), pp. 416–440; Lorenzo Vidino, Raffaello Pantucci, and Evan Kohlmann, "Bringing Global Jihad to the Horn of Africa: Al Shabaab, western fighters, and the sacralization of the Somali Conflict," *African Security* 3:4 (2010), pp. 216–238.

37 Moghaddam (2005); Byman and Shapiro (2014); Quintan Wiktorowicz, *Islamic activism: A social movement theory approach* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004); Scott Helfstein, *Edges of radicalization: Ideas, individuals and networks in violent extremism* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2012); Marc Sageman, *Leaderless jihad: terror networks in the twenty-first century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

ting stages.<sup>38</sup> The former stage includes the actual return to the home country, but now with enhanced status and “street cred,” and the latter pertains to the decision to plan attacks. Various motivations are ascribed to the desire to plot attacks upon return, including a perception that Islam is under threat from local rules and legislation, as well as from frustration emanating from perceived insults and prejudice against Muslims in their home countries.

The empirical analyses that are presented in the subsequent chapters will allow us to not only offer some evaluation of the models and approaches presented above, but also provide insights into the evolution of and recent developments in the foreign fighter phenomenon.

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38 Byman and Shapiro (2014).

## Chapter 2: Scoping the Phenomenon of Jihadist Foreign Fighters

### Dataset Construction

To study the causes and characteristics of the foreign fighter phenomenon, a new dataset was constructed specifically for this study. The dataset, which started by identifying the names of 1,175 individuals who traveled, attempted to travel, or expressed substantial desires to travel to Syria or Iraq beginning in 2011 until 2015 to join one of the militant groups opposing the Syrian regime, was compiled using a variety of open sources. During the first stage of the data gathering process, we used government and policy documents, media datasets, and social media sources to gather information about foreign fighters from Western countries (i.e., North America, Western Europe). At later stages of the collection effort, we expanded our collection efforts to Eastern Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East, while focusing on a similar time-frame.

The dataset includes three sets of variables, each pertaining to a specific phase of the foreign fighter's life cycle (see Figure 2.1). The first set of variables describes various elements of the foreign fighter's socio-demographic profile and his pre-travel lifestyle. Variables coded in this stage include information about the foreign fighter's ethnicity, religious affiliations, age, marital status, immigration status, level of education, occupational background, criminal background, operational background and how he was recruited. The second set of variables focuses on the travel to, and the actual activities in, Iraq and Syria. In this stage, coders attempted to track the travel route of the foreign fighter, his organizational affiliation and role, if he attended training camps, the nature of his involvement in military operations, and whether or not he tried to serve as a recruiter via his connections with people from his home country. The last set of variables is related to the actual, or potential, return of the foreign fighter to his home country. We tried to identify those foreign fighters who maintain communications with or eventually returned to their home countries and if they were involved in any criminal or terrorist activity, or were investigated by law enforcement bodies.

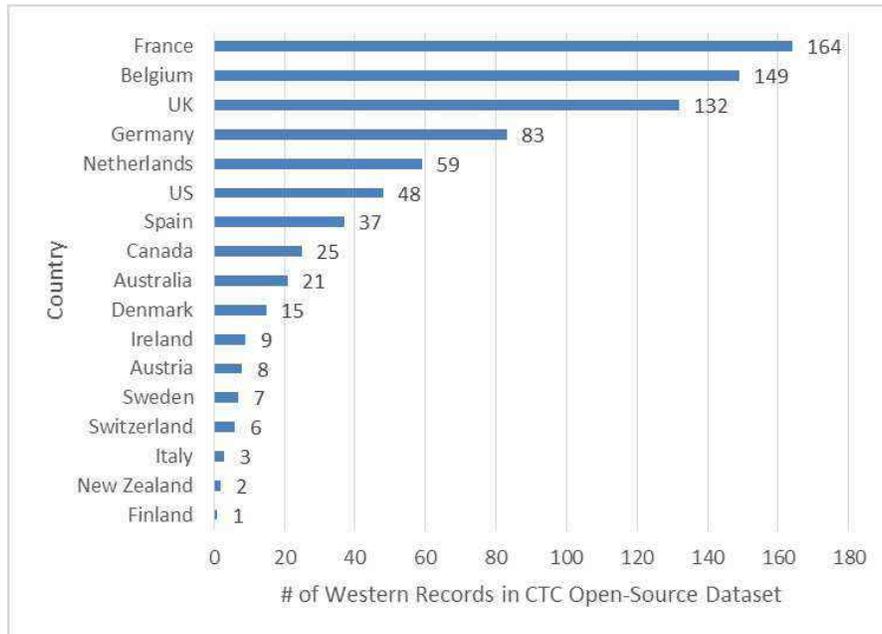


*Figure 2.1: Multiple Phases of the Foreign Fighter Lifecycle*

### Overview of Data

The rest of this chapter strives to provide a macro-level overview of the foreign fighter dataset. To begin, the dataset contains a large number of records of fighters from various countries. The overall dataset skews heavily towards Western Europe, North America, and Australia, which account for 800 of the 1,175 entries in the dataset. Figure 2.2 provides the detailed breakdown of the country-by-country records in the CTC dataset for those fighters from Western states. The estimated number of Western foreign fighters at the approximate time of the cessation of our data collection was 4,500.<sup>39</sup> This means that our dataset contains slightly less than 20% of total Western foreign fighters, a significant proportion of the overall population from the countries that represent that part of the world.

39 Eric Schmitt and Somini Sengupta, "Thousands Enter Syria to Assist Militants in ISIS," *New York Times*, September 26, 2015.



**Figure 2.2: Western Foreign Fighters in CTC Open Source Dataset, by Country**

To further illustrate this point, Table 2.1 contains information regarding the estimated total number of Western fighters based on open source information and a comparison to the number of detailed records that we were able to find. For these open source estimates, we relied on an aggregated map of estimates produced by a news organization.<sup>40</sup> We then compared those estimates of the overall number of fighters to what we found in our dataset. For example, the open source estimate for the United States was 200 foreign fighters at the time of the completion of our collection. That represented 4% of the total open source estimates for all the countries in Table 2.1. The CTC dataset, by comparison, contained 48 detailed records of U.S. foreign fighters, which represented 4% of the total of CTC records for all countries listed in Table 2.1. The number of records of U.S. fighters in the CTC dataset is 24% of the total open source estimate.

40 Ashley Kirk, "Iraq and Syria: How many foreign fighters are fighting for Isis?" *Telegraph*, March 24, 2016.

*Table 2.1: Comparison of CTC Dataset to Open Source Estimates*

Country	Open Source Estimate	Proportion of Total	Records in CTC Dataset	Proportion of Total	Proportion of Estimate
Australia	70	1%	21	2%	30%
Austria	229	5%	8	1%	3%
Belgium	380	8%	149	13%	39%
Canada	150	3%	25	2%	17%
Denmark	115	2%	15	1%	13%
Finland	60	1%	1	0%	2%
France	1550	32%	164	14%	11%
Germany	700	15%	83	7%	12%
Italy	65	1%	3	0%	5%
Netherlands	190	4%	59	5%	31%
Norway	150	3%	0	0%	0%
Spain	80	2%	37	3%	46%
Sweden	150	3%	7	1%	5%
UK	700	15%	132	11%	19%
US	200	4%	48	4%	24%

Table 2.1 shows that there are many countries in which the CTC was able to find a decent sample of detailed records of foreign fighters. The table above also shows that there are a few countries where our collection effort was less successful, Norway being the most glaring example. Overall, the collection effort resulted in a fair amount of success, but caution must be taken with some areas in regard to interpreting results from the analysis.

It should be noted that while Westerners account for a large portion of the CTC dataset, there are a fair number of records from Eastern European, Middle Eastern, African, and Asian countries. These non-Western records are not comprehensive and were not collected in a strategic, targeted, or consistent fashion. While the initial data collection focused on Western countries, once that was completed researchers began collecting on additional countries, but a decision was made to cut off this secondary effort for logistical reasons. Given that the estimate of foreign fighters from non-Western countries at the time data collection stopped is somewhere in the area of 25,500, this suggests that we have only captured a very small number of these fighters. In addition, as can be seen in Table 2.2, the countries were collected with varying levels of focus. For example, while a number of fighters from Saudi Arabia were collected and coded (90), only 4 were collected from Tunisia, despite the fact that Tunisia represents the second largest donor of foreign fighters by all estimates.<sup>41</sup> So these numbers should not be taken to reflect anything close to a representative rank order. Nevertheless, despite the fact that collection of this smaller non-Western sample was not completed and the caution that should be used in its interpretation, we feel that including these records could provide a useful subset of information about the broader foreign fighter dynamic. More specifically, we adopt a comparative approach to identify potential differences and similarities between Western and non-Western foreign fighters, while taking into consideration the inherent differences between specific non-Western countries (Bos-

41 Brian Dodwell, Daniel Milton, and Don Rassler, *The Caliphate's Global Workforce: An Inside Look at the Islamic State's Foreign Fighter Paper Trail* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2016).

nia-Herzegovina and Saudi Arabia, for example), and how that may impact the validity of our analysis.

**Table 2.2: Non-Western Foreign Fighters in CTC Open Source Dataset, by Country\***

Country	Number	Country	Number
Albania	8	Oman	1
Algeria	1	Pakistan	1
Bahrain	4	Palestine	17
Bosnia and Herzegovina	78	Qatar	3
China	2	Russia	12
Egypt	8	Sandzak**	3
Georgia	6	Saudi Arabia	90
Israel	40	Serbia	3
Jordan	64	Slovenia	3
Kosovo	10	Syria	2
Kuwait	10	Tunisia	4
Libya	5	Turkey	8
Macedonia	8	Uzbekistan	1
Morocco	7	Yemen	1

\*List is alphabetized because totals are not representative.

\*\*Sandzak is an historical region, now divided by the border between Serbia and Montenegro.

This study nicely complements previous work by the CTC in the area of foreign fighters. In two previous studies, one based on declassified information and the other on leaked information, the majority of the data dealt with fighters from North Africa and the Middle East.<sup>42</sup> This study, however, focuses more on fighters from Western Europe, the United States, Canada, and Australia.

### Data Limitations and Caveats

Before proceeding to the analysis of the data, it is important to recognize that this dataset, like all datasets, has its share of limitations. While these limitations do not undercut our ability to point out interesting trends in the data, understanding that such limitations exist introduces an element of caution to any attempts to make conclusive predictions and statements based on the data contained herein.

Many datasets used in social science research rely on open source data.<sup>43</sup> The open source collection of data on individual foreign fighters, however, presents some unique challenges. We discuss four of these challenges here as they apply to each stage of the collection process: the usage of media publications, the availability of sources for collection, the reliability of the accounts in identified sources, and the subjectivity in coding the sources into the dataset.

42 The two reports referenced are the CTC's report based on the data captured by U.S. forces in Sinjar, Iraq, and documents obtained by NBC News from an Islamic State defector. Brian Fishman and Joseph Felter, *Al-Qa'ida's Foreign Fighters in Iraq: A First Look at the Sinjar Records* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center); Brian Dodwell, Daniel Milton, and Don Rassler, *The Caliphate's Global Workforce: An Inside Look at the Islamic State's Foreign Fighter Paper Trail* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2016).

43 Among them are the Correlates of War dataset, Global Terrorism Database, Uppsala Conflict Data Program's datasets on Armed Conflict, and the International Terrorism: Attributes of Terrorist Events (*ITERATE*) dataset on transnational terrorism.

The first challenge is the use of media publications. While this is common in sociological and political research,<sup>44</sup> this approach for data collection also has some limitations,<sup>45</sup> which we have tried to overcome by employing the following steps: (a) we made an effort to cross-check all data, and therefore most individuals in our dataset are described by multiple sources; (b) we refrained from using indexes prepared by the publishers themselves and completely avoided sampling; (c) we used multiple coders (including for validation of data collected by previous coders), which presented the challenge of ensuring consistency of coding, but also enhanced reliability by reducing the likelihood that personal bias impacted the coding process.

The second challenge is that the data collected here is not a random sample of all foreign fighters worldwide or even of foreign fighters from a particular country. In all likelihood, the sample of foreign fighters covered by the press or any of the other sources in our report is not representative of the broader population of foreign fighters. Certain countries are likely underreported in terms of their foreign fighters.<sup>46</sup>

The next challenge involves the sources themselves and the difficulty collecting individual level data from them. The main sources utilized by coders were newspaper accounts, academic studies, public government reports, and martyr profiles. Newspapers, however, are designed to sell copies, not to collect research information. When the subject of inquiry is a war or terrorist event, it can be easier to find multiple witnesses, government reports, or other sources. This is less the case, however, with individual foreign fighters. Journalists often rely on interviews with friends and family members, who likely have their own set of incentives in choosing to speak with journalists. Consequently, the possibility exists that stories written about foreign fighters emphasized certain facts or deemphasized (or omitted) other facts that were not critical to the story's narrative.

Even with a source in hand, many of the variables coded in this study have some element of subjectivity. To minimize the subjectivity of the task, coders received instructions and were encouraged to ask questions on ambiguous cases. In addition, the data received two successive instances of quality control after the initial data collection was complete. Individuals who had not participated in the initial coding process reviewed the coding, noting any discrepancies. If such a discrepancy was due to a data entry error, it was corrected. Where such discrepancies appeared due to multiple sources for a particular variable, the adjudication of such cases was completed in consultation with the primary investigators.

Nevertheless, despite these limitations, we think there is still value in utilizing this data to understand what we refer to as the "lifecycle" of a foreign fighter. Where possible, we have tried to minimize the limitations of the data through coding redundancies. Our hope is that this data, even with its limitations, provides additional insight into a problem that is likely to vex policymakers and practitioners for many years to come.

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44 William A. Gamson and Andre Modigliani, "Media discourse and public opinion on nuclear power: A constructionist approach," *American Journal of Sociology* 95:1 (1989), pp. 1-37; Eitan Y. Alimi, "The Israeli Political Arena and Palestinian Contention: The Case of the 'First' Intifada," *British Journal of Political Science* 37:3 (2007): pp. 433-453.

45 Jennifer Earl, Andrew Martin, John D. McCarthy, and Sarah A. Soule, "The use of newspaper data in the study of collective action," *Annual Review of Sociology* 30 (2004), pp. 65-80; Pamela E. Oliver and Daniel J. Myers, "How Events Enter the Public Sphere: Conflict, Location, and Sponsorship in Local Newspaper Coverage of Public Events," *American Journal of Sociology* 105:1 (1999), pp. 38-87.

46 This problem has plagued research on terrorism events as well. Konstantinos Drakos and Andreas Gofas, "The Devil You Know but Are Afraid to Face: Underreporting Bias and its Distorting Effects on the Study of Terrorism," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 50:5 (2006), pp. 714-735.

## Chapter 3: Motivations and Radicalization of Jihadist Foreign Fighters

“It is horror.” That was the response of French President Francois Hollande following the deadly series of attacks in Paris on November 13, 2015.<sup>47</sup> President Hollande’s response, as well as the decision of the French government to announce three days of national mourning, reflects the potential psychological impact of a terrorist attack on the “home front.” Indeed, one reason for the increasing concern over the escalation of violence and political instability in the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia is the recognition that terrorism is unlikely to be contained in those areas and that terrorism is most effective against target governments when it is manifested domestically. At home, terrorism can more effectively generate the psychological impact that disrupts social, economic, and political spheres, enhance distrust between the public and the government, intensify social polarization and communal conflicts, and disrupt the delicate balance between security and civil liberties that most democracies aspire to maintain. After all, despite the fact that al-Qa`ida conducted a series of attacks on American interests abroad during the 1990s and in 2000, it was its attack on the homeland that triggered American policymakers to launch the United States’ longest war. Similarly, Spain withdrew its forces from Iraq in 2004 after a terrorist attack in Madrid, and not as a result of its military casualties in Iraq.

While in the last 15 years most Western countries developed new mechanisms for preventing attacks on the home front by foreign groups, the increase in the number of foreign fighters presents a new vulnerability. This has made acquiring a better understanding of the factors that facilitate the radicalization of individuals residing in Western countries crucial to national security. In this chapter, we utilize the CTC open source foreign fighter dataset to identify possible facilitators of radicalization and the circumstances that lead individuals to travel from their home countries to Syria and Iraq with the intention of joining violent groups.

### Socio-Economic Factors

As detailed in chapter 2, one of the longest-held beliefs among both students of political violence and practitioners assumes that there is an association between socio-economic status and the tendency of individuals to join militant political groups. To put it simply, it is the idea that individuals join militant groups because they are either poor, uneducated, or some combination thereof, and thus compelled to look for alternative illegitimate or illegal paths to improve their life conditions. Recently, some prominent scholars expressed doubts about such propositions. Krueger and Malecková, for example, argue that “any connection between poverty, education and terrorism is indirect, complicated and probably quite weak.”<sup>48</sup>

To assess these contradicting propositions, we looked into multiple indicators of foreign fighters’ socio-economic status and tried to identify common trends. Our findings seem to provide support for the view that foreign fighters (at least those in our dataset, which is Western-heavy) are indeed emerging from lower socio-economic echelons and lack opportunities for upward mobilization, thus differing from what Krueger and Malecková found in their study of the education level of Palestinian suicide bombers.<sup>49</sup>

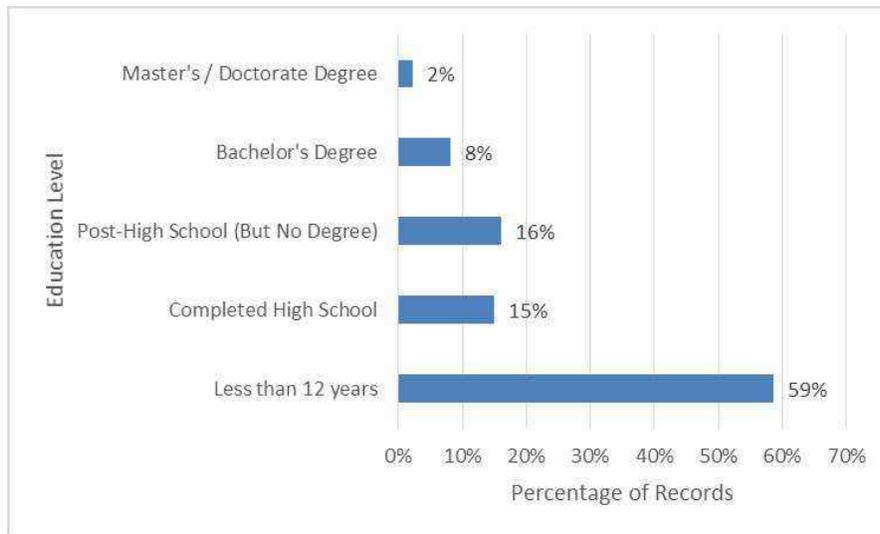
Before comparing our numbers to the mean level of education in each country, consider that while education is considered one of the most important mechanisms for self-growth and rise in socio-economic

47 Swati Sharma, “‘It is horror’: French President Hollande’s remarks after Paris attacks,” *Washington Post*, November 13, 2015.

48 Krueger and Malecková (2003).

49 Although our findings differ from Krueger and Malecková, we recognize that the two populations under consideration, foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq and Palestinian suicide bombers, are not directly comparable. We make the point, not to refute their findings, but to suggest that one terrorist may be different from another, much as we have found here.

nomic status, the majority of the foreign fighters in our dataset did not complete high school (see Figure 3.1), and less than 10% of them completed a Bachelor's or graduate degree. However, 15% claimed some amount of college-level schooling, if not a degree. This number is roughly consistent with the CTC's previous report on foreign fighters based on leaked documents, which found that approximately 35% of Islamic State foreign fighters claimed to have an education beyond high school. As shown in Figure 3.1, the data for this report shows that 26% have some education beyond high school.

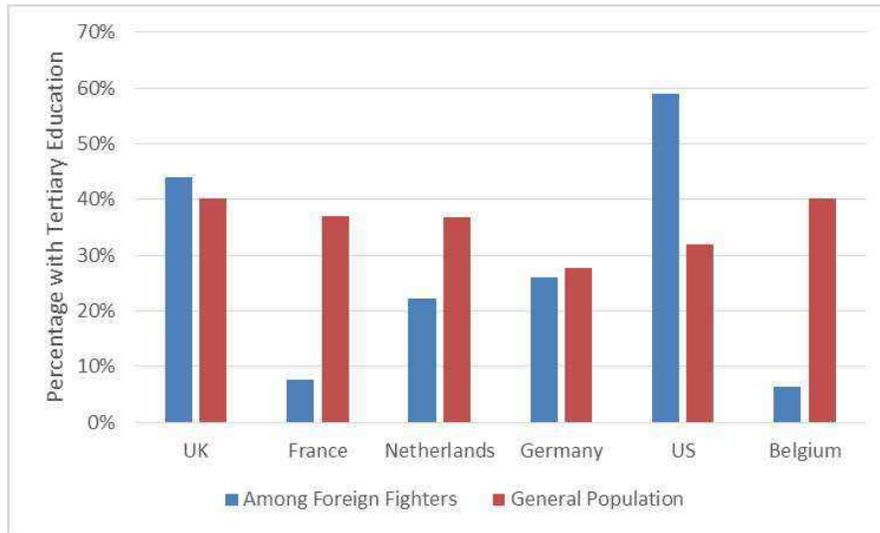


**Figure 3.1: Level of Education among Foreign Fighters (n = 394)**

A lower level of educational attainment, however, does not necessarily point to a cause for these individuals to join jihadist organizations. A comparison of the educational attainment of foreign fighters to the average educational attainment rate in the societies in which the foreign fighters live would allow for a stronger claim. In other words, how does the tertiary education rate of the German fighters in our dataset compare to the similar statistic for the German population at large? Using educational data from various European governments, Figure 3.2 provides some insight into this question.<sup>50</sup> As can be seen, in some of the main Western countries that “export” foreign fighters (France, Netherlands, and Belgium), the portion of foreign fighters with tertiary education is much lower when compared to the portion of tertiary education holders in the entire population. This trend does not hold with other countries, where a comparison of the tertiary education rate shows either no difference (United Kingdom and Germany) or, in the case of the United States, that the foreign fighter population appears to have a higher rate of tertiary education. While specific investigations into why this difference exists are beyond the scope of this study, what is clear is that across countries, there appear to be differences between the various groups of foreign fighters.<sup>51</sup>

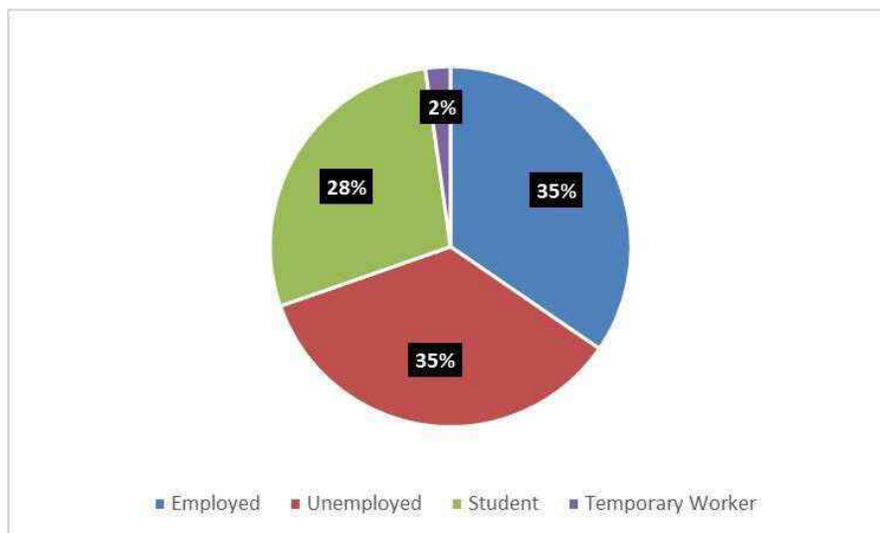
<sup>50</sup> Data regarding the general population was extracted from Eurostat – the statistical office of the European Union and refers to ages 25-54. The data on the U.S. was extracted from the U.S. Bureau of Labor of Statistics.

<sup>51</sup> This was also reflected in the CTC study of Islamic State personnel records, which also found variance across countries but which generally found fighters had higher levels of education than national averages (with the key difference between the studies being the heavy Middle East and North Africa representation in that study versus the Western focus in this one). Dodwell, Milton, and Rassler (2016).



**Figure 3.2: Portion of Foreign Fighters and General Population with Tertiary Education**

The lack of opportunities for upward mobilization is also reflected in the occupational status of the foreign fighters. As can be seen in Figure 3.3, in which we were able to code the occupational status of 402 foreign fighters, the percentage who are unemployed is only slightly less than the number who have some form of employment (combining those who have employment with those who are temporary workers). This roughly even amount of employed and unemployed fighters, however, hides some nuance regarding the types of work in which individuals are employed. If we further break down the number of fighters based on the skill-level of their position, another trend emerges. Of the 35% of fighters who are employed, 67% work in low-skilled positions, defined as positions that do not require a professional or academic certificate. Taken together, the data suggests that approximately only 11% are employed in high skilled positions, with the rest either being unemployed or engaged in lower-skilled work.



**Figure 3.3: Foreign Fighters by Occupational Status (%)**

Of course, it is impossible to assess whether or not the individuals who decided to become foreign fighters did so because of discontent with their employment or as a consequence of having no employment, as opposed to the wide range of other possible motivators. However, it is true that, in this

dataset, only 1 out of 10 fighters had what might be loosely characterized as “good” employment. This observation should serve as a reminder that the socio-economic conditions of foreign fighters might be an important factor worthy of consideration when thinking about preventative factors.

Comparing the employment results presented in this report with previous CTC work that relied on leaked Islamic State personnel documents is a bit difficult.<sup>52</sup> This is in part because only 255 of the fighters in the latter study reported that they were unemployed, or about 6% of the total. Even factoring in all of the missing responses, 455 in all, the unemployed rate using that data rises only to 17%. This is still less than half the rate that we found here. It is impossible to assess the reasons for the difference. It may be due to the fact that journalists, who wrote the news stories that formed the bulk of data available for this report, had a preference towards stories of unemployed and downtrodden individuals going to fight. Of course, it could also be that incoming Islamic State fighters, when asked to state their previous occupation, did not want to appear incapable of contributing to the organization by responding that they had been out of work. Alternatively, the fighters in the leaked documents may have listed themselves as employed even if their employment was illegal or informal, while journalists and interviewees may have simply said that an individual engaged in such activities was unemployed.

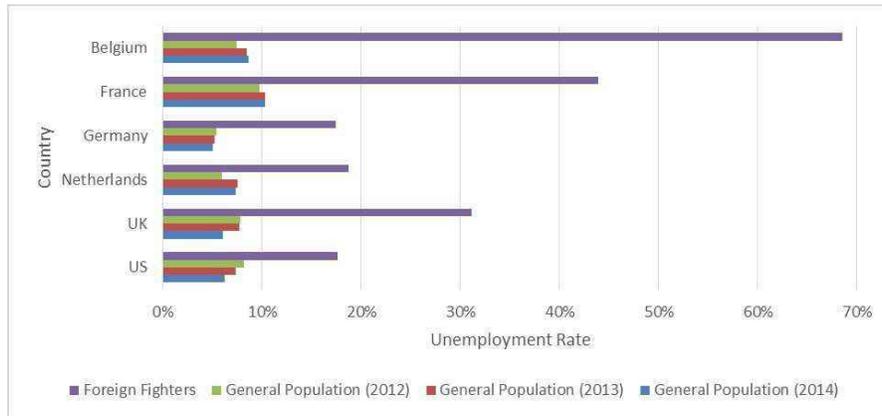
Any of these explanations would have resulted in a higher amount of employment responses in the leaked Islamic State data. Regardless of the reasons for the differences, which cannot be resolved, there are clearly some similarities. Both datasets show a substantial number of students among foreign fighters (28% in this report, 17% in the report based on leaked documents). Additionally, among those who are employed, relatively high proportions are in low-skilled positions (67% in this report, 50% in the previous report). Based on either report, it seems to be the case that employment prospects could be one part of the equation contributing to the foreign fighter problem.

The foreign fighters’ difficulties in the labor market are even more obvious when they are compared to other relevant segments of the population in their home countries. As can be seen in Figure 3.4, the unemployment rates among foreign fighters are much higher in comparison to the general population. More specifically, in countries that “provide” the highest number of foreign fighters (Belgium, United Kingdom, and France) the gap in the unemployment rate is three times or more between the general population and the foreign fighters’ population. In the other three countries (United States, Germany, and Netherlands), the unemployment rate is twice as high among the foreign fighters’ population in comparison to the general population.

One interesting note involves foreign fighters from the United States. They appear to have relatively more education than the general population, but according to Figure 3.4, also seem to have relatively high levels of unemployment. While not conclusive, it suggests the possibility of relative deprivation playing a role in the radicalization process. Some individuals may be more susceptible to the narratives of fulfillment offered by jihadi groups if they feel that their current situation is below what their qualifications seem to indicate that they deserve.

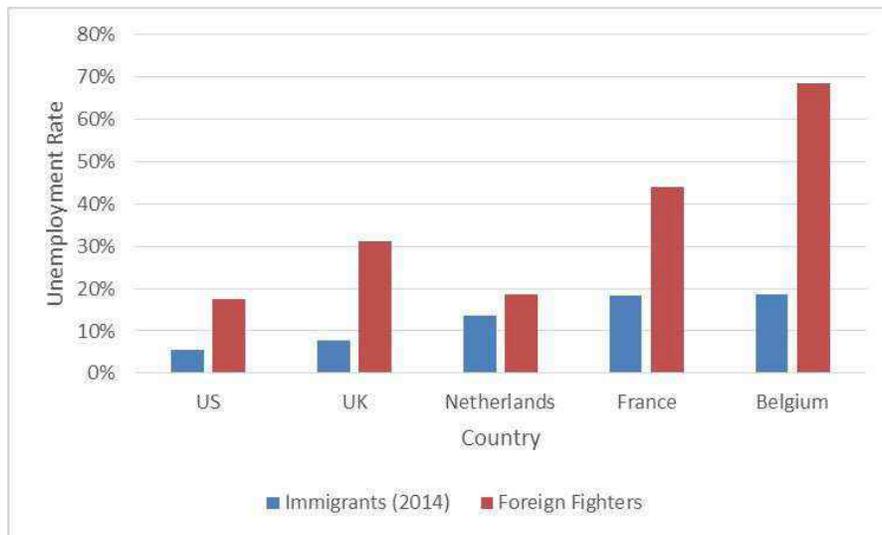
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52 Dodwell, Milton, Rassler (2016).



**Figure 3.4: Unemployment Rate in General Population and Foreign Fighters by Country (%)**

It seems that the foreign fighters are at a labor market disadvantage in comparison to the immigrants in their home country. As can be seen in Figure 3.5, with the exception of the Netherlands, the unemployment rate among foreign fighters is significantly higher in comparison to the unemployment rate among the immigrant community in their home country.



**Figure 3.5: Unemployment Rate among Immigrants and Foreign Fighters by Country (%)<sup>53</sup>**

An obvious point that nonetheless needs to be made is that the findings here do not suggest that the only people who will radicalize fit the profile described above (unemployed and uneducated). Indeed, students (who are not considered as unemployed) made up slightly more than a quarter of the foreign fighters in the dataset and a small percentage left some form of high skilled employment (doctors, engineers) to participate in the fighting in Syria and Iraq, thus responding to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s “special call” for skilled individuals to provide services to those who live within the borders of the Islamic State.<sup>54</sup>

The evidence that foreign fighters are, in some countries, occupying the lower socio-economic echelons of their sub-culture community may suggest that part of the dynamics that explain their radicalization

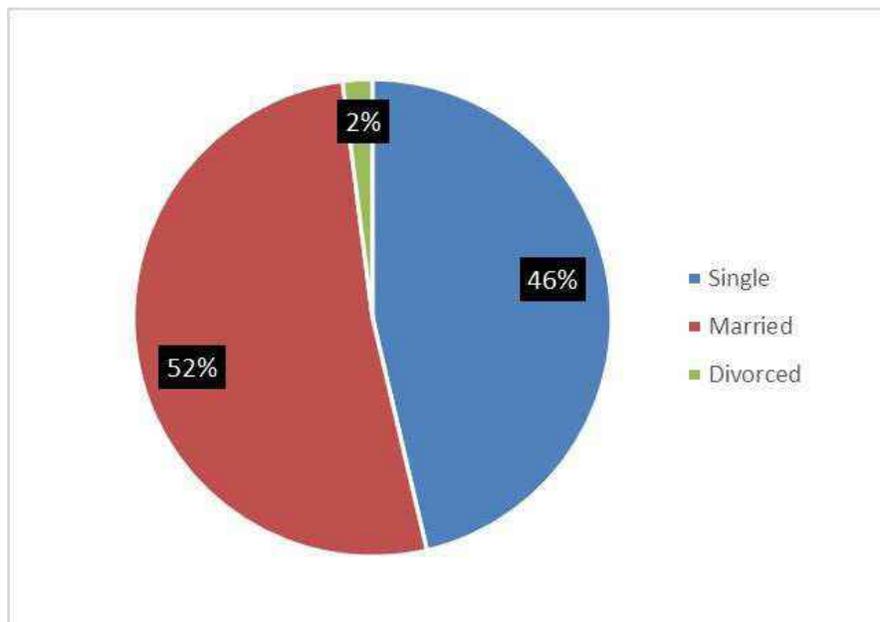
53 The data used for this figure comes from the United States Department of Labor’s Bureau of Labor Statistics. Available at <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/forbrn.nr0.htm>.

54 “Isis Leader Calls on Muslims to ‘Build Islamic State,’” *BBC*, July 1, 2014.

are also related to a sense of relative deprivation. In other words, the fact that they are situated at the socio-economic margins may facilitate among them hostility and a lack of trust not just towards the mainstream culture and society, but also towards the mainstream of their own immigrant sub-culture. Thus, this may present an obstacle for community leaders who strive to prevent radicalization in their areas of stewardship.

The findings also hint that these foreign fighters (again, from a Western-dominated dataset) possess high levels of biographical availability. The concept of biographical availability describes the absence of strong external commitments such as marriage or professional career. According to this argument, it is the absence of strong external commitments that encourages individuals to fulfill more risky functions within militant groups and feel that they have limited resources to lose by making such a drastic decision.<sup>55</sup> Simply put, it is much easier to travel to the Middle East when one does not need to sacrifice a promising professional career or leave a family behind. As Mohammed Aslam El Youssoufi, a Belgian foreign fighter, explained, “I wanted to support the Syrian people. There was nothing that kept me in Belgium: I had no job, no family.”<sup>56</sup>

But can we say that the combination of low socio-demographic status and biographical availability (limited social or organizational commitments) is the main motivating factor for foreign fighters? The findings that we have discussed up until this point have tended to provide some empirical support to the idea that low socio-demographic characteristics matter. However, the latter part of the question, which deals with biographic availability, is less supported by an examination of our dataset.



**Figure 3.6: Foreign Fighters by Marital Status (n = 399)**

To begin with, prior to travel slightly less than half of the foreign fighters were single or divorced and

55 Doug McAdam, “Recruitment to High-Risk Activism: The Case of Freedom Summer,” *American Journal of Sociology* 92 (1986), pp. 64-90; Gregory L. Wiltfang and Doug McAdam, “The Costs and Risks of Social Activism: A Study of Sanctuary Movement Activism,” *Social Forces* 69:4 (1991), pp. 987-1010; Alan Schussman and Sarah A. Soule, “Process and Protest: Accounting for Individual Protest Participation,” *Social Forces* 84:2 (2005), pp. 1083-1108.

56 “Deze straffen kregen de beklaagden in het terrorismeproces,” *Het Nieuwsblad*, February 11, 2015.

a significant portion were married (see Figure 3.6).<sup>57</sup> Beyond their marital status, almost one-third of the married fighters had children before traveling to a zone of conflict.<sup>58</sup> Another interesting observation is that a small portion of foreign fighters (8%) married upon their arrival in Syria and Iraq. This raises the possibility that while some fighters may have decided to travel to Syria and Iraq in part due to a lack of current prospects in their life, still others may have traveled because of the possibility that traveling would remedy that problem. Abu Ibrahim al-Suedi, for example, a Swedish foreign fighter of Palestinian origin, married Umm Haritha, a 20-year-old Canadian student, merely weeks after she arrived in Syria around January 2015. The marriage was short-lived though, as al-Suedi was killed on May 5 when a Jabhat al-Nusra operative detonated an explosive belt he was wearing while driving a motorbike near a car occupied by IS operatives, including al-Suedi.<sup>59</sup>

When comparing the marital status of foreign fighters to that of the general population in their home countries, the gap does not seem significant. As in most relevant EU countries, the portion of the population that is married is between 45%-55%.<sup>60</sup> In the United States, the portion of the population that is married is a bit higher (61%), but not significantly.<sup>61</sup>

The average age of the foreign fighters in our dataset is approximately 24 years. This is fairly comparable to the average age of 26-27 found in the CTC's previous report, especially when one takes into account that Western fighters tend to be younger and are overrepresented in the open source data used for this report.<sup>62</sup> Almost two-thirds of the foreign fighters are in their mid-20s, and a significant number of them are actually in their 30s (see Figure 3.7), which is a time when individuals often begin to acquire significant commitments (children, employment, social ties).<sup>63</sup>

Along with the data on marital status, the fact that a significant portion of fighters are relatively older undermines the perception that foreign fighters have especially high levels of biographical availability. Those who are older tend to have more commitments in professional and social spheres. While the media has focused on the many youth who have joined jihadi groups in Syria and Iraq, the fact that we find a large number of individuals who are in their 30s reflects the broader appeal of these groups. On the other hand, the fact that almost 25% of the dataset are below the age of 21 makes a clear determination about biographic availability impossible. Instead, the fact that the foreign fighter is relatively diverse suggests a need to jettison the idea of one single profile of the "average" foreign fighter.

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57 This number, at first glance, may appear to be very different than the number presented in the CTC research based on leaked Islamic State foreign fighter records. In that report, 61% of fighters were said to be single. However, this number includes unknown responses. If you take those away, the number of fighters said to be single in that report approaches 67%. In this report, the number of married includes 31 fighters who were married in theater. To get a better comparison between the two reports, fighters married in theater should be reassigned to the "single" category. When this is done, the percentage of single fighters is just over 54%. This suggests a gap of 13% between the report based on open source data and that based on leaked personnel forms. See Dodwell, Milton, Rassler (2016).

58 We did not collect information on whether or not fighters who were married took their children with them to the conflict zone. While we did not collect information on this, evidence from Islamic State propaganda videos and other sources have stated that it does occur. Michael Martinez, "ISIS Video Claims to Show Boy Executing Two Men Accused of Being Russian Spies," *CNN*, January 15, 2015; Lizzie Dearden, "ISIS Training Children of Foreign Fighters to Become 'Next Generation' of Terrorists," *Independent*, July 29, 2016.

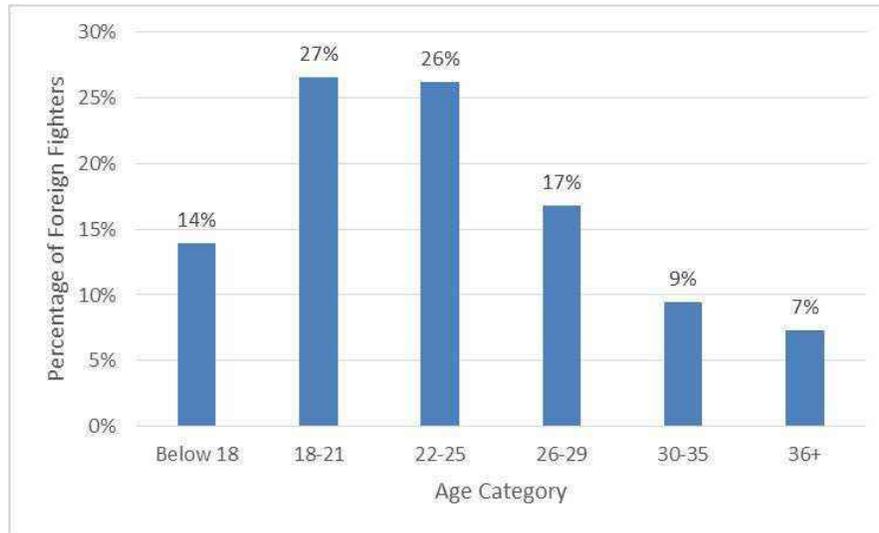
59 Nadim Roberts, "The life of a jihadi wife: Why one Canadian woman joined ISIS's Islamic state," *CBC News*, July 7, 2014.

60 Hilde Orten, "Measuring Legal Marital Status in Europe and in the European Social Survey," paper presented at the 35th CEIES Seminar in Warsaw, Poland, January 24-25, 2008.

61 This data was obtained from Statista's information on 2014 marital status statistics in the United States. Available at <https://www.statista.com/statistics/242030/marital-status-of-the-us-population-by-sex/>.

62 Dodwell, Milton, Rassler (2016).

63 To illustrate, the median age of first marriage in the U.S. is 29 for men and 27 for women (U.S. Census Bureau, Decennial Censuses, 1890 to 1940, and Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplements, 1947 to 2015) and slightly above 30 in West European Countries (see - <http://priceconomics.com/at-what-age-do-people-get-married-around-the-world/>).



*Figure 3.7: Foreign Fighters by Age (n = 604)*

To conclude, examination of the socio-demographic characteristics of the fighters in this dataset reveals two possible profiles of foreign fighters. The first are individuals who enjoy high levels of biographical availability. They are young (usually under 21 years of age), in many cases high school or university students, who are still single.<sup>64</sup> While this study is not able to assign causality for the willingness of this profile to travel and join jihadi groups in Syria and Iraq, the fact that they have high biographic availability suggests that boredom, the desire for adventure, the influence of friends, the allure of rebellion, and religious or ethnic identity may play a role.

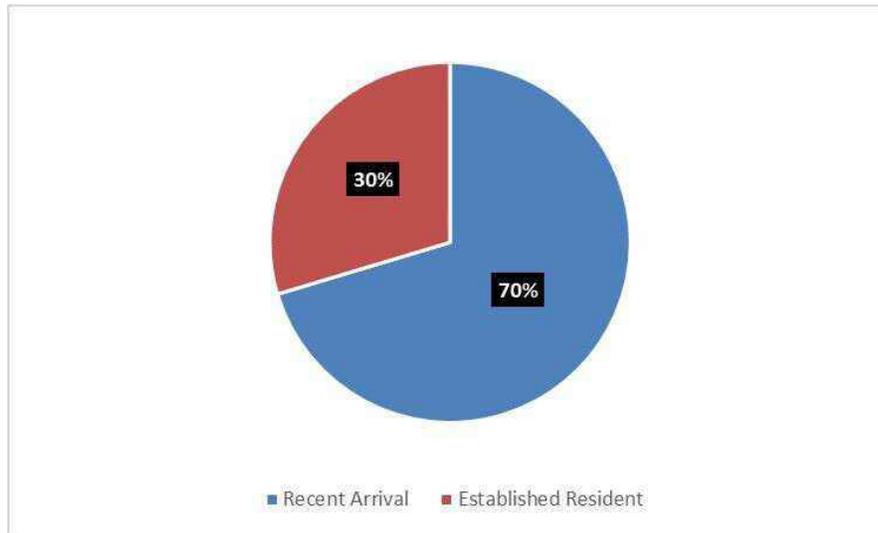
The second profile is of more mature foreign fighters, many of whom are married with children. Despite the fact that they need to provide for their families, many are unemployed or employed in low-paying jobs. Their age ranges from the upper 20s to the upper 30s. Thus, while they are at the stage in life in which their expenses reach their peak, and they are expected to experience professional and personal growth, their ability to climb the socio-economic ladder is limited. In this case, the possibility exists that the lack of biographical availability and growing responsibilities may serve to push a susceptible individual to look for radical options, including traveling to fight in Syria or Iraq.

While the profiles described above explain some of the frustrations that foreign fighters may experience before traveling to conflict zones, they illustrate just one aspect of the process that may lead individuals to join jihadi groups in Syria and Iraq. Both profiles could also include the key ingredient of political grievances and resulting activism.

### **Ethnic or Religious Attachment and Recruitment**

In the previous chapters, we indicated that an increasing number of scholars see elements related to identity and cultural attachment as an important part of the radicalization process (what we designated in chapter 2 as the “ideological” approach). In order to investigate if these kinds of processes may complement socio-economic related motivations, we measured several aspects that are related to the association of the individual foreign fighter with specific ideology or religious or ethnic framework.

64 For reference, the single fighters tend, on average, to be 6.6 years younger than the married fighters.



**Figure 3.8: Foreign Fighters by Residency Status (%)**

To begin with, the great majority of the foreign fighters belong to a specific sub-culture in their home countries. In one attempt to illustrate this, researchers coded foreign fighters into two categories: recent arrival or established resident.<sup>65</sup> We were able to ascertain residency status for 668 individuals. As can be seen in Figure 3.8, the majority of them are recent arrivals. Moreover, if we focus attention just on Western foreign fighters, we can see that the portion of recent arrivals is even higher.

The previous CTC report relying on leaked Islamic State personnel records does not contain a convenient coding of an individual fighter's residency status. It does, however, contain a category that could provide some insight into this question. Incoming fighters were asked to fill out their citizenship and their country of residence. If we consider individuals where a difference exists between those two columns to be "recent arrivals," then we have a very rough estimate of the number of recent arrivals in the data. We did this using the leaked data for the 377 individuals from Western countries. The result is that differences exist in the citizenship and residence column in 61% of the cases. Excluding cases where the citizenship column was blank decreased the estimate to 49%. In other words, in 49-61% of the cases, there were differences between a fighter's stated country of residence and his citizenship, which means that the fighter could reasonably be considered a recent arrival.<sup>66</sup>

These findings strengthen further the argument that socio-economic difficulties may play a role in the motivation of foreign fighters traveling to conflict zones. To illustrate this, data collected by EUROSTAT shows that the risk of poverty is 10% higher for immigrants in comparison to natives, and that the overall unemployment rates among immigrants are significantly higher in comparison to natives, including what can be defined as long term unemployment.<sup>67</sup>

The fact that most foreign fighters appear to be immigrants or second- or third-generation descendants of immigrants seems to be consistent with previous findings related to the "socio-economic explanation," but it also provides limited support to the "ideological" approach. The data, however, does not allow a firm conclusion on this important point. That said, while the nature of the cultural and

65 For purposes of coding this variable, we counted someone as a "recent arrival" if they had just arrived in their current country of residence or if there was an indication that they were the second or third generation of their family who had immigrated to their country of residence.

66 This should be seen as a conservative estimate for purposes of comparison to the open source data being used for this report. The reason is that "immigrants" in this report include second and third generation immigrants. There is no comparable variable in the data used for the previous CTC report.

67 This data was obtained from Eurostat's 2014 data. Available at <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat>.

normative gap between immigrant communities and mainstream society is still debated by academics and practitioners, there is some empirical evidence that it exists.<sup>68</sup> For example, in the United Kingdom studies revealed significant support for the adoption of Shari`a law as state law. This led Sadiq Khan, a British-Muslim and current Mayor of London, but then a member of the British Parliament, to admit in 2006 that “vast numbers of Muslims feel disengaged and alienated from mainstream British society.”<sup>69</sup> Moreover, it seems that jihadi groups are attempting to exploit and even widen this gap for recruitment purposes.<sup>70</sup>

The point regarding the nature of immigrant communities is an important one, but one that is beyond the scope of this report in terms of a more robust examination. It is also important to explicitly state that, while the data shows that a number of foreign fighters are recent arrivals, the data is not representative of broader immigrant populations, nor should the findings here be applied as such. Indeed, these communities in all the countries we have discussed are diverse and sizable. The reason that some individuals from these relatively large immigrant and recent immigrant communities radicalize and decide to join terrorist organizations is not clear based on the data presented in this report.

There is not really any conventional wisdom regarding the role that one’s religious beliefs play in the decision to become a foreign fighter. Clearly, those joining Sunni jihadist organizations are Muslim, but pinpointing the exact time that they became Muslim is difficult using our data. We asked coders to capture information related to an individual’s religious conversion process. That is, what was the profile of these fighters with regards to their faith? We were only able to find information on a very small subset of fighters in the dataset (n = 262). Even in this small sample, however, some trends emerge. First, it appears that about 68% of the fighters in the sample were Muslims since childhood, although only about 28% of these were described as being very religious at that stage.

Interestingly, for the remaining 32% in the sample who were identified as converts to Islam, only 11% of the conversions took place in the months leading up to their departure to Iraq and Syria. In other words, while there were many converts in our dataset who went to Iraq and Syria, they were not generally identified as having recently converted. Taken together with the descriptive statistics regarding those who were lifelong Muslims, the data suggests that the bulk of the foreign fighters in our dataset are neither lifelong adherents nor latecomers to the faith. While it is impossible to say with certainty based on the limited data we have, there appears to be a critical stage when individuals fall in between either of these extremes and radicalize.<sup>71</sup>

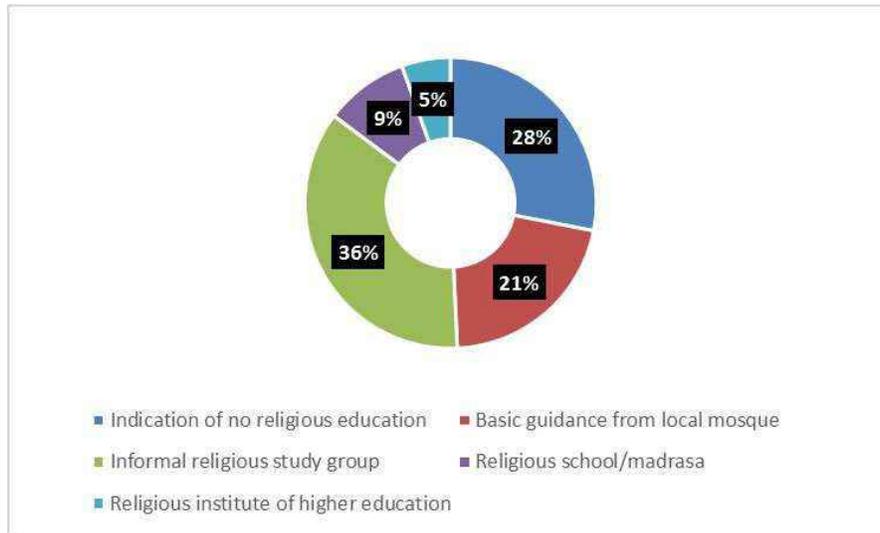
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68 Robert T. Hitlan, Kimberly Carrillo, Michael A. Zarate, and Shelley N. Aikman, “Attitudes Toward Immigrant Groups and the September 11 Terrorist Attacks,” *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 13:2 (2007), pp. 135-152.

69 Patrick Hennessy and Melissa Kite, “Poll reveals 40pc of Muslims want sharia law in UK,” *Telegraph*, February 19, 2006.

70 Javier Jordan and Luisa Boix, “Al-Qaeda and Western Islam,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 16:1 (2004), pp. 1-17; Adam Taylor, “The Islamic State Wants You To Hate Refugees,” *Washington Post*, November 16, 2015; Stephen Dinan, “American-born Children of Immigrants Proving Fruitful Recruiting Ground for Jihad in U.S.,” *Washington Times*, June 13, 2016.

71 This point is consistent with a previous CTC report that examined the radicalization process. Scott Helfstein, *Edges of Radicalization: Ideas, Individuals, and Networks in Violent Extremism* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2012).



**Figure 3.9: Foreign Fighters by Religious Education (%)**

One other way to parse out the role of religion is to try to assess the level of each fighter's religious education. In an attempt to code religious education, we asked coders to code both formal types of religious education (at a madrasa or other religious institute of higher education) as well as informal types (indications that they had been part of a study group or sought religious guidance at a local mosque).<sup>72</sup> Much like the data related to the coding of an individual's conversion to the Islamic faith, the sample in the case of religious education was also very small ( $n = 203$ ). The results of this breakdown can be seen in Figure 3.9, which shows that a small minority of the foreign fighters had any formal religious education (less than 15%), while the majority of them had no religious guidance (or just basic guidance) before their travel.

Both findings indicate that the majority of the foreign fighters had limited familiarity with the tenets of the Islamic faith. This is consistent with the findings from the CTC's earlier report, which showed that very small numbers of foreign fighters reported having any religious education and that approximately 70% of fighters reported having a basic knowledge of Shari`a law.<sup>73</sup>

Given these findings, it seems that the ability of the foreign fighters to develop an emotional and cognitive attachment to the jihadi community is based on other factors, which may be more related to cultural and political dimensions of their identities as Muslims in non-Muslim societies than religious triggers. The ability of jihadi groups to recruit foreign fighters is thus based on creating a narrative that is focused on the ongoing deprivation of Muslims, both in specific Western polities, as well as in the international arena. While convincing them that joining the jihadi movement based on specific religious imperatives may be important, it seems to play a secondary role. Moreover, our findings also correspond with primary sources indicating that jihadi groups in general prefer to recruit individuals who have limited religious education since they are less capable of critically scrutinizing the jihadi narrative and ideology, in addition to being less familiar with contrasting Islamic schools of thought.<sup>74</sup>

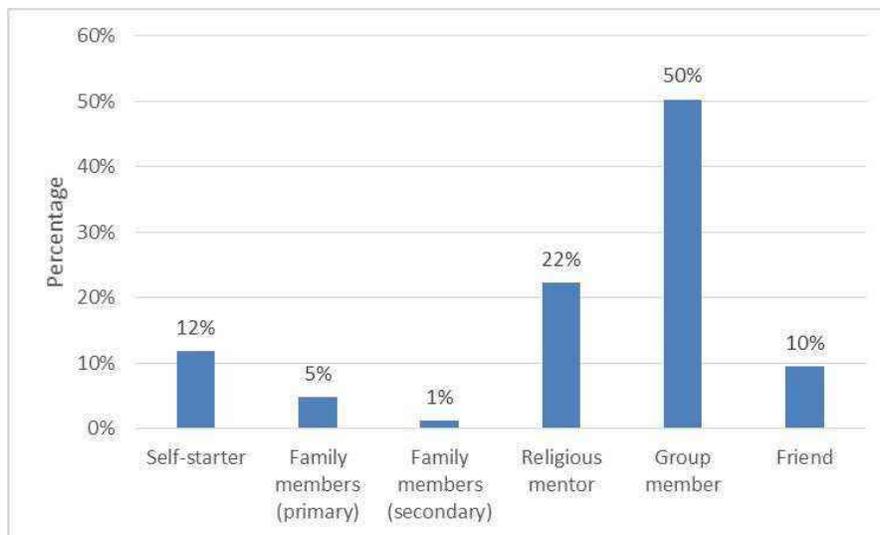
The above conclusions are also supported by our findings regarding patterns of recruitment. To examine the question of recruitment, we first tried to identify the medium of recruitment for each foreign

72 Based on the sources, this often took the form of a portion of the story related to how the individual acquired knowledge about the Islamic faith, as opposed to when this occurred, which was the basis for coding the variable related to the timing of someone's conversion to Islam.

73 Dodwell, Milton, Ressler (2016).

74 Brian Fishman and Abdullah Warius, "A Jihadist's Course in the Art of Recruitment," *CTC Sentinel* 2:2 (2009).

fighter. This was not an easy task, especially since in many cases multiple individuals or mechanisms are involved in the recruitment process. Indeed, in the case of 85 individuals, we could not identify a primary recruitment medium and instead coded multiple recruitment contacts. For 300 individuals, the sources we relied on to compile the information pointed toward a single recruitment node. Figure 3.10 shows how often different types of individuals played a role in the recruitment process of foreign fighters. As can be seen, when we could identify recruitment information, in nearly 50% of the cases a direct connection with a group's representative facilitated the radicalization process. Religious mentors also played a role, and to a lesser extent family members and friends. A smaller group of foreign fighters appear to have been what we refer to as "self-starters," taking the steps on their own to radicalize and travel to Syria or Iraq, whether via the virtual or the physical world. That does not mean that individuals only radicalize with help, but third parties still appear to be a significant part of the radicalization and mobilization process.



**Figure 3.10: Foreign Fighters by Recruitment Methods (%)**

One pattern we wanted to identify was whether recruitment occurred virtually or personally (actual meetings with a "recruiter" in the physical world). This turned out to be very difficult to assess with certainty, as the contribution of the internet as opposed to in-person connections is rarely discussed with much detail in any of the available accounts of foreign fighters, with the exception of certain court records when they become available. Consequently, we do not feel we have solid enough empirical grounds to offer a breakdown of the relative amount or impact of virtual versus personal recruitment. Nevertheless, one trend we saw in the data is worth mentioning. Despite the growing attention to the role of virtual recruitment, the majority of the foreign fighters still relied on some form of interpersonal connection to make such a life changing decision (leaving their home country to join the jihadi movement). This may indicate that while virtual propaganda can provide the initial cognitive opening for adopting the jihadi narrative, a human connection is necessary to push the individual to actual activism, as well as for logistical reasons for traveling to a war zone. While our data cannot prove this point, we do think it is one that deserves future analysis.

One other piece of evidence in favor of the important role played by in-person facilitators is the fact that it is possible to identify specific geographic hubs of recruitment (see Table 3.1). In other words, the recruitment networks in Western countries are focused in specific municipalities where they can identify high numbers of potential recruits (i.e., significant immigrant communities) who are potentially under socio-economic stress. In some cases, specific geographical considerations are also in play. For example, it seems that the location of Ceuta, a municipality under Spanish rule, but on the north coast of Africa, makes it a comfortable recruitment hub from a logistical and operational perspective. The

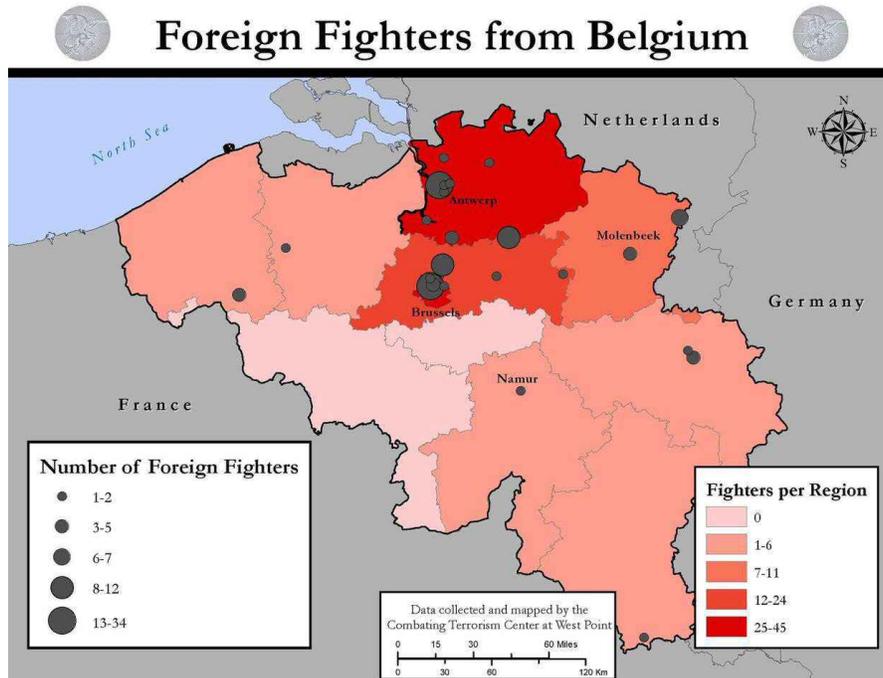
town of Lunel, on the southern coast of France, is another case in point.<sup>75</sup> In fact, for the 854 foreign fighters in the dataset for whom we could identify a city of residence, almost 70% (595 individuals) came from cities where at least one other fighter was also identified.

*Table 3.1: Hubs of Recruitment*

Country	City	Number of Recruits
UK	London	38
Belgium	Antwerp	32
Belgium	Brussels	30
Spain	Ceuta	18
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Zenica	15
France	Nice	13
France	Toulouse	13
France	Lunel	12
Belgium	Vilvoorde	11
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Sarajevo	11
Belgium	Molenbeek	10
France	Paris	10
Germany	Dinslaken	9
Netherlands	Hague	9
UK	Portsmouth	8
Canada	Montreal	7
Germany	Frankfurt	7
Netherlands	Delft	7
Australia	Sydney	7

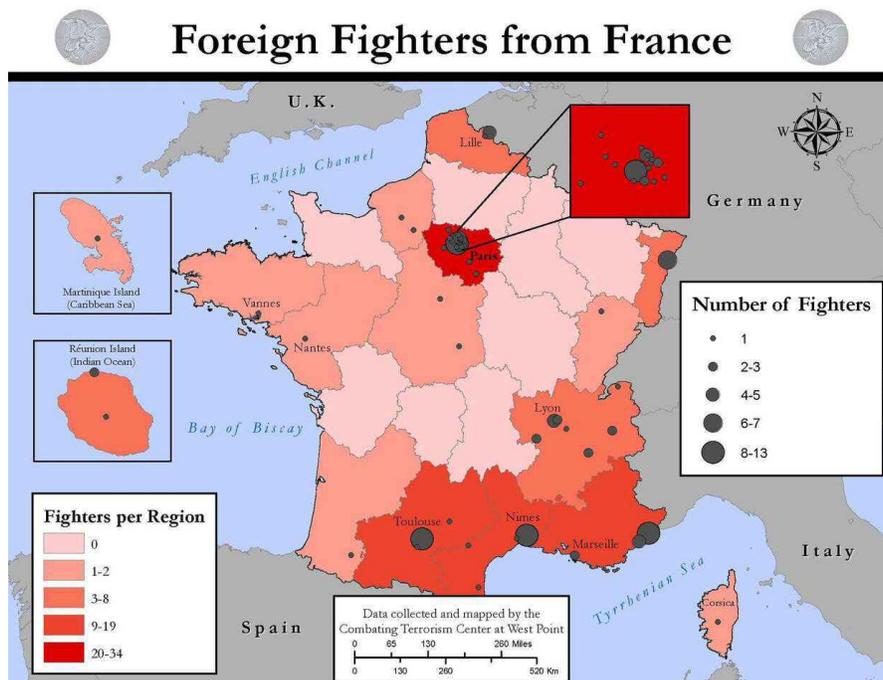
Moreover, it seems that in some cases it is possible to identify specific regions that are areas of concentrated recruitment efforts. This is best represented visually by mapping the cities of residence for foreign fighters in certain countries. Figure 3.11 contains a map of foreign fighters in Belgium. In the map, the dots represent cities from which foreign fighters have come, with the larger dots representing greater numbers of fighters. The underlying color in the map shows the density of fighters by province within Belgium, with increasing density represented by darker shades of red. As can be seen, the E19 corridor—which includes the cities of Antwerp, Mechelen, Vilvoorde, Brussels, and Molenbeek—appears to be a particularly rich source of foreign fighters.

75 Andrew Higgins, "A French Town Linked to Jihad Asks Itself Why," *New York Times*, January 16, 2015.



**Figure 3.11: Map of Belgian Foreign Fighter Cities of Residence**

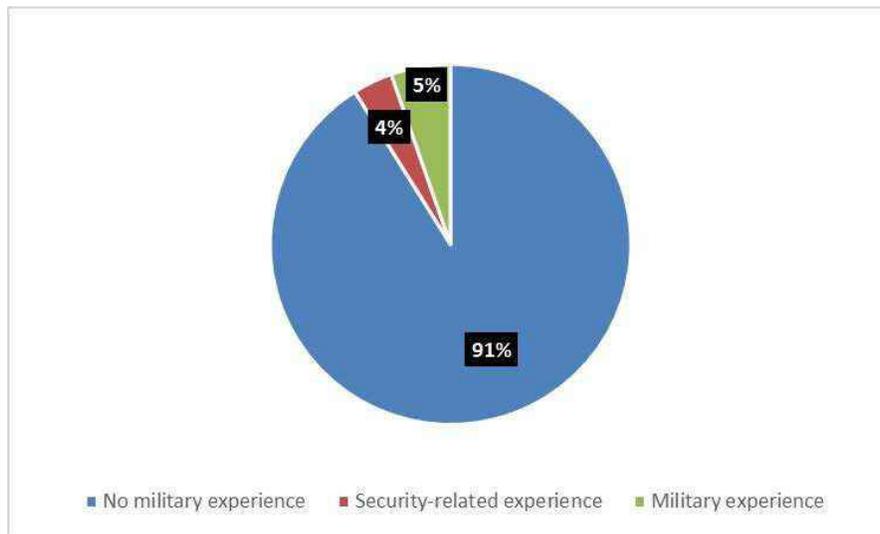
We created a similar map for France, which appears in Figure 3.12. There is a large concentration of fighters in Paris, which is to be expected. However, the French Riviera (including cities such as Cannes, Lunel, and Nice) also seems to be a significant recruitment hub for foreign fighters coming from France.



**Figure 3.12: Map of French Foreign Fighter Cities of Residence**

Although questions related to the demographics and geographic origins of foreign fighter recruitment

are interesting, there is an area that we have not yet explored related to why groups target certain individuals. Theories of selective recruitment may offer some clues. These theories suggest that militant groups prefer to recruit individuals who already possess the appropriate ideological convictions and avoid investing resources in ideological training once the recruits arrive in zones of conflicts.<sup>76</sup> If this is the case, we would expect to see comparable tendencies with regard to the operational background of the recruited foreign fighters. To offer some insight into whether or not this occurs, we coded each of the fighters according to their operational background. If foreign fighters had previously served in the military or in some other security related occupation, we noted that in our dataset. Nonetheless, as can be observed in Figure 3.13, of the 618 foreign fighters for which we could code their operational experience, the great majority of them seem to have none.



**Figure 3.13: Foreign Fighters by Operational Experience (%)**

It seems that, despite incentives to do so, militant groups have limited success in identifying recruits who are employed or have prior experience in security-related occupations. Of course, there are not as many individuals who both (1) have operational experience and (2) might be susceptible to the jihadi message to begin with. Nevertheless, we believe that successful targeted efforts by jihadi groups to recruit individuals with operational experience would have yielded a more balanced picture.

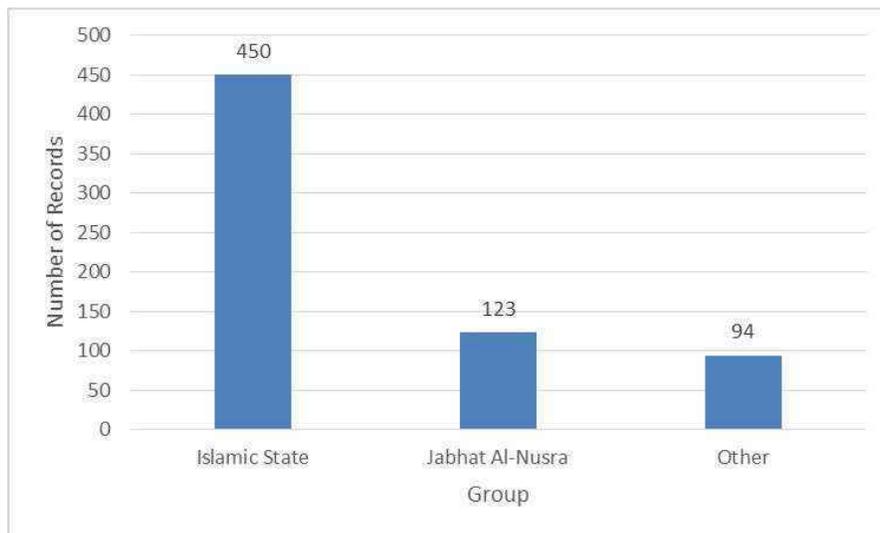
Since some of the skills that are required for terrorist or insurgency operations may be acquired via experience with illegal activities, we also tried to identify whether the foreign fighters had a higher tendency to be involved in criminal activities in general, or politically illegal activities more specifically. To assess this category, we coded a simple binary variable regarding whether or not an individual had been convicted of a crime and been given some form of punishment. We did not code instances in which an individual was investigated or charged with a terrorism-related offense, as those will be covered below. When it came to criminal records, if one assumes that everyone for whom we could not identify a criminal background did not have one, then just under 10% of the fighters had a criminal record. If, however, instead of dividing the number of those with a criminal background by all fighters in the dataset, one only divides it by the number of fighters for which there was an explicit mention of their lack of a criminal background, that proportion rises to 41%. Regardless of the estimate used, there certainly appears to be a greater proportion of fighters with criminal records than with a security background.

<sup>76</sup> While we stated earlier that the foreign fighters in our dataset seem to have a low level of religious education and background, it is important to note that religious background is not the same as ideological conviction. Someone may be very committed and attracted to a particular ideology without having a strong religious background.

An additional insight is gained when we consider the proportion of fighters investigated or charged with terrorism related offenses before leaving to fight in Iraq or Syria. If, as before, the number of individuals in this category is divided by all fighters in the dataset, the number of fighters who had previously been investigated or charged with terrorism related offenses is over 10%. If one considers only the number for whom we could find an explicit mention that they were never investigated, the proportion increases to 26%. This leads to an important insight: at least a quarter of foreign fighters exhibited behaviors that attracted the attention of law enforcement in some form or another. This corresponds with the foreign fighters' general lack of experience, which prevents many of them from developing appropriate habits to avoid detection. However, the fact that recruitment channels are not based mainly on primary social networks (as was shown above) likely prevented law enforcement from expanding and identifying a larger portion of would-be foreign fighters.

There is a larger concern that arises from this finding. There is no question that identifying potential foreign fighters is a daunting task for law enforcement and intelligence officials. This study, however, shows that a sizable minority of these fighters were on government radar at some point prior to traveling and joining a militant organization. Despite this fact, they were still able to travel. The question of what to do in these cases is an important consideration moving forward.

Our final point of examination in this section is the organizational affiliation of the foreign fighters in our dataset. While some fighters do not join a specific militant group until arriving in theater, some begin their quest to become a foreign fighter with a specific group in mind. What we present here is the primary organizational affiliation of the foreign fighters in our dataset, regardless of when that affiliation took place. As can be seen in Figure 3.14, the Islamic State, the most prominent of all the jihadi groups, attracts most of the potential and actual fighters, while other jihadi and anti-Assad non-jihadi groups attract the rest. In chapter four, we will try to identify how trends in organizational affiliation are related to various aspects of the foreign fighter's activities on the battlefield.



**Figure 3.14: Organizational Affiliation of Foreign Fighters**

In summary, several insights can be extracted from the preceding examination of the recruitment of foreign fighters.

First, while it is difficult to ascertain whether the recruiter or potential foreign fighter initiates the connection, it seems that religious figures play a relatively minimal role in this process, a fact that provides support for previous findings indicating that political and cultural aspects of jihadi ideology play a greater role in the radicalization of foreign fighters than strictly religious ones. This finding has implications for how governments should think about counter-radicalization. Traditional sources

of religious authority, such as imams and clerics, may not provide as much stopping power against foreign fighter radicalization because they are not a large part of the process from the start. This is a point worth further research and discussion.

Second, while social media and the internet are not the main mechanisms facilitating recruitment, exposure to militant groups' virtual propaganda is an important complementary radicalization mechanism. In other words, while this data show that organizations play an important (and traditional) role in the recruitment process, understanding how new technologies such as social media reinforce and interact with more traditional organizational recruitment processes is an important topic for future research.

Third, while many studies of "conventional" terrorist groups emphasize the role of primary social networks as a mechanism of radicalization and recruitment, in the case of the foreign fighters in our dataset this role seems less crucial, as family and close friends appear to play a more limited role. Although the exact reason for this deemphasized role is not clear from our data, it is possible that the last two trends regarding virtual propaganda and social networks may be related. If, in the past, information and communication were based on direct interaction, today's technological landscape provides terrorist groups a more accessible means of communication with potential recruits as well as more effective means to disseminate their ideological narrative. Paired with the increasing sophistication of digital operational security, the use of technology presents a worrying trend in recruitment.

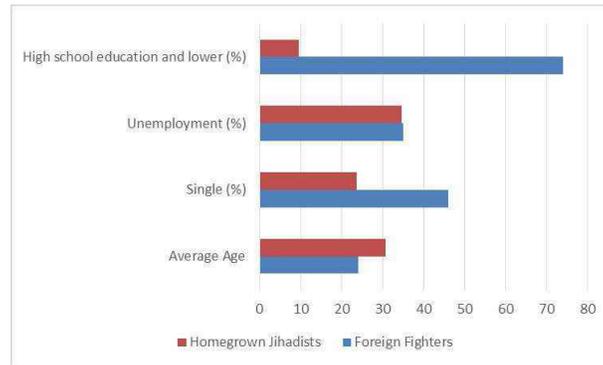
Finally, considering the ongoing debate regarding the ethical dilemmas involved in the monitoring of minorities' communal or religious areas by law enforcement agencies, the findings show that these tactics may have limited utility in identifying potential recruits. Based on the data, it appears that much of the recruitment and radicalization process occurs in less visible and defined forums. It does not mean, however, that the actual travel and the related logistical components are conducted in a similar solitary fashion. Indeed, insofar as our data reveals, the opposite may be true. Our dataset shows that the majority of foreign fighters traveled to Iraq and Syria as part of a small group (75.4%). It is not clear if the groups are "created" by the recruiting organization to reduce logistical costs or if they simply form organically due to independent local initiatives. Nonetheless, it seems that in most cases once the decision to travel was made, the preparation stage involved some collective or group effort.

### **Foreign Fighters Vs. "Local" Jihadists**

The differences between foreign fighters and domestic jihadists have received less attention in prior work than these other topics. In the most rigorous study on this issue, Thomas Hegghammer (2013) argues that most radicalized individuals prefer to fight abroad, and that those who prefer to act domestically are usually veterans with military experience. In general, he asserts, normative perceptions regarding the legitimacy of the various theaters are the main explanations for theater variation. In this study, we try to provide additional data points to this discussion and ask if the socio-demographic features we described above are unique to foreign fighters, or can they also describe other types of jihadi activists? Answering this question provides important theoretical and policy insights. If indeed there are differences between the two groups of jihadists, it may indicate that characteristics of the radicalization process itself are not monolithic across all types of fighters. Such a difference would raise important questions for future research regarding how individuals assess the costs and benefits of fighting at home versus going abroad to fight. Additionally, if the radicalization process is different depending on the expected role that a person is going to fill in the organization, then programs designed to counter violent extremism need to take into account these differences to increase the chance of deflecting someone off the path.

To conduct the comparison between foreign fighters and local or homegrown jihadists, and to gain a diachronic comparative perspective, we compared the socio-demographic characteristics of foreign fighters in the CTC dataset with that of individuals who were members of jihadi cells within their

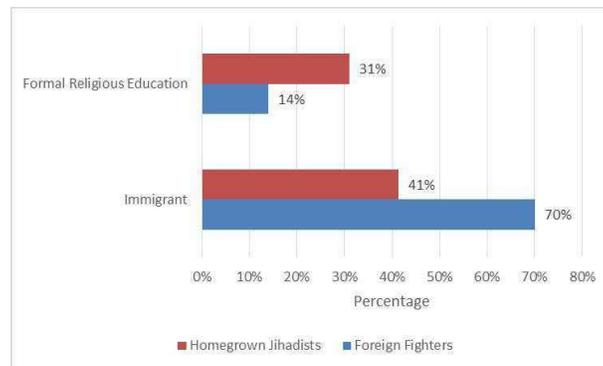
country of recruitment who did not travel to Syria or Iraq. The data on homegrown jihadists included 266 individuals distributed across 10 countries and was collected via court documents, official governmental inquiries, local reporting as well as primary source documents produced by terrorist groups themselves.<sup>77</sup>



**Figure 3.15: Foreign Fighters Vs. Homegrown Jihadists**

Our analysis identified several clear differences between foreign fighters and homegrown jihadists (see Figure 3.15). It is clear that a higher proportion of the homegrown jihadists are married, educated and older. In terms of unemployment, there is almost no gap between homegrown jihadists and foreign fighters. Despite the lack of difference in terms of unemployment, it seems that relative economic deprivation plays less of a role in the incentive structure of those who prefer to engage in militant activities in their home countries. In contrast, among foreign fighters, the lack of upward mobilization opportunities seems like a stronger incentive to opt for a true “new beginning” or “career path” in a new country. Simply put, when an individual experiences frustration and hopelessness regarding their economic future, the idea of moving to another country seems more desirable than the idea of continuing operating (although as part of a new social or ideological framework) in the same environment. Of course, this is just one of potentially many factors that may contribute to a decision to travel.

We also compared homegrown jihadists and foreign fighters in the case of certain aspects of cultural and religious identity. We were only able to find two variables that lent themselves to such a comparison across both datasets: formal religious education and immigration status. Even on these two factors, we found some clear differences between the two groups of militant activists.



**Figure 3.16: Homegrown Jihadists Vs. Foreign Fighters, Cultural Background**

77 For more information about collection procedures and methodology, see Arie Perliger, Gabriel Koehler-Derrick, and Ami Pedahzur, “The Gap Between Participation and Violence: Why We Need to Disaggregate Terrorist ‘Profiles,’” *International Studies Quarterly*, online January 14, 2016.

As Figure 3.16 illustrates, homegrown jihadists have stronger religious backgrounds and formal religious training compared to foreign fighters. Hence, in the case of the former, religious identity may play a bigger role in the radicalization process than among foreign fighters. These findings are compatible with the fact that local spiritual leaders led homegrown networks, especially before the recent wave of lone-wolf attacks, while the role of such figures in the recruitment of foreign fighters is more limited.

This section presented data on the pre-departure stage of the foreign fighter lifecycle. This is the stage where radicalization and recruitment occur. Although collection of data on the specifics of these processes is difficult, we believe that what we have presented here offers a number of important insights regarding why and how an individual can go from a regular citizen to a fighter bound for Syria or Iraq. Two of these findings in particular are worth restating.

First, our findings provide support for the idea that socio-demographic factors are in play in the radicalization process of Western foreign fighters. We also identified two types of socio-demographic profiles, a fact which represents a further challenge for law enforcement as it illustrates the appeal of militant groups to multiple constituencies. One is of young and single fighters. The second is of older, more established fighters. Both groups tend to have relatively low education levels and poor job prospects. This finding adds support to one of the main takeaways from the CTC's report based on leaked foreign fighter documents regarding the diversity of the foreign fighter pool. Despite narratives about fighters all being of one type or background, there is a fair amount of diversity among those who are going to fight in Syria and Iraq. Understanding that this diversity exists is key to designing policies geared to prevention and deradicalization.

Second, while we do not identify a strong association between religious frameworks and attachment to militant ideology, there is some evidence that the radicalization process may be influenced more by political and cultural factors. This finding is strengthened by the fact that foreign fighters are coming from specific sub-culture communities in Western countries. It is important to note that this is not simply a problem of first generation immigrants into countries, but one based on communities. Many of these diaspora enclaves have existed for multiple generations, where connections to the broader societies in which they live remain limited. Placing blame for this lack of connection is unproductive. It exists and, based on our data, appears to play a role in the radicalization and mobilization of foreign fighters. Solutions need to take these dynamics into account if governments are to effectively confront the foreign fighter problem now and in the future.

In the next section, we transition from looking at the pre-departure stage of the foreign fighter lifecycle to an examination of the experiences that these individuals have on the battlefield in Syria and Iraq. Through an examination of this data, we can better understand the threat that these fighters may ultimately pose to the countries to which they may eventually return.

## Chapter 4: Foreign Fighters on the Battlefield

Much of the focus in the public discourse regarding foreign fighters has been on the overall number of fighters going to Iraq and Syria. The large number of foreign fighters who have traveled to the conflict zone is seen as a measure of the future threat that these same fighters may pose once they return, presumably ready to carry out attacks against their home countries. While the focus on the quantity of outgoing and returning fighters is important, it leads our attention away from the very important question of what happens in the conflict zone itself. To put it more specifically, the threat that these returning fighters pose is directly related to the nature of the experience that they gain upon their arrival in Iraq and Syria.

For context of why the quality question is important, consider the following quote from an American military officer engaged in the training of Afghan security forces: “We have been too obsessed with quantity over quality. You can only build so many troops to a certain standard. At some point...you get to diminishing returns.”<sup>78</sup> Others have put the quantity versus quality problem in simpler terms, “One trained soldier [is] worth more than two raw recruits.”<sup>79</sup>

The point is not that the overall number of foreign fighters is irrelevant, but that, particularly when it comes to the problem of returning foreign fighters, focusing on the skills individuals acquire on the battlefield needs to be considered in conjunction with the question of how many individuals have joined these organizations. Such an assessment may be telling in terms of the type of threat returning fighters are likely to pose.

Two overarching points are worth recalling in this section. The first is the recognition that foreign fighters present a unique challenge to terrorist organizations as these organizations seek to put their new recruits to optimum use. While organizations can benefit from having foreign fighters, their presence can also bring problems of division and disunity.<sup>80</sup> In addition, foreign fighters are costly. For example, some claims suggest that foreign fighters draw higher salaries and live in nicer homes than local fighters.<sup>81</sup> While this chapter does not focus exclusively on the drawbacks of foreign fighters, there are a number of findings that are useful to consider in countering foreign fighters, both prior to their decision to travel to Iraq and Syria and after.

The second is a desire to understand what skills and capabilities individuals who choose to fight abroad acquire. There is, justifiably, some concern regarding the threat that foreign fighters pose after their time in the battle zone. But that question is in part contingent on what happens to the foreign fighter while they are in Iraq and Syria. Part of this study’s purpose is demystifying the battlefield phase of the foreign fighter’s lifecycle using the data CTC researchers collected from open sources.

### *A Note on Data*

The third chapter of this report, which focused on the pre-deployment stage of the foreign fighter lifecycle, offered an analysis of individuals who expressed an interest in fighting, made attempts to travel to Syria or Iraq, or actually arrived in Syria or Iraq. The focus of this section, which looks at the battlefield experience of foreign fighters, only uses data on fighters who actually reached Syria or Iraq. Once individuals who never made it to the conflict zone were removed, there were 1,094 individuals who remained in the dataset. As noted previously in the report, this total number only represents the number of names that coders found, not the number of fighters for which complete information was

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78 Rajiv Chandrasekaran, “Afghan security forces’ rapid expansion comes at a cost as readiness lags,” *Washington Post*, October 20, 2012.

79 Joseph H. Parks, *Joseph E. Brown of Georgia* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1977).

80 Matt Bradley, “Rift Grows in Islamic State Between Foreign, Local Fighters,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 25, 2016.

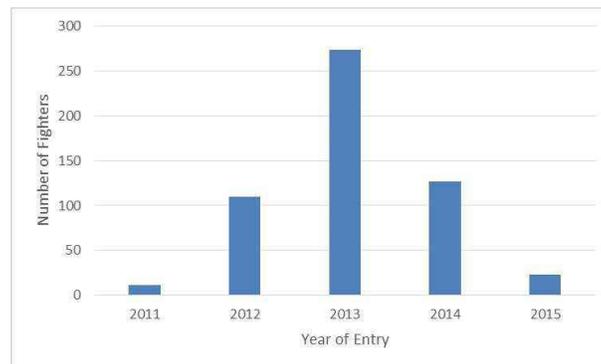
81 Orlando Crowcroft and Arij Limam, “Isis: Foreign fighters ‘live like kings’ in Syrian Raqqa stronghold of Islamic State,” *IBTimes*, March 12, 2015.

available. Coders were able to find more information on some variables as opposed to others. In an effort to be transparent, the discussion that follows mentions the actual number of individuals coded on any one variable.

### Arriving in Iraq and Syria

One individual who made it successfully to fight against the Islamic State in the conflict zone said that it was “like booking a flight to Miami Beach.”<sup>82</sup> The ease of travel was similar for individuals joining jihadist groups like the Islamic State, especially given that supporters of the group attempt to provide instructions on the best and easiest ways to travel to Iraq and Syria.<sup>83</sup> Although such travel has grown more difficult following military gains by Kurdish fighters on the Syrian side of the Turkey-Syria border in mid-2015 and into 2016, as well as increased vigilance on the part of Turkish and other governments around the world, the increased difficulty has not been prohibitive.<sup>84</sup>

For those who do travel to Iraq and Syria, policymakers and journalists have long identified Turkey as the penultimate layover before entering the conflict zone.<sup>85</sup> Assessing the final transit point is difficult using open source data, especially because many accounts of travel only include the first location the potential fighter went to from their home country, even though this is likely not the final destination point before entering Iraq or Syria. Nevertheless, in cases where we could identify the final point a foreign fighter travelled through prior to entering Iraq or Syria, Turkey was by far the most common route.



**Figure 4.1: Foreign Fighter Entries, by Year (n = 545)**

Figure 4.1 shows the year of entry into Iraq and Syria for the fighters in this dataset.<sup>86</sup> It is included

82 Catherine Herridge, “US vet says fighting in Syria was as easy as buying airplane ticket to Miami,” *Fox News*, September 25, 2014.

83 Daniel L. Byman and Jeremy Shapiro, “Homeward Bound? Don’t Hype the Threat of Returning Jihadists,” *Foreign Affairs* 93 (2014), pp. 37-46; Michael McCaul, “Europe Has a jihadi Superhighway Problem,” *Time*, November 11, 2014; Constanze Letsch, Carmen Fishwick, and Vikram Dodd, “UK police move to take down Islamic State how-to guide from internet,” *Guardian*, February 25, 2015; House Homeland Security Committee, “Final Report of the Task Force on Combating Terrorist and Foreign Fighter Travel,” September 2015.

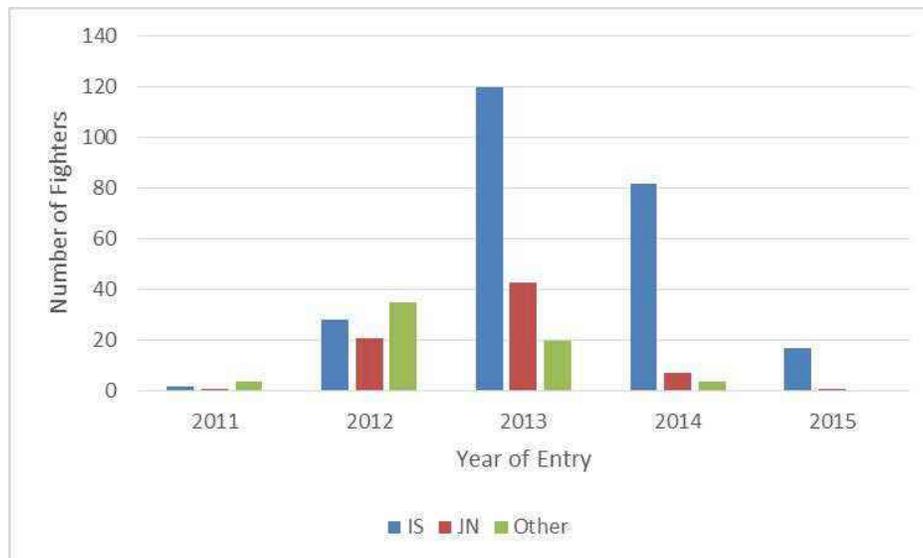
84 Nour Malas, Ayla Albayrak, and Julian E. Barnes, “U.S. Allies in Syria Cut Islamic State Supply Line,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 16, 2015; Tom Perry, “Syrian Kurds plan big attack to seal Turkish border-source,” *CNBC*, January 28, 2016; Humeyra Pamuk, “Walls and watchtowers rise as Turkey tries to seal border against Islamic State,” *Reuters*, February 3, 2016.

85 Ceylan Yeginsu, “ISIS Draws a Steady Stream of Recruits from Turkey,” *New York Times*, September 15, 2014; Nick Tattersall and Mariam Karouny, “Turkey struggles as ‘lone gatekeeper’ against Islamic State recruitment,” *Reuters*, August 26, 2014; Constanze Letsch, “To the wire: the smugglers who get people into Syria for the Islamic State,” *Guardian*, March 12, 2015; Amberin Zaman, “Captured fighter details Islamic State’s Turkey connection,” *Al Monitor*, June 17, 2015; Adam Entous, Gordon Lubold, and Dion Nissenbaum, “U.S. Urges Turkey to Seal Border,” *Wall Street Journal*, November 27, 2015.

86 Some accounts only gave general time ranges for when fighters entered Iraq and Syria. In some of these cases, the general range extended from one year to the next (“Late 2011-Early 2012”). In these cases, the earliest point of entry was used in the analysis.

here so that readers better understand the data used in the subsequent analysis. It should not be seen as suggesting that foreign fighter flows peaked in 2013. Indeed, the collection effort for this dataset mostly occurred in 2014 and into 2015, so the decrease in the number of foreign fighters entering Iraq and Syria after 2013 should be interpreted as a byproduct of the collection process, rather than as a substantive drop off in the number of fighters; in fact, according to many open source accounts, the number of fighters continued relatively unabated through 2015.<sup>87</sup> The time period prior to 2013, however, can be interpreted a bit more substantively. Not surprisingly, as the civil conflict in Syria intensified and as a larger number of groups began developing networks to facilitate the travel of fighters, the number of fighters dramatically increased between 2011 and 2013.

Despite the larger increase of foreign fighters during this period of time, it is worth noting that some groups took better advantage of the increased flow than others. Figure 4.2, which breaks down the year individuals entered by their ultimate group affiliation, shows that there was a momentum shift as 2012 gave way to the increased intergroup conflict of 2013 and 2014. For instance, although the number of fighters who joined the Islamic State was relatively comparable to the number of fighters joining Jabhat al-Nusra or other militant groups in 2011 and 2012, a distinct difference emerges after this point in time.<sup>88</sup>



**Figure 4.2: Foreign Fighter Entries, by Year and Group (n = 385)**

From 2013 onward, fighters in our dataset who joined the Islamic State greatly outnumber fighters of

87 Jamie Crawford and Laura Koran, "U.S. officials: Foreigners flock to fight for ISIS," *CNN*, February 11, 2015; Paul Cruickshank and Brian Dodwell, "A View from the CT Foxhole: An Interview with RDML Michael Dumont, BG Michael Kurilla, and COL Stephen Michael," *CTC Sentinel* 8:10 (2015), pp. 9-12. It should be noted that it is not clear if the flow diminished even after that point, with various opinions emerging even within the U.S. intelligence and policymaking communities. Ken Dilanian, "U.S. Says It's Slowing Flow, But Foreign Fighters Still Flock to ISIS," *NBC News*, January 16, 2016.

88 The authors are well aware that the Islamic State did not exist as such from 2012-2013. However, to give a clearer picture of the momentum on the ground and among the foreign fighter ranks and due to a lack of data about the details of movement from one group to another, coders were asked to code fighters by their primary group affiliation, regardless of when that affiliation took place. So, a fighter who joined Jabhat al-Nusra prior to April 2013, but moved over to the Islamic State after that point, was coded as an Islamic State fighter for purposes of the analysis here. There is no doubt that Jabhat al-Nusra was the strongest jihadi group prior to April 2013 and the split with the Islamic State. That said, it seems clear that the breakup between Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State introduced chaos into the Syrian side of the conflict and that the balance of foreign fighters eventually favored the Islamic State.

either Jabhat al-Nusra or other militant groups.<sup>89</sup> Thus, discussion about the foreign fighter problem in the aggregate, while a starting place, is likely insufficient for dealing with the nuanced attraction of fighters to any one of the 1,000 groups currently fighting in Syria.<sup>90</sup> While the Islamic State may have “cornered” the foreign fighter market for the time being, its hold is neither exhaustive nor indefinite. Such a conclusion is not an effort to downplay the threat posed by the Islamic State, but a recognition that a variety of approaches will be needed to undercut this phenomenon.

### Waging Jihad in Iraq and Syria

What do fighters end up doing within the jihadist organizations they join in Iraq and Syria? Assessing the activities of fighters once they arrive in theater is difficult, as fighters may break off contact for an indefinite period of time.

As noted in the previous chapter, many fighters arrive in Iraq and Syria without military or security training upon which jihadist organizations can draw. Consequently, the first stop for many fighters after arriving in theater is a training camp. Based on interviews with both current and former members of the Islamic State, such training camps can last from two weeks to over a year and include religious courses, weapons training, and other preparation for participation in the caliphate.<sup>91</sup> Participation in such camps appears to be usually mandatory based on the data our coders could collect on the subject. Of the 223 cases where the coders identified whether or not an individual attended a training camp, they found evidence of training camp attendance in 213 (96%) of the cases. While not particularly surprising, this finding reemphasizes the importance of training camps in providing jihadi organizations with the fighters they need for both fighting and governance functions. It also highlights the overall institutional investment that jihadi organizations make in training foreign operatives. Bringing foreign fighters into the war theater is not costless and can lead to battlefield and governance challenges should they decide to desert.<sup>92</sup>

Once they graduate past the training camp, foreign fighters fulfill a variety of roles in the terrorist organization. Abu Maryam al-Firansi, who appeared in a propaganda video inciting attacks against France, served mainly as a combat fighter for the Islamic State, but was also trusted as a liaison with other fighting groups prior to carrying out a suicide mission in Iraq.<sup>93</sup> Others, such as British foreign fighter Ismail Jabbar, claimed to lead units of fighters into combat in Syria while simultaneously encouraging acts of violence back in Britain.<sup>94</sup> Of course, the utility of foreign fighters extends beyond the battlefield. Such is the case of Ahmad Abousamra, a dual U.S.-Syrian citizen who was alleged to have played an important role in the Islamic State’s social media campaign.<sup>95</sup>

All of the individuals previously mentioned represent, broadly speaking, three possible roles that foreign fighters may end up playing in jihadi organizations in Iraq and Syria: leadership, fighter, or

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89 It is possible that this is simply an artifact of the amount of focus placed on IS in the media. It seems to be the consensus, however, that IS did manage to take the lead in attracting fighters from 2013 on. Eric Schmitt and Somini Sengupta, “Thousands Enter Syria to Join ISIS Despite Global Efforts,” *New York Times*, September 26, 2015.

90 Charles Lister, *Dynamic Stalemate: Surveying Syria’s Military Landscape*, (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2014).

91 Bill Roggio, “ISIS video shows Zarqawi training camp in Syria,” *Long War Journal*, May 8, 2014; Hassan Hassan, “The Secret World of ISIS Training Camps – Ruled by Sacred Texts and the Sword,” *Guardian*, January 24, 2015.

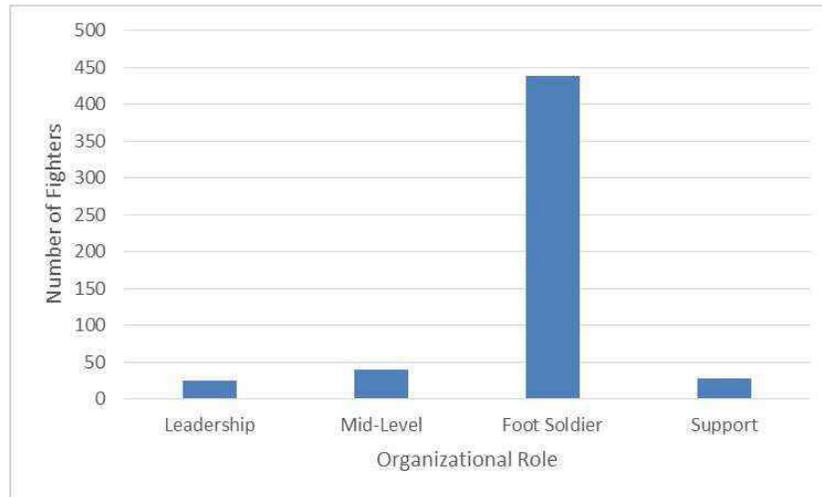
92 Ben Tuft, “Isis ‘executes up to 200 fighters’ for trying to flee jihad and return home,” *Independent*, December 29, 2014; Jay Akbar, “Senseless slaughter, corruption and broken promises of money and glory: Landmark report reveals why growing numbers of foreign fighters are defecting from ISIS,” *Daily Mail*, September 23, 2015.

93 Loubna Mrie, Vera Mironova, and Sam Whitt, “I Am Only Looking Up to Paradise,” *Foreign Policy*, October 2, 2014; “New IS Video Calls On French Muslims To Carry Out Terror Attacks In France,” *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, November 20, 2014; “French Jihadists ‘Behind IS Group Suicide Bombings in Iraq,’” *France 24*, May 23, 2015.

94 Oliver Duggan, “British Muslim Unmasked as Terrorist Fighting in Syria,” *Telegraph*, June 1, 2014.

95 Michele McPhee and Brian Ross, “Official: American May Be Key in ISIS Social Media Blitz,” *ABC News*, September 3, 2014; “Mass. Man Accused of Aiding ISIS Killed in Iraq, Reports Say,” *Boston Globe*, June 3, 2015.

support personnel.<sup>96</sup> For purposes of data collection, we divided the leadership category into top-level leadership and mid-level operatives, such as those who lead smaller groups of fighters into battle. Coders identified the organizational role of 530 individuals in the dataset, a breakdown of which is shown below in Figure 4.3.



**Figure 4.3: Organizational Role of Foreign Fighters (n = 530)**

The prevalence of foot soldiers is to be expected, as jihadist organizations are engaging in military operations against a wide array of state and non-state actors in both Iraq and Syria. It seems clear, however, that there is some process that allows fighters to end up in organizational roles other than that of a foot soldier. The data we have allows us to offer some analysis of how this process might work.

To do this, we first considered which categories may help explain why fighters would have different organizational roles and identified age, military experience, and education level as important factors. The age of the incoming fighter may serve as a proxy for overall experience. For a jihadist organization engaged on the battlefield in Iraq and Syria, military experience would likely be a useful individual skill that could enable advancement in the organization. Finally, the level of education of an incoming fighter may indicate his future potential to the organization. The breakdown of fighters across these different categories appears below in Table 4.1.

**Table 4.1: Foreign Fighter Organizational Role, by Selected Demographics**

	Average Year of Birth	Operational Experience	Possessing Above High School Education
<b>Top-Level Leadership</b>	1974	56%	27%
<b>Mid-Level Leadership</b>	1986	16%	53%
<b>Foot Soldier</b>	1983	7%	18%
<b>Support Personnel</b>	1986	17%	73%

The results provide support for the idea that an individual’s characteristics affect where they end up working in the organization. The average age of top-level leadership figures is nearly 13 years older

96 It is worth noting that these roles are likely not mutually exclusive. Individuals with media experience may create propaganda, but could also participate in key battles or skirmishes. Our coders were asked to capture all of the organizational roles for each fighter mentioned and identified 15 such cases, though such detail is likely underreported. In the 15 cases of overlap, 14 were between the foot soldier and support personnel categories. We excluded these cases from the subsequent analyses.

than foreign fighters in other parts of the organization. In terms of operational experience, approximately 56% of the leadership possess some prior security or military experience. Conversely, fighters who end up as foot soldiers in the organization possess the least amount of prior military experience. If an organization is engaged in talent management, it would make sense to see those with operational experience rising to higher levels of the organization. The insights provided by breakdown of educational level are not as clear. At the top-leadership level, only 27% of the individuals possess more than a high school education. This amount nearly doubles when it comes to the mid-level leadership (53%) before dropping off again for foot soldiers (18%).

What this data suggests is that jihadi organizations, which are primarily geared towards fighting in Iraq and Syria, do not place as much value on education as they do on military experience. From this perspective, the breakdown shown in the above table makes sense. It also explains the comparatively high proportion of education possessed by those operating as support or auxiliary personnel. These are the individuals whose educational skills make them better suited to other roles (media, governance, infrastructure, etc.) than to the frontlines.

Regardless of the varied organizational experiences of the individuals who join these organizations, it is clear that there is one type of experience that nearly all of them have: participation in acts of violence on the battlefield in Iraq or Syria. Of the 689 fighters for whom battlefield experience could be determined, over 98% of the fighters had some direct exposure to violence while in theater. Ultimately, the effect of this violence on any individual is hard to assess. For some, exposure to violence may serve to harden their belief in the organization on behalf of which they are working.<sup>97</sup> For others, the brutal realities of the battlefield may be the first step in their disenchantment with an organization.<sup>98</sup> Either way, there are important policy implications arising from the psychological byproduct of violence on such a large scale. Wrestling with how to distinguish between returnees who are hardened as opposed to those who are disillusioned, as well as what to do in either case, is a challenge that will only grow larger as fighters return in greater numbers and governments struggle to respond.<sup>99</sup>

Foreign fighters are not just engaging in a significant amount of fighting, but they are also doing a large amount of dying. It would be useful to identify the relative “death rate” encountered by foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria, but we have several reservations about doing so. First, there is tremendous uncertainty over how many fighters have actually died while in theater. Consider the fact that in June 2016, the acting Coordinator for Counterterrorism at the U.S. State Department said that he had seen reports suggesting that more than 40,000 foreign fighters had gone to fight in Iraq and Syria.<sup>100</sup> In May 2016, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) released its casualty estimates for the Syrian revolution. In the estimate, SOHR claimed that over 47,000 foreigners had been killed fighting on behalf of the various anti-Assad factions, including the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra.<sup>101</sup> This number surpasses the total number estimated by the United States to have gone. The Pentagon estimates that its airstrikes alone have resulted in 45,000 fatalities of Islamic State fighters, including foreigners and locals.<sup>102</sup> This figure does not include those who have died in the intense ground war that is being carried out against these groups by Iraqi and Syrian military forces, the Peshmerga, each other, and

97 Akil N. Awan, “What Happens When ISIS Comes Home,” *National Interest*, September 29, 2014.

98 Lori Hinnant and Paul Schemm, “The Cost of Leaving Islamic State: Death or Jail,” *Associated Press*, February 3, 2015.

99 Jon Henley, “How Do You Deradicalize Returning ISIS Fighters,” *Guardian*, November 12, 2014; Cheryl Brumley, “A Danish City Is Giving Its Jihadis A Second Chance,” *Public Radio International*, December 26, 2014; Georgia Holmer, “What to Do When Foreign Fighters Come Home,” *Foreign Policy*, June 1, 2015; Catherine Solyom, “Jihadis Returning to Quebec Out of Reach for Deradicalization Centre,” *Montreal Gazette*, March 10, 2016.

100 Justin Siberell, “Country Reports on Terrorism,” *Special Briefing at the State Department*, June 2, 2016.

101 Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, “More than 400000 were killed in 63 months of the Syrian revolution,” May 28, 2016. Available online at <http://www.syriahr.com/en/2016/05/28/46478>.

102 Matthew Rosenberg, Helene Cooper, and Nicholas Kulish, “ISIS Expands Reach Despite Military and Financial Setbacks,” *New York Times*, April 12, 2016; Lolita C. Baldor, “US: 45,000 Islamic State Fighters Taken Off Battlefields,” *Associated Press*, August 11, 2016.

military units from various countries, including Turkey and Iran. In other words, there is tremendous uncertainty about actual estimates, but much of the evidence suggests casualties are high.

Second, beyond the uncertainty regarding estimates, it is likely that any open source collection effort will suffer from some upward bias in estimating a death rate. This is because news reports of foreign fighters and discussion of these same fighters by their peers tends to be the greatest when the fighter has died in action. In other words, since this data collection is based on open source media reporting, it will likely overestimate the “death rate” of foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria. This caveat must be kept in mind for the discussion that follows.

In the dataset used for this report, researchers identified whether or not foreign fighters died in 741 cases. Of these cases, the foreign fighter died in 550 of them, which means that approximately 74% of the individuals in our dataset are deceased.<sup>103</sup> This number seems high, although it is hard to offer any estimates with confidence. The data on Middle Eastern and North African fighters is based in large measure on martyr accounts, which are likely to inflate the death rate. If the fighters from the Middle East and North Africa are excluded, the death rate drops to 65%. This estimate is not much different from the 40% figure presented by the New America Foundation, particularly once one accounts for fighters who never actually made it to Iraq and Syria and female recruits who do not take part in fighting.<sup>104</sup>

Regardless of the ultimate number, there is some support for the narrative that foreign fighters are “cannon fodder” for the various organizations, although this speculation had not been previously substantiated by research.<sup>105</sup> Because of the potential limitations in the data described above, the evidence offered here should not be seen as proving this to be the case; rather, it offers another data point to this discussion. Yet regardless of the actual death rate, caution must be taken in leveraging such information for counter-narrative purposes. It was, in part, the belief that such a perception would serve as a deterrent to foreign fighters that led to the creation of some widely-criticized counter messages.<sup>106</sup> Regardless of whether such a counter-narrative effort would be successful or not, the fact remains that foreign fighters die at a very high rate in Iraq and Syria.

Another potential takeaway is that the death rate does not appear to be consistent across all types of organizations in this dataset. Figure 4.4 shows the breakdown of the death rate of foreign fighters in the dataset by organization. Two items seem to be of particular note. The first is that the two main jihadist groups in the dataset, the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra, have significantly higher death rates for foreign fighters than groups categorized as “other.” Second, and perhaps most surprising, is that the death rate of Jabhat al-Nusra foreign fighters seems to be higher than that of Islamic State fighters. To be clear, the separation is not large (77% for Jabhat al-Nusra and 66% for the Islamic State), but it does exist. Even if there were some upward bias in the absolute estimate of the death rate of foreign fighters, there is little reason to suspect that it would affect the relative rates between the various organizations.

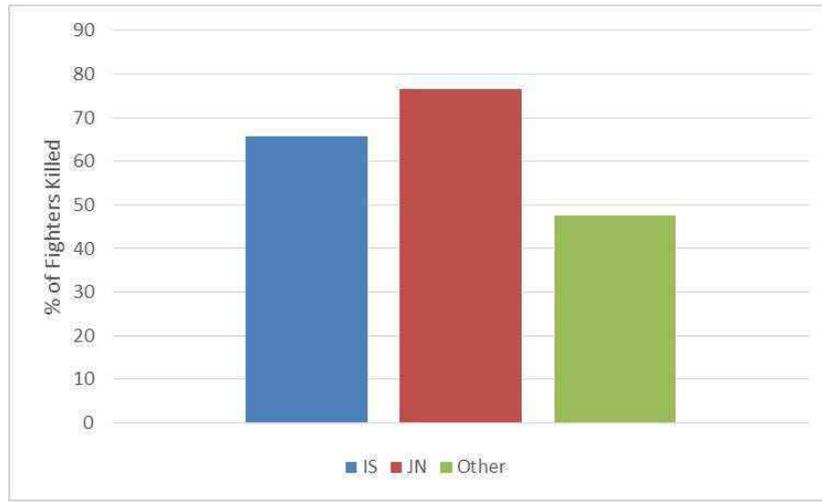
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103 Even if we coded the 205 where the final disposition of the foreign fighter is unknown as still alive, the death rate of foreign fighters in our dataset is 58%.

104 It is not entirely clear how the New America Foundation’s dataset deals with individuals arrested prior to reaching Iraq and Syria. We have excluded them for the analysis in this section, as they will obviously bias any discussion of a death rate. The decision to exclude females is also a distinguishing point there. Neither of these comments undermines the value of either dataset, but are offered as points of distinction that help explain the differences between the two. Peter Bergen, David Sterman, Alyssa Sims, and Albert Ford, *ISIS in the West: The Western Militant Flow to Syria and Iraq* (Sacramento: New America Foundation, 2016).

105 To fully support the argument that foreign fighters are used as cannon fodder, it would be helpful to have the comparable rate of death information for local fighters. Unfortunately, to the best of the authors’ knowledge, such information is not currently available.

106 Ritz Katz, “The State Department’s Twitter War With ISIS Is Embarrassing,” *Time*, September 16, 2014; Greg Miller and Scott Higham, “In a propaganda war against ISIS, the U.S. tried to play by the enemy’s rules,” *Washington Post*, May 8, 2015.



**Figure 4.4: Foreign Fighter Death Rate, by Organization (n = 416)**

The data also shows that there is some variation in the death rate when considered by nationality. Table 4.2 shows the death rates for countries outside of the Middle East and North Africa with more than 10 individuals in the dataset. While many of the death rates for these countries are above 60%, two prominent outliers are those of the Israeli and French foreign fighters. Although an explanation for this difference is not immediately apparent, the fact that there are differences in the comparative death rates between countries is an area for future research.

**Table 4.2: Breakdown of Death Rate, by Nationality**

Country of Origin	Dead Fighters in Dataset	Total Fighters in Dataset	% Dead in Dataset	Open Source Flow Estimate	Death Rate of Flow Estimate
Australia	14	19	74%	70	20%
Belgium	44	69	64%	380	12%
Bosnia and Herzegovina	25	38	66%	---	---
Canada	11	13	85%	150	7%
Denmark	7	11	64%	115	6%
France	39	91	43%	1550	3%
Germany	38	59	64%	700	5%
Israel	5	20	25%	---	---
Netherlands	26	34	76%	190	14%
Spain	14	17	82%	80	17%
UK	55	74	74%	700	8%
US	10	13	77%	200	5%

It is important to note that this death rate does not reflect the rate at which foreign fighters from specific countries are used in suicide bombings or suicide fighting missions. We captured this information by coding whether or not specific information could be found indicating that the foreign fighter in question died in the commission of a suicide attack. Of the 534 fighters for which such a determination could be made, only 51 (9.6%) were identified as having died in the commission of a suicide attack.

This number stands in stark contrast to what previous work by the CTC showed in Iraq in a study conducted in 2007, which found that suicide bombers made up more than 50% of the incoming foreign fighters.<sup>107</sup> However, it is more consistent with the CTC's research based on leaked Islamic State foreign fighter registration forms, which shows that the number of individuals volunteering for suicide missions is approximately 12%.<sup>108</sup>

One reason offered for this drop in the number of individuals volunteering for suicide missions is the differing nature of what Al-Qa'ida in Iraq and the Islamic State of Iraq are pursuing as opposed to a group like the Islamic State currently. Whereas the groups that existed during 2006-2007 in Iraq were much more focused on fighting against domestically-based foreign and local security forces, groups currently fighting in Iraq and Syria are more focused on taking territory and substituting themselves for the existing governing entities in that territory.

If this argument were true, one would assume that there are differences between the number of suicide operatives of the various groups that currently operate in Iraq and Syria. For instance, while Jabhat al-Nusra has taken territory and, in some places, established basic governance services, it remains by and large engaged in the effort to fight against the Syrian regime. Consequently, one might expect the group to have a higher rate of suicide operations than the Islamic State, which has made efforts to establish the caliphate a distinguishing feature of its activity. Of course, it is not simply the question of whether a group's focus is on fighting or governance that impacts the use of suicide operatives.<sup>109</sup> There is also potentially an argument to be made that an organization's ideology comes into play as well when making this determination. In this case, one might expect groups such as the Free Syrian Army to be less predisposed toward the use of suicide operatives because of their more "moderate" leaning and desire to attract Western support.<sup>110</sup>

The data collected for this report allows a preliminary assessment of the possibilities outlined above by separating out the rate of suicide bombers by organizational affiliation. The result of this separation is graphically represented in Figure 4.5. Overall, there is a fair amount of separation in this dataset between the more extreme organizations and the more secular organizations in terms of their use of suicide bombers, but there is almost no separation between jihadist groups. Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State both have a suicide bomber rate of about 13%.<sup>111</sup> Equally interesting is the fact that, among groups placed together in the "Other" category, not a single suicide bomber was found in the dataset used for this report.

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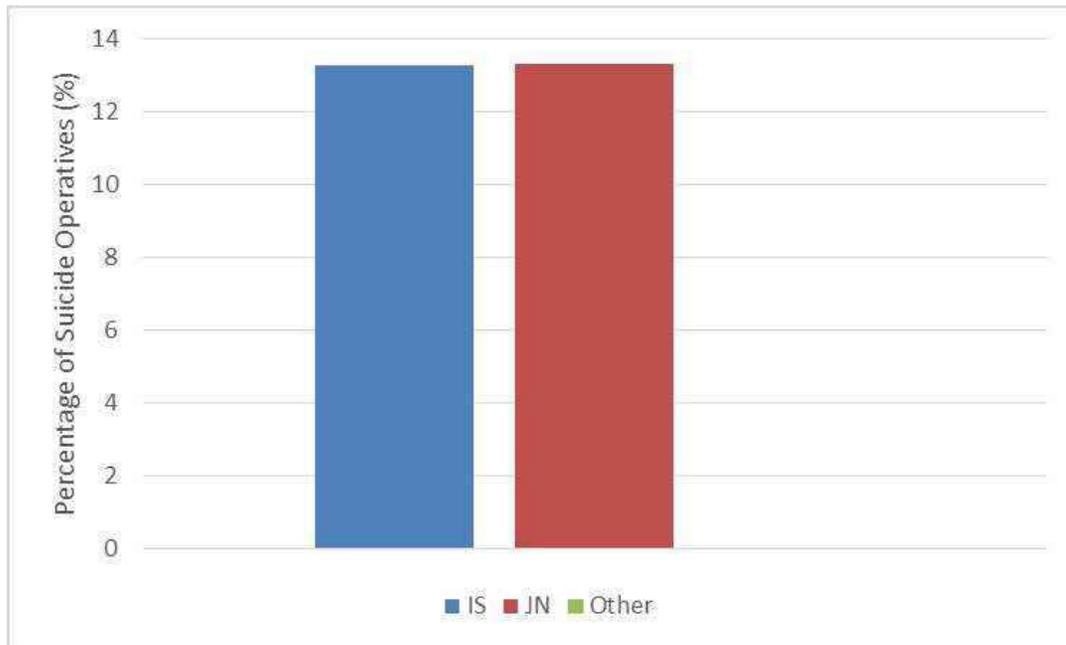
107 Brian Fishman and Joseph Felter, *Al-Qa'ida's Foreign Fighters in Iraq* (West Point: Combating Terrorism Center, 2007); Brian Fishman, Peter Bergen, Joseph Felter, Vahid Brown, and Jacob Shapiro, *Bombers, Bank Accounts, and Bleedout: Al-Qa'ida's Road In and Out of Iraq* (West Point: Combating Terrorism Center, 2008).

108 Dodwell, Milton, Rassler (2016).

109 The academic literature on the strategic use of suicide bombing by terrorist organizations is voluminous and nuanced, far more than discussed here. Several key works, but by no means an exhaustive list, are referenced here. Robert A. Pape, "The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism," *American Political Science Review* 97:3 (2003), pp. 344-361; Bruce Hoffman and H. Gordon McCormick, "Terrorism, Signaling, and Suicide Attack," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 27:4 (2004), pp. 243-282; Mia M. Bloom, "Palestinian Suicide Bombing: Public Support, Market Share, and Outbidding," *Political Science Quarterly* 119:1 (2004), pp. 61-88; Assaf Moghadam, "Motives for Martyrdom," *International Security* 33:3 (2008/2009), pp. 46-78; Michael Horowitz, "Non-state Actors and the Diffusion of Innovations: The Case of Suicide Terrorism," *International Organization* 64:1 (2010), pp. 33-64.

110 Of course, the employment of suicide bombing as a tactic is not limited to religious groups. Non-religious groups have used it as well. Martha Crenshaw, "Explaining Suicide Terrorism: A Review Essay," *Security Studies* 16:1 (2007), pp. 133-162.

111 This number is very close to findings of a previously referenced CTC study that relies on leaked Islamic State foreign fighter registration forms. See Dodwell, Milton, and Rassler (2016).



**Figure 4.5: Percentage of Suicide Operatives, by Group**

To be clear, the issue is not as simple as presented here. The Free Syrian Army comprises multiple organizational elements, some of which conduct suicide operations.<sup>112</sup> In addition, the Free Syrian Army, regardless of its relationship with Jabhat al-Nusra, has conducted joint operations with the group in the past.<sup>113</sup> In other words, the fact that no suicide bombers emerged in the “Other” category should not be taken to indicate that only two groups are responsible for all suicide bombings in Iraq and Syria. That said, regardless of the reasons, the differences between the groups shown in Figure 4.6 are a finding worth further study. At the very least, it indicates that there are distinct tactical profiles between these organizations that would be useful for those working with or fighting against them to take into account.

This chapter has examined the battlefield arrival, activities, and deaths of foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria. It has revealed that there are several differences among the foreign fighters themselves, as well as among the various organizations for whom they work. It appears that the majority of foreign fighters who are able to survive their time in Iraq and Syria are exposed to violence and acquire some amount of organizational and operational experience. This experience varies, with the majority of foreign fighters serving in lower level roles and the minority serving in other capacities, including leadership and auxiliary functions. The next chapter will examine the final stage in the foreign fighter lifecycle by exploring what happens when they return home from the battlefield.

112 Austin Bodetti and David Axe, “Syria Rebels Plan Suicide Attacks on Russians,” *Daily Beast*, October 12, 2015.

113 Bill Roggio, “Suicide Bombers Kill More Than 30 in Syrian Capital,” *Long War Journal*, November 28, 2012.

## Chapter 5: Returning Home

As we mentioned in the introduction, one of the major concerns regarding foreign fighters is the threat they represent upon returning to their home countries. The recent attacks in Europe have further intensified these concerns, as some of the members of the networks that perpetrated the attacks in Paris and Brussels were active members of IS, who spent time in the Middle East before returning to Europe.

Academics and practitioners usually present several reasons for why returning foreign fighters may represent a major security threat:

- 1. Experience and skill-set:** while it seems that most foreign fighters had limited military or other operational experience before their travel, a significant portion of them receive military training and become involved in violent operations during their “service” in areas of conflict. Hence, it is possible that they may try to use their new skill-set to develop terrorist infrastructure upon their return to their home countries.
- 2. Ideological indoctrination:** while many of the foreign fighters seem to have limited knowledge of jihadi ideology and limited religious background before traveling to the Middle East, their time with militant groups can potentially be utilized to enhance their indoctrination and commitment to militant narratives and motivate them to engage in militant activities outside areas of conflict while spreading their beliefs to others.
- 3. Organizational preferences:** it is important to consider the possibility that the unique attributes of foreign fighters will encourage militant organizations to use them specifically to conduct attacks outside the Middle East. The familiarity of the foreign fighters with various aspects of their home countries (language, culture, etc.), their ability to move freely because of their citizenship status, and their advantage in developing social or operational networks in their home countries make them strong candidates for leading operations of militant groups in foreign countries.

In order to offer a preliminary examination of the validity of these three assumptions and to try to assess the actual threat that returning foreign fighters represent, we examined a subset of our dataset which includes 120 returning foreign fighters, or about 10% of the overall number of fighters in the dataset. This estimate of 10% is on the low end of what other analysts have suggested in terms of the overall percentage of returnees, which can range anywhere from 10-33%.<sup>114</sup> As was the case when discussing the number of dead fighters in the preceding section, there is tremendous uncertainty regarding estimates of returning foreign fighters. Such uncertainty should introduce caution into the interpretation of these results.

Our main findings regarding the characteristics of these returning foreign fighters are described in the rest of this chapter. It is important to note, however, that the small number of “returnees” demand analytical caution in drawing definite conclusions based on our findings, and that our chief objective in this chapter is to identify mainly broad trends, as well as avenues for further exploration.

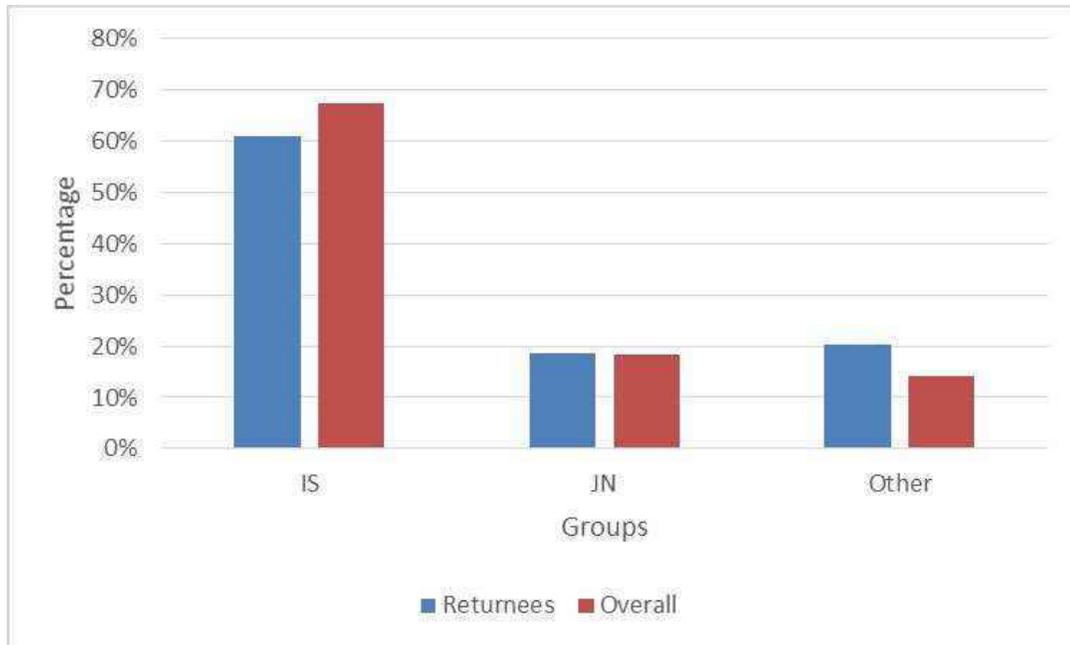
### Organizational Affiliation and Time in Theater

The first question about the returnees is their organizational affiliation. Coders were only able to ascertain the organizational affiliation of 64 fighters. As can be seen from Figure 5.1, the organizational distribution of the returning foreign fighters (the blue columns) is not much different than the dis-

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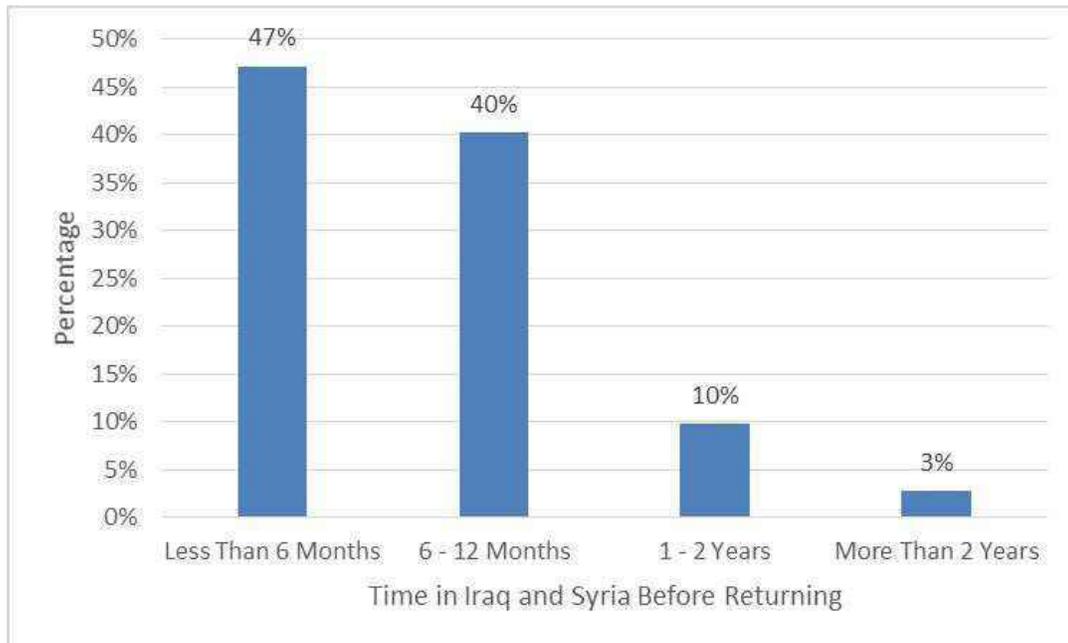
114 Charles Lister, *Returning Foreign Fighters: Criminalization or Reintegration* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2015); “The Murky Challenge of Returning Foreign Fighters,” *The Soufan Group*, December 9, 2015; Bibi van Ginkel and Eva Entenmann (editors), *The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon in the European Union: Profiles, Threats, and Policies* (The Hague, Netherlands: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism).

tribution of the general population of foreign fighters in our dataset (the red columns). The majority of returning foreign fighters were affiliated with the two main jihadist groups: the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra. The difference between the portion of returning fighters we were able to identify and the overall number in the dataset, while slightly greater in the case of the Islamic State and slightly less in the case of other militant groups, did not seem to suggest any particular cause. It is interesting to note, however, that the Islamic State, which welcomes its fighters not just to fight, but to live, still seems to see a good number of departures.



**Figure 5.1: Percentage of Returning Fighters Compared to Overall Organizational Distribution, by Group**

Another question of interest is how long the fighters stayed in Iraq and Syria before returning. To this end, we attempted to code when a foreign fighter left and then returned. We were able to find this information for 72 returning fighters. The results of this effort to code the time in theater appear in Figure 5.2.



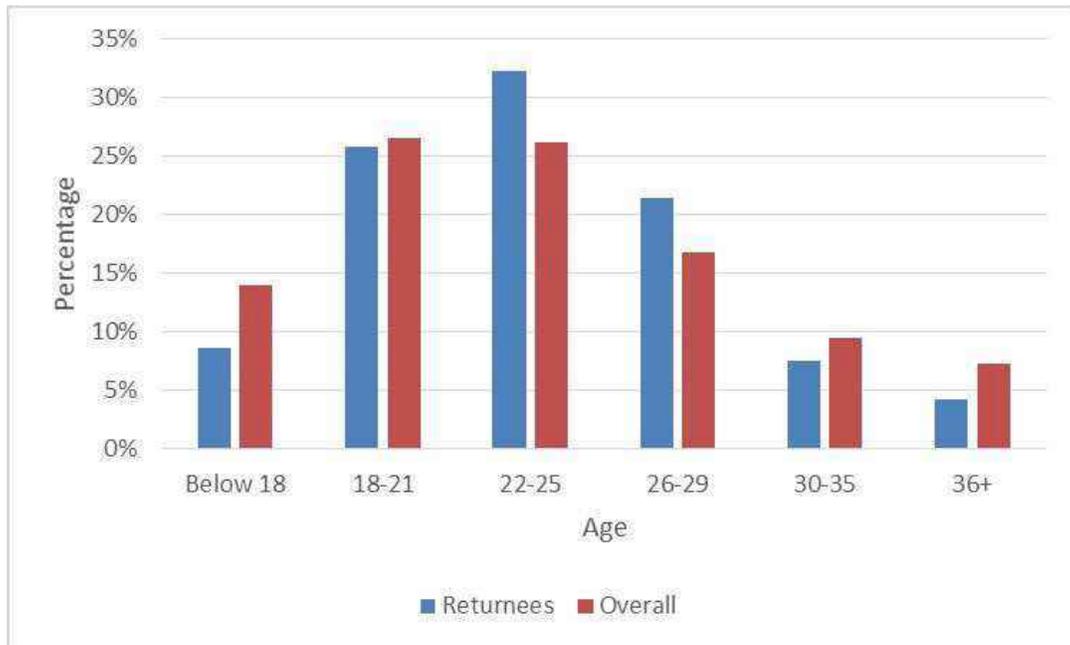
**Figure 5.2: Time in Iraq and Syria for Returning Foreign Fighters**

This data shows that the fighters in our dataset who returned did so relatively quickly. Nearly 90% spent less than a year in Iraq and Syria before returning home. However, recall that, as mentioned above, only a small portion of the fighters in our dataset actually returned home. This suggests that, even though those who do return do so shortly after leaving, not many fighters overall leave. This is a sobering takeaway, suggesting the belief that fighters quickly become disillusioned is possibly misplaced. The returnees, regardless of the reason for their departure, will likely have had a substantial amount of time in which they could receive training and battlefield experience.

### **Socio-Demographic Background and Aspects of Identity**

The data reflects some inconsistencies in terms of the socio-demographic characteristics of the returning foreign fighters. While they deviate from the entire population of foreign fighters with regard to some specific socio-demographic characteristics (marital status, immigration status), they do not have a distinct educational and occupational background, or specific characteristics in terms of their cultural or religious background. This may be a result of the limited data with regard to some of the variables, or due to the relatively small number of returning foreign fighters in the dataset, but could also be a result of some unique dynamics that are further explored below.

For example, there is not much difference in the age profile of fighters who go and those who return. The average age of the overall sample of fighters who go to Iraq and Syria in our dataset is 24.15, while the average age of those who return in our dataset is 24.21. Indeed, as can be seen in Figure 5.3, while there are some minor differences in the overall age breakdown of foreign fighters, there is consistency when it comes to age.



**Figure 5.3: Age Comparison of Foreign Fighters Who Go and Those Who Return**

As for marital status, we can identify gaps between the returnees and the entire population of foreign fighters in two major categories. The returnees include a higher portion of single foreign fighters (67% in comparison to 52% in the entire population of foreign fighters) and a smaller portion of those married before travel (22% in comparison to 44%).<sup>115</sup> These somewhat counter-intuitive findings may indicate that family-related considerations do not play a significant role in the decision of foreign fighters to return to their home countries or that for some reason married foreign fighters are less inclined to return. It is very interesting to note, however, that of the 11 returnees who were married prior to traveling to Iraq and Syria, every one of them had children as well. So, while it appears that the fighters who return are more likely to be single, the married fighters who return are more likely to have children. One possibility that exists is that, although some social ties may not be strong enough to lead a fighter to return, others may end up exercising a greater pull.

The immigration background of the returning foreign fighters also is somewhat distinct. While just 30% of foreign fighters are natives, approximately 40% of the returnees are natives. This finding may further support the idea that cultural and socio-economic aspects play a role in the decision of the foreign fighters to return. With stronger cultural ties to his home country, a fighter might be more likely to return than a fighter who had more recently immigrated to a new country.

Some differences also emerged in the data on the religious background, education and employment status of the returning foreign fighters.<sup>116</sup> The percentage of returnees who were converts to Islam is slightly higher in the case of returnees (40% to 32%). Additionally, although 74% of the general foreign fighter population had a high school education or less, this percentage rose to 87% in the case of returning foreign fighters. Finally, there was very little difference when it came to the prior occupational status of the returning fighters. In fact, the distribution was nearly identical. This last observation is logical, as it is unlikely that any fighter who had employment would return and anticipate having the same job position available.

<sup>115</sup> We were able to code marital status for 49 returnees.

<sup>116</sup> We were able to code religious background for 43 returnees, education level for 47 returnees, and previous occupation status for 60 returnees.

In summary, while this examination of the demographic characteristics revealed a few interesting insights about returning foreign fighters, a strong profile did not emerge that would suggest why these fighters return. The final question we consider is what the data, limited as it might be, provides regarding the threat posed by these returning fighters.

### Threat Potential

On April 1, 2016, U.S. President Barack Obama stated that, while the flow of foreign fighters had slowed, the danger posed by returning fighters “remain[ed] all too real.”<sup>117</sup> Politicians, experts, and practitioners around the world have echoed this warning. Our goal is to use the small amount of data we have to provide some insight into this threat.

We begin our evaluation of the threat potential of returning foreign fighters by identifying their pre-travel operational experience. If those who are returning have a significantly larger amount of pre-travel training, it may suggest that the group is selecting these individuals for operations in their home countries. While 9% of the overall population of foreign fighters had some prior operational experience, returnees seemed to have only slightly more operational experience than this (15%).<sup>118</sup>

Of course, regardless of whether or not these fighters had operational experience prior to travel, it seems clear that they obtained some amount of operational experience as part of their time in theater. Using open source accounts, we found that 96% of returnees had attended a training camp and that over 88% were involved in the execution of military operations while in Iraq and Syria.<sup>119</sup> In other words, as one would expect, foreign fighters obtain fighting experience. This experience could be leveraged to carry out attacks at home, not only because it may provide the returnees with tactical skills, but also their experience under fire may increase confidence and determination.

The actual experience of fighters differs slightly among our returnees. Almost 9% of the returning foreign fighters held a leadership position within the militant organization they joined, with about 80% serving as foot soldiers and 12% in auxiliary capacities.<sup>120</sup> In our view, the proportion of returnees with leadership experience is a relatively high number. When considering that the majority of foreign fighters spent limited time in areas of conflict, had limited familiarity with jihadi ideology, and had limited operational experience prior to joining a group, we would expect that very few of them attained a leadership position. The fact that a significant number of these few who climb to leadership positions decided to return to their home country illustrates further the risk that capable returnees will be engaged in violent operations upon their return.

Confirming concerns about the threat potential of returning foreign fighters is the fact that a significant number of the fighters in our dataset were arrested upon or after their return (89%). While this likely reflects selection bias in our data (newspapers are more aware of returning fighters who are arrested, making them more likely to enter into our dataset), it also may indicate that law enforcement identified many of them as having the intention to engage in terrorist activities in the future. The fact that we were able to identify that at least 14% of the returning foreign fighters were engaged in terrorist activity upon their return provides credence to these concerns. However, “involvement in terrorist activities” is a broad term that covers many different actions. In our dataset, the large majority of fighters arrested by security services were accused of involvement in criminal activities to fund jihad and in recruiting new fighters and helping with the logistics of their travel. On the other hand, only a couple

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117 Barack Obama, “Remarks by President Obama at the Closing Session of the Nuclear Security Summit,” *Released by the White House*, April 1, 2016.

118 We were able to code prior operational experience for 73 of the returnees.

119 We were able to find information on training camp attendance and involvement in violent operations for 51 and 60 returnees, respectively.

120 We found information on the operational role of 68 of the returnees.

of the returnees in our dataset were involved in planning and preparing for future terrorist plots. If this is an accurate reflection of the broader dynamics at play with returnees, their greatest threat may not be that they directly commit acts of violence, but rather that they return home to become part of a network that in turn commits attacks.

Another interesting observation from our data is that the arrests of many returnees took place outside of their country of origin. In other words, some of the returning fighters were caught in a country other than that from which they originally left. Some of these arrests took place in Turkey, as fighters sought medical assistance. Others occurred in unrelated third countries. It should also be pointed out that some of the foreign fighters who have actually gone on to execute attacks upon their return from Iraq and Syria did so in countries other than their own.<sup>121</sup> All of this suggests that the threat of direct return, where a foreign fighter returns to his own country to perpetrate violence, is only one pathway through which returnees pose a threat. Such a possibility only increases the importance of multilateral cooperation in dealing with the threat posed by returning foreign fighters.

In conclusion, there are some distinct demographic markers of returning foreign fighters. They are more likely to be single and slightly more likely to be native-born in the country to which they are returning. Most of the returnees in our data came home within a year of leaving, but those who stayed on longer are likely to have acquired more training and battlefield experience. Finally, our data, although small in size, suggests that the returning foreign fighter problem is multifaceted. It is not just about those who return directly to the country from which they originated, but it is also about those who move on to other countries where they will (presumably) be less likely to hit the radar of intelligence and law enforcement services. This finding in particular suggests that multilateral cooperation will be critical in identifying and preventing acts of violence carried out by these returning fighters.

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121 Mehdi Nemmouche, discussed at the beginning of this report, was from France and carried out his attack in Belgium. Rory Mulholland, "French Police Arrest Syria Jihadist over Brussels Jewish Museum Murders," *Telegraph*, June 1, 2014. Additionally, a number of the November 2015 Paris attackers were not from France, but from Belgium. "Paris Attacks: Who Were The Attackers," *BBC*, April 27, 2016.

## Conclusion

This report has used open source data on foreign fighters to offer as clear a picture as possible regarding the foreign fighter lifecycle. Each stage of this cycle (pre-departure, in theater, and return) presents unique policy challenges to the policymakers and practitioners working to prevent the flow of foreign fighters into the fields of battle and to deal with the potential consequences of their return.

In the pre-departure stage, this report highlighted the diversity of fighters that are going to fight for groups opposing the Assad regime in Iraq and Syria. Whether it is the slick propaganda of these groups or the jarring brutality poured suffered by civilians, individuals are clearly motivated by what is happening in that region. This report has suggested that some of these fighters are coming, not just from specific ethnic or religious communities, but from the fringes of these communities. Finding a way to identify, reach out to and, when necessary, monitor and detain these types of individuals is a challenge.

The foreign fighter problem would be challenging enough if reaching marginalized individuals within already insular communities were the only focus in the pre-departure stage of the foreign fighter problem. However, this report also highlighted the fact that these conflicts are also attracting individuals who seem to be in a more comfortable place in life when it comes to socioeconomic, marital, and other commitments. The fact that individuals who are married, have families, in some cases have good education and employment, are going to fight in Iraq and Syria suggests a need to consider various approaches even within the same geographic borders to limit the number of those who radicalize.

The distinct types of individuals notwithstanding, the analysis in this report on the pre-departure stage also suggests that the mediums through which individual radicalize are changing. While some individuals appear to have been mobilized by particular radical religious figures at local mosques, other factors appear to play a more prominent role in the process. Both group recruiters and the internet are key in the process, although group recruiters have the edge in terms of the vital nature of their role. Focusing on these individuals, both in terms of research to better understand their role as well as policy in limiting their ability to operate, is critical to dealing with the problem moving forward.

The next stage of the foreign fighter lifecycle examined in this report was the in-theater stage that occurs once the radicalized fighter arrives in Iraq and Syria. Here, the report suggested that training camps remain a critical part of the infrastructure. Most individuals arrive without any sort of military experience; groups must remedy this situation if their new recruits are to be of any service to the organization. These training camps remain an important bottleneck in the process of getting fighters from their home countries onto the battlefield.

Once arriving on the battlefield, fighters seem to serve within the various opposition groups in part according to the preexisting skill sets. Those with previous military experience tend to work in leadership positions, while those with more technical expertise find themselves working in an auxiliary capacity. Most of the new recruits go to the frontlines as foot soldiers, where it is also apparent that many die on the battlefield, although it is impossible to determine with any precision the actual death rate of fighters. The data for this report relies on open source news, which introduces some bias toward those who have died. This critique notwithstanding, the battlefield experience is likely deadly for many and influential for those who survive, albeit in a positive or negative manner.

The analysis section of the report concluded by examining the final stage of the lifecycle: the return phase. Though only a small number of fighters in the CTC dataset made it to this stage, the analysis of those that did provided a few insights. First, those who returned in the data appeared to have done so quickly. For those fighters, the experience may have been more disheartening than developing. The fighters who remain longer in-theater are at greater risk of being completely committed to their organization. Second, those who return do not always return directly to the country from which they originally left. One of the major challenges of the returning foreign fighter problem is that it may manifest itself in different ways over the course of the next decade. While the direct return and execution

of attacks is an important concern, the data here has shown that is far from the only concern.

In the end, the goal for this report is that it will be an enduring contribution in understanding the phenomenon of foreign fighters. Unfortunately, history would suggest that the flow of foreign fighters into Syria and Iraq is unlikely to be the last time individuals decide to travel long distances to take up arms in an ongoing conflict. However, by examining the phenomenon in detail, nations can better design and implement policies moving forward that deal with each stage of the foreign fighter lifecycle.

