American Foreign Fighters: Implications for Homeland Security

Final Report

31 August 2015

Prepared for the Department of Homeland Security
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HSSAI’s research is undertaken by mutual consent with DHS and is organized as a set of discrete tasks. This report presents the results of research and analysis conducted under

**Task 14-01.03.11 Implications of Foreign Fighters for Homeland Security**

The issue of foreign fighters is a rapidly evolving one, with unprecedented numbers of persons joining the conflict in Syria, attracting a broader population of individuals than have entered previous conflicts. This study characterizes the threat posed by foreign fighters, to include examining cases involving U.S. persons who have traveled, or attempted to travel, abroad to join foreign terrorist organizations. Our primary focus was to identify the terrorism-related behaviors of these individuals in order to inform prevention and response activities.

The results presented in this report do not necessarily reflect official DHS opinion or policy.
AMERICAN FOREIGN FIGHTERS: IMPLICATIONS FOR HOMELAND SECURITY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

One of the most pressing concerns for the Intelligence Community is the ongoing flow of foreign fighters to Syria and the threat they could pose upon return to their home countries. The battlefields in Iraq and Syria provide foreign fighters with combat experience, weapons and explosives training, and access to terrorist networks that may be planning attacks which target the West. The United States and our allies are increasingly concerned with the more than 20,000 foreign fighters who have traveled to Syria from over 90 different countries. We assess at least 3,400 of these fighters are from Western countries including over 150 U.S. persons who have either traveled to the conflict zone, or attempted to do so ... the trend lines are clear and concerning. The rate of foreign fighter travel to Syria is unprecedented. It exceeds the rate of travelers who went to Afghanistan and Pakistan, Iraq, Yemen, or Somalia at any point in the last 20 years.

—National Counterterrorism Center Director Nicholas J. Rasmussen

Concerns regarding the foreign fighter threat continue to be expressed by U.S. government officials. The unprecedented number of persons joining the fight in Syria, the relative ease of travel to the conflict, and inadequate intelligence resources are some of the unique security challenges. From a homeland security perspective, there are implications for border security, intelligence, immigration, law enforcement, and countering violent extremism.

This study examines the terrorism-related behaviors of U.S. persons who have traveled or attempted to travel abroad to fight with designated foreign terrorist organizations and identifies implications to inform homeland security decision makers. We conducted an extensive literature review to characterize current aspects of the broader foreign fighter threat. This review synthesized reporting on foreign fighter motivations, recruiting techniques, and the role of social media in furthering those objectives. We also sought to identify the current understanding of foreign fighter travel.

An in-depth analysis of cases involving 63 U.S. foreign fighters (and aspiring foreign fighters) was used to provide context for the literature review, and identify characteristics exhibited by U.S. foreign fighters that are not widely discussed in the public literature. These cases are individuals who were publicly identified between December 2011 and May 2015. A focus of our analysis was to identify any terrorism-related behaviors these individuals may have exhibited prior to their offense. Particular attention was paid to understanding any patterns or trends with respect to these individuals’ social media use and travel planning. These knowable terrorism-related behaviors could inform improvements to security measures and countering violent extremism efforts.

1 Countering Violent Islamist Extremism: The Urgent Threat of Foreign Fighters and Homegrown Terror, Hearing before the Committee on Homeland Security, United States House of Representatives, 114th Cong. (February 11, 2015) (statement of Nicholas J. Rasmussen, Director, National Counterterrorism Center).
Key Findings

We were unable to ascertain any profile for the type of person who has sought to become a foreign fighter. Our data set included males and females ranging in age from 15 to 47 years. They hailed from locations across the United States. Some were described as being loners or disenfranchised, while others were said to be successful and charismatic. The group included students and former members of the U.S. military. Some of the persons had spouses and children in the United States whom they intended to leave behind, while others had families they sought to take with them. Many of the individuals were prevented from leaving the country by law enforcement. Others successfully left the United States to fight in conflict zones, with a few voluntarily returning home. Only one of the persons was arrested on suspicion of plotting a domestic terror attack after his return.

We found that social media are more than a venue for foreign fighter recruits to receive jihadist propaganda. They also actively push content across a variety of platforms, which enables a public view of their ideological transformation and beliefs. Nearly all of the foreign fighters we studied used social media to communicate with other likeminded individuals, to include co-conspirators and other foreign fighters, recruiters, or facilitators located overseas. While some of these communications are available for public view, many persons took steps to ensure the security of their planning and discussions. Of those who successfully traveled abroad, many continued to use social media accounts to provide status updates, post propaganda, and encourage others to join them in the conflict.

The decision to travel overseas and join a terrorist organization requires a significant amount of planning and logistics. The individuals in our data set often needed to acquire basic travel documents, such as passports and visas, in addition to plane tickets. They relied on co-conspirators or existing foreign fighters to facilitate and coordinate their itineraries. Many did not have easy access to sufficient money, and engaged in a variety of means to pay for their trip and expenses overseas. They also prepared for combat by engaging in physical fitness training and gathering appropriate gear.

Implications

This study demonstrates the threat from foreign fighters is distinctive and continues to evolve. The takeaways from our analysis of cases involving Americans highlight several issues that could have implications for homeland security efforts.

*Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) efforts can be strengthened by incorporating travel behaviors of foreign fighters*

Foreign fighters exhibited several terrorism-related travel behaviors that do not appear to be covered by existing CVE efforts. First, they frequently needed to acquire documentation (e.g., passports) prior to traveling abroad. There appears to be an opportunity to expand current CVE initiatives with the State Department, by informing passport officials to be aware of suspicious behaviors that could be exhibited by potential foreign fighters.
Second, a few individuals engaged in financial aid fraud to finance their travel. Incorporating institutes of higher education and the Department of Education Office of Inspector General in CVE efforts could help identify potential foreign fighters through improved reporting and investigation of fraud cases. A broader integration of non-security partners in CVE is important to expand opportunities that can identify suspicious behaviors. However, incorporating these capabilities must be done carefully. To date, engagement with other non-security partners have been confusing, sporadic, under-resourced, and occasionally confrontational with law enforcement.

**Our counter-terror travel programs are only as good as the information that serves them**

Counter-terror travel programs are successful at interdicting known or suspected terrorists when they can leverage comprehensive and accurate information. Unfortunately, our study found that foreign fighters were able to depart and return to the U.S. in the absence of an active investigation. This highlights the limits to counter-terror travel programs. Relying on a range of international, federal, state, local, community partners, and families is critical for the U.S. to continue focusing on efforts to identify potential foreign fighters as early as possible.

**Foreign fighters are adaptive adversaries, requiring constant reevaluation about intent and capabilities**

Terrorist organizations, exemplified by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), have successfully demonstrated an ability to remain relevant by developing a dispersed, persistent, and cohesive online presence. They also employ innovative technical capabilities and focusing messaging to circumvent security efforts. These include outreach efforts providing recommendations on travel paths that limit suspicion, and informing potential foreign fighters about the need to communicate on encrypted messaging services. As the terrorism-related behaviors and travel itineraries of American foreign fighters evolve, so too must the responses of U.S. law enforcement officials, intelligence agencies, and CVE partners.
1. **INTRODUCTION**

This study characterizes the threat posed by foreign fighters, to include examining cases involving U.S. persons who have traveled, or attempted to travel, abroad to join foreign terrorist organizations. Our primary focus was to identify the terrorism-related behaviors of these individuals in order to inform prevention and response activities. In addition to conducting an extensive literature review to provide an overall picture of the foreign fighter threat, we collected data on cases involving Americans who have been identified as foreign fighters (or aspiring foreign fighters) since 2012.

Using only open-source and publicly available information, we compiled data on demographic and other variables (such as travel planning and social media use) to identify relevant trends and possible behavioral indicators. Additionally, we attempted to put the foreign fighter threat in the context of homeland security interests, including border security, immigration, and countering violent extremism.

This study is organized into six sections, followed by appendices.

- **Section 1** provides an introduction to the task and describes the methodology for the study. This includes defining the key terms found throughout the report.

- **Section 2** is an overview of the current foreign fighter threat. It highlights the concerns of security services regarding foreign fighters, and discusses their motivations and basic recruitment.

- **Section 3** explains how terrorist organizations have become adept at exploiting social media to radicalize and recruit Westerners, to include foreign fighters. It highlights their ability to leverage multiple social media platforms simultaneously, their innovative networking techniques, and the broad scope of their radicalizing content.

- **Section 4** discusses general characteristics of foreign fighter travel. This includes the importance of Turkey as a transit zone for Western foreign fighters.

- **Section 5** presents our data set findings. These were derived from an analysis of 63 U.S. individuals who fit our definition of a foreign fighter. It specifically identifies terrorism-related behavior trends regarding social media use and travel planning.

- **Section 6** describes possible implications that may inform homeland security decisions regarding border security, intelligence, immigration and law enforcement, and countering violent extremism.

- **Appendix A** contains a complete list of the individuals in our study, along with a brief description of their alleged activities.

- **Appendix B** is a discussion on engaging the education community to counter violent extremism.
Appendix C provides a more detailed description of the methodology used to guide this study.

Appendix D provides a selected bibliography of the references we used to inform our study and research each of the case studies.

1.1. Scope

This study focused on assessing 63 U.S. jihadist foreign fighters who were publicly identified between December 2011 and June 2015 (this includes two cases where the travel occurred in December 2011 but the persons were not identified until 2012; see appendix A for a complete list of cases). While this timeframe coincides with the growth of foreign fighters engaging in the Syrian conflict, we included all foreign fighters identified during this timeframe regardless of the conflict they were supporting. As a result, while Syria is the destination for the majority of the cases, our study also includes those who desired to join designated foreign terrorist organizations in other locations such as Pakistan, Afghanistan, Somalia, and Yemen.

Our study examined individuals who were indicted, arrested, or convicted, or who self-identified as joining State Department designated jihadist foreign terrorist organizations overseas. We did not include any U.S. persons known to have joined Kurdish rebel groups in Iraq and Syria.

Additionally, this study was informed by several previous HSSAI studies examining: the recruitment, radicalization, and utilization of school-aged youth by international terrorist groups; the nature and extent of radicalization and violent extremism among school-aged youth in the United States; educators’ perspectives on understanding and preventing violent extremism; the use of the Internet as a terrorist tool for recruitment and radicalization; and the public’s role in countering domestic terrorism plots.

1.2. Definitions

The following definitions guided our research:

- **Foreign fighter** is a U.S. person (citizen, naturalized citizen, legal permanent resident, etc.) known to have traveled (or attempted to travel) abroad to engage in military activity (training or fighting), using any tactic (terrorist or guerrilla tactics), against any enemy.²

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² Adapted from Thomas Hegghammer, “Should I Stay, or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists’ Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting,” *American Political Science Review* 107, no. 1 (February 2013). Thus, our study focuses on those individuals who are foreign fighters for a State Department-designated foreign terrorist organization. There is a long history of U.S. persons engaging in a variety of conflicts around the globe outside of the U.S. military, and not necessarily terrorism-related.
- **Radicalization** is the process of adopting an extremist belief system, including willingness to use, support, or facilitate violence as a method to effect social change.³

- **Terrorism** is the unlawful use of force against persons or property to intimidate a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof in furtherance of political or social objectives.⁴

- **Terrorism-related behaviors** are activities engaged in by individuals that directly relate to their charged terrorism offense or plot. These activities could include operational or travel planning or recruitment attempts, as well as any communications related to terrorism planning.

- **Jihadist** is a term to describe individuals who subscribe to violent jihad ideologies, such as those of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIL) and al-Qaeda. While the appropriateness of the term is debated among policy practitioners and academics, it is a self-identifier for those in the movements, so we use it here.⁵

### 1.3. Limitations

As noted above, this study was informed entirely by open-source materials. It is possible that information exists within the classified domain that could have provided additional details about the cases studied. Unfortunately, due to various limitations—including our intent to provide a publicly accessible report—we did not include classified data.

The type and quantity of information available for each of the individuals we studied varied considerably. The amount of behavioral data we were able to find differed significantly, including information regarding terrorism-related behaviors that led to the individuals being identified as potential threats. We relied heavily on court documents—including criminal complaints and indictments—to identify terrorism-related behaviors. However, we found that court documents generally provided information about the individuals’ behaviors that occurred after an investigation began. As such, there was minimal information available for most cases that allowed for a clear understanding of the behaviors that occurred prior to the persons being identified by law enforcement—including information about their radicalization process and behaviors that led to the initial identification by law enforcement. Having a better understanding of those earlier behaviors may have led to more concrete recommendations regarding prevention.

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⁴ 28 C.F.R. 0.85, Judicial Administration.

We recognize the absence of data for a specific individual or research variable does not necessarily mean there was an absence of behavior. Alternatively, because a behavior was specifically highlighted in reporting does not necessarily mean it occurred multiple times. We understand that determining the importance of reported behaviors is very subjective. Due to discrepancies in the amount of information available, we were cautious not to over-emphasize specific cases or individuals, but rather to analyze the data set as a whole.
2. Overview of the Current Foreign Fighter Threat

On 8 June 2014, Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud is alleged by the Department of Justice to have returned to Columbus, Ohio from Syria with the intent to kill uniformed personnel, specifically members of the armed forces or police officers. A naturalized U.S. citizen, Mohamud exemplifies the concerns U.S. law enforcement and counterterrorism officials have regarding foreign fighters. He easily traveled overseas on a U.S. passport and entered Syria to train in weapons, explosives, and hand-to-hand combat. He supposedly became further radicalized, and gained access to extremist networks (Jabhat al-Nusra, an al-Qaeda associated terror group) that directed him to return to the United States and conduct an act of terrorism. Highlighting the Mohamud case as a tangible reminder of the foreign fighter threat, Assistant Attorney General John Carlin stressed that “identifying and neutralizing the threat posed by foreign fighters who return to the United States is one of the National Security Division’s highest priorities.”

While most foreign fighters do not appear to leave for armed conflicts abroad with the intention of returning home and conducting terrorist acts, Western security services and intelligence agencies have repeatedly warned about the real danger posed by returning fighters such as Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud. The concern is that fighters will be specifically recruited to carry out attacks in the West because their backgrounds and passports may decrease the security scrutiny they face. According to the seminal study of European foreign fighters by Thomas Hegghammer, the return rate of foreign fighters “suggests that far from all foreign fighters are domestic fighters in-the-making”; roughly one in nine returned to conduct an attack in the West. However, those attacks were deadlier than attacks that did not involve a foreign fighter. Our data set appears to be consistent with the return rate found in Europeans by Hegghammer, with Mohamud as the one individual suspected of returning to conduct an attack out of 63 cases.

Foreign fighters are a rapidly evolving and multifaceted threat, especially since the Syrian conflict escalated in 2011. Importantly, they are drivers of instability and insecurity. As conflict participants, they bolster support for terrorist organizations by increasing force size and capabilities. Their participation also draws media attention,

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) dates to 2004 when Abu Musab al-Zarqawi founded al Qaeda in Iraq. The group reconstituted itself following discontent in Iraq and the civil war in Syria, and in April 2013, it declared its presence in Syria as ISIL. In 2014, ISIL had several high-profile battlefield successes and swept through large portions of Iraq while maintaining its safe haven in Syria, gaining weapons, equipment, and revenue while killing thousands of Iraqis. In June 2014, it proclaimed a new caliphate—the Islamic State.

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6 United States v. Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud, Criminal Indictment, United States District Court, Southern District of Ohio, April 2015.


8 Hegghammer, “Should I Stay, or Should I Go?”
globalizing local conflicts and promoting violent jihad ideologies. As displayed in the Iraq War, they directly impact the trajectory of conflicts by increasing sectarian conflict through indiscriminate attacks, including those against civilians.

While the volume of foreign fighters is difficult to determine, it has been reported that 20,000 foreign fighters from more than 90 nations have traveled to Syria. While the majority of these fighters are from the Middle East and North Africa, more than 3,400 are Westerners, including the approximately 200 Americans known to have traveled, or attempted to travel, to fight with Islamic militants. This is considered an unprecedented scale of Western participation in a jihadist campaign. The substantial and rapid growth of Syrian foreign fighters amplifies the challenge for U.S. and European counterterrorism agencies, where existing counterterrorism capabilities may be overwhelmed and leave security services shy of resources to deal with the problem.

According to Nicholas Rasmussen, director of the National Counterterrorism Center, the flow of foreign fighters is a pressing concern because, in addition to the sheer numbers, the Syrian conflict is attracting a broader population of individuals than have entered previous conflicts, making them difficult to identify. They come from “a variety of backgrounds and locations in the United States,” not fitting any profile or stereotype. Our foreign fighter case studies reflect that official assessment. Individuals in our data set are as young as 15, and as old as 47. They are from 19 different states. Some were disenfranchised, while others were known to be successful and charismatic. Our cases include good students, loners, former members of the armed services, and individuals with families—including children.

The ease of travel to Syria is another reason that this wave of foreign fighters is more concerning than those of previous conflicts. Fighters who transit through Europe can take short flights, drive, or take a train to Turkey “and quickly enter the fray across the border.

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11 U.S. Homeland Security and the Threat from Syria and Iraq: Hearing before the Committee on Homeland Security, Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence, United States House of Representatives, 114th Cong. (June 24, 2015) (statement of Seth G. Jones, The RAND Corporation). These numbers also do not include Westerners and Americans who have traveled to other conflict zones as foreign fighters in the past few years.
13 Countering Violent Islamist Extremism (Rasmussen statement).
14 Nicholas J. Rasmussen (prepared remarks for the NYPD Shield Conference, New York, NY, February 17, 2015).
in Syria.” Compared to other potential foreign fighter destinations such as Afghanistan, Yemen, or Somalia, the Syrian conflict is a relatively cheap and easy destination. Additionally, residents of countries in the European Union are not required to have a visa to enter Turkey, allowing foreign fighters to blend in among millions of tourists. Once in Syria, the volunteers are quickly connected with jihadist operatives in border towns who “troll among the new arrivals.” Jihadists use the territory they control in Syria and Iraq as a safe haven where they can congregate, reinforce commitment, develop contacts, communicate freely, train, and plan operations.

### 2.1. Motivations

There are a variety of personal motivations for foreign fighters, both political and ideological. Initially, the repressive and brutal policies of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s regime to popular uprisings during the so-called Arab Spring of 2010-11 motivated most of those traveling to Syria to aid rebels in their attempt to overthrow the government. Some also may have initially traveled to offer humanitarian assistance but became entwined with rebel groups or terrorist organizations participating in the conflict. However, as terrorist organizations such as the self-proclaimed Islamic State began dominating resistance efforts through battlefield successes, overtly secular motivations of foreign fighters diminished. It also appears that recent recruits to al-Shabaab in Somalia are religiously motivated and are not driven by the sense of nationalism that motivated the initial wave of foreign fighters who joined in 2008.

Today, most Western volunteers, including Americans, are influenced by jihadist ideology. Driven by a perception that life in Western society is sinful and corrupting, they express solidarity with jihadist terror organizations and openly seek martyrdom through jihad, believing their death will provide a path to heaven for them and their families. For foreign fighters drawn to Syria, they feel it is their duty to “live in what they see as an authentic Muslim caliphate.” Potential fighters are enticed by the idea of building the Islamic State’s caliphate—of being on the ground floor of a new world order.

As terror organizations link foreign conflicts to problems at home, such as discrimination or differing cultural norms, participation in jihadist campaigns may make fighters feel pride in standing up for their family and community. Thus, existing grievances are

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17 Ibid. 8.
18 *Worldwide Threats Hearing, Hearing before the Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, U.S. House of Representatives, 113th Cong.* (February 4, 2014) (statement of Matthew G. Olsen, Director of the National Counterterrorism Center).
mixed with foreign dynamics to portray a global religious struggle. They feel empowered and find a purpose by joining jihad.

Some also sought a place where they could fit in better, experience camaraderie, or do something courageous by “kinda jumping headfirst into it.” Finally, ISIL’s tactics, including mass executions, crucifixions, and beheadings, attract the “most violence-prone foreign recruits” while also intimidating enemies.

2.2. Recruitment

Terrorist organizations actively target and recruit Westerners and Americans as foreign fighters. Doing so raises their profile, broadens their network of supporters and fighters, and expands their capabilities. While potential foreign fighters are exposed to jihadist propaganda online, their mobilization to travel overseas almost always involves personal contact with a member or members of the organization. The strategies used to make these personal connections are both virtual and face-to-face.

The mobilization of a foreign fighter is not spontaneous. It results from a dynamic process involving several interdependent factors that influence a potential recruit. These factors may be personal, socio-political, or ideological. For example, ISIL’s recruiting leverages demographics, religious ideas, and assimilation challenges. Americans who decide to travel to overseas conflict zones are almost universally inspired by propaganda from jihadist leaders as well as postings on social media from foreign fighters engaged in the conflict. The latter convey “their experiences on the battlefield live on social media” and have been known to utilize GoPro video cameras to provide a first person perspective of combat. They document their experiences, offer encouragement for those who wish to join, and even provide guidance about how to get there. Potential recruits who are sufficiently inspired by jihadist propaganda are vetted online by jihadists and then transitioned away from public social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook to more private social media platforms such as Facebook Messenger, Kik, and WhatsApp. This allows recruitment to be more clandestine, decreasing the likelihood their plotting may be uncovered by law enforcement, friends, and family. A more comprehensive

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23 United States v. Joshua Van Haften, Criminal Complaint, United States District Court, Western District of Wisconsin, October 2014.

24 Jenkins, When Jihadis Come Marching Home, 6.


discussion on the sophisticated nature of social media use by terrorist organizations to target foreign fighters is found in section 4, “Exploitation of Social Media to Recruit Foreign Fighters.”

While recruitment of foreign fighters through social media is a significant concern, it is not the only manner terrorist organizations use. We have seen cases involving recruitment within families, including cousins, brothers, and sisters. Additionally, a recent study of ISIL’s recruitment of foreign fighters from the Minneapolis area has demonstrated that recruitment is occurring through face-to-face interactions with a recruiter. It appears that ISIL has appropriated an existing al-Shabaab recruiting network, and that while social media is enhancing recruitment efforts, it is not the primary tool facilitating it.

It is also important to keep in mind that terrorist organizations are not only seeking foreign recruits as fighters, but also as international terror operatives. Al-Qaeda sent the Khorasan group, veterans from the conflict in Afghanistan and Pakistan, into Syria to identify and recruit Westerners as operatives capable of blending into their home nation and conduct terrorist attacks. U.S. forces bombed the Khorasan group, but in an interview on CBS’s 60 Minutes, FBI Director James Comey said Khorasan “may still be working on an effort to attack the United States or our allies, and looking to do it very, very soon.”

A significant concern regarding the recruitment of foreign fighters to Syria is that the bombing campaign being conducted by the United States and its allies does not appear to have significantly reduced the flow. While additional instances since the campaign began in September 2014 may be attributed to a lag in when authorities identify these recruits, some evidence suggests that the flow continues.

According to our data set, 23 Americans have been publicly identified as foreign fighters so far in 2015 (all but one attempting to enter Syria), compared to just 11 in 2011 and 9 in 2013.

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30 Southers, et al., Foreign Fighters, 1 and 16.

31 Countering Violent Islamist Extremism (Rasmussen statement).


33 There Will Be Battles in the Heart of Your Abode, The Threat Posed by Foreign Fighters Returning From Syria and Iraq, Hearing before the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, United States Senate, 114th Cong. (March 12, 2015) (statement of Brian Michael Jenkins, RAND Corporation).
3. **EXPLOITATION OF SOCIAL MEDIA TO RECRUIT FOREIGN FIGHTERS**

Utilizing the Internet and social media to spread jihadist propaganda, disseminate messages, recruit, and raise funds is not novel.\(^{34}\) However, these engagements are constantly evolving. Current efforts by terrorist organizations focus on developing a persistent, cohesive, and outsized presence to grow their influence and specifically target potential foreign fighters.\(^{35}\) This dispersed presence across social media platforms is especially important in the recruitment of individuals who might not otherwise come into physical contact with jihadists.\(^{36}\) They produce timely and high-quality content, leverage multiple online platforms, and apply innovative networking techniques—a combination the Department of Homeland Security has described as “very sophisticated” and designed to inspire, radicalize, and ultimately recruit U.S. citizens to travel to Syria.\(^{37}\)

It is that level of sophistication that separates the terrorist organizations in Syria, specifically ISIL, from those in previous conflicts that drew foreign fighters. It also causes significant concerns among law enforcement agencies and the intelligence community, which see a robust jihadist online environment making it “difficult to protect our young people here in the U.S. from being drawn” into conflicts overseas.\(^{38}\) Recent cases of U.S. foreign fighters displaying a significant amount of jihadist social media engagement reinforces these concerns.

### 3.1. Multiple Platforms

We are witnessing a distinct shift in messaging and mass communication strategies by terrorist organizations. The dominance of command-and-control official press releases, such as audio and video broadcasts from al-Qaeda core leaders like Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, are becoming less frequent. But terrorist organizations are also moving toward a new media model focused on peer-to-peer sharing, allowing it to be more dispersed and resilient.\(^{39}\)

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\(^{34}\) Catherine Bott, et al., *The Internet as a Terrorist Tool for Recruitment and Radicalization of Youth* (Arlington, VA: Homeland Security Institute, April 24, 2009).


\(^{36}\) *Jihad 2.0* (Gartenstein-Ross statement).

\(^{37}\) *Cybersecurity, Terrorism and Beyond: Addressing Evolving Threats to the Homeland, Hearing before the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate, 113\(^{th}\) Cong. (September 10, 2014)* (statement for the record of Suzanne E. Spaulding, Under Secretary, National Protection and Programs Directorate, Department of Homeland Security and Francis X. Taylor, Under Secretary, Office of Intelligence and Analysis, Department of Homeland Security).

\(^{38}\) Countering Violent Islamist Extremism (Rasmussen statement).

\(^{39}\) Fisher, “Swarmcast.”
Utilizing social media platforms is a critical capability in that shift. A peer-to-peer approach allows members, adherents, and foreign fighter recruits to connect, communicate, and spread their ideology quickly and easily. Facilitating these capabilities is a proliferation of social media platforms: Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, KiK, and WhatsApp are just a few of the more recognizable examples. By using these platforms to distribute their propaganda, terrorist organizations are able to ensure that their “influence flows through multiple hubs in multiple directions.” Often messages that appear on one platform are embedded with links to a variety of other platforms. This allows users to download content from any number of locations and save it for reposting at a later time. This multiple-platform strategy is intended to ensure that sufficient numbers of users have downloaded the content, enabling it to be “reposted faster and in a greater variety of places than platform owners and government agencies can remove them.”

For example, on Saturday, 17 March 2014, ISIL used Twitter to release the fourth installment of a video series glorifying extreme violence and its ideology—“The Clanging of the Swords.” In the first 24 hours after its release, the video was uploaded to YouTube and viewed nearly 57,000 times—the equivalent of 680 days, taking into account the average time (17 minutes) spent watching the hour-long video. It was reposted several times to YouTube over the next few days. By the following Monday morning, when it was removed from the site, the single video had been viewed more than 150,000 times, and 32,313 tweets carried the Arabic name of the video—or more than 800 tweets per hour over two days (see figure 1). This does not account for the reposting of the video to any number of other file sharing sites such as justpaste.it and archive.org.

Using a multi-platform approach allows terrorist organizations to develop a complex information-sharing network. Some platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook, allow for real-time communication with group members who are able to share operational successes, supposed atrocities committed by adversaries, or the relatively mundane aspects of daily life. These sites also allow these messages to be delivered through a variety of content including text, audio, and video. These aspects are a significant recruiting tool because they allow for potential foreign fighters to directly connect,

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41 Jihad 2.0 (Berger statement).
42 Fisher, “Swarmcast.”
43 Ibid.
share, and empathize with foreign fighters already overseas. Additionally, utilizing multiple platforms forces intelligence and law enforcement agencies to locate the content and to contact the platform administrators about removing the content. The more time that process takes, the more opportunities jihadists have to share, download, and repost elsewhere.\textsuperscript{46}

Figure 1: Volume of Tweets per hour for “The Clanging of the Swords”

3.2. Innovative Networking Techniques

While the utilization of numerous open social media platforms by terrorist organizations is a progression beyond traditional password-protected forums, the means being developed to share information across those platforms is striking. A complex combination of technical sophistication, along with a distributed organizational structure allows propaganda to be widely shared and protects the network from critical vulnerabilities. For example, online supporters are known to use multiple accounts across multiple platforms to limit the impact of account suspensions on social media sites.\textsuperscript{47} According to FBI Director James Comey, terrorist organizations now appear to be focusing on techniques to “crowdsource” their outreach efforts.\textsuperscript{48} The goal is to elicit support by spreading their propaganda and engagement efforts as broadly as possible.

\textsuperscript{46} Fisher, “Swarmcast.”

\textsuperscript{47} Jihad 2.0 (Berger statement).


\hspace{1cm}
These techniques are currently exemplified by Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIL, which “adopted fluid, dispersed networks to distribute their media content online,” ensuring that it remains easily available (see figure 2). Relying on a cadre of online supporters, these organizations engage in a systematic recruiting campaign allowing potential foreign fighters to self-radicalize or make direct contact over the Internet with members of the organizations.

This ability to interact with recruits and adherents without explicit direction from the jihadist organization is a significant strength. It allows the network to “survive the loss of prominent nodes and ‘official’ accounts by constantly reorganizing,” and combines innovate approaches to complex systems, information technology, operational structures, and the lowering of barriers between physical and electronic battlefields.

Some of the innovative technical means for targeting propaganda at potential foreign fighters leverage the unique capabilities of Twitter in a coordinated manner. According to some estimates, an energetic core of between 500 and 2,000 ISIL members and online devotees are using highly organized tactics to drastically influence how the world perceives the strength of and support for ISIL. Using hashtags, terrorist organizations label their content in a manner that makes it easy to identify and recognize. For example, while some language or shorthand variations exist, hashtags referencing the caliphate or Islamic State—such as Dawla (Arabic for “state”), baqiyah (an ISIL slogan), and Shami

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49 Fisher, “Swarmcast.”
50 Jihad 2.0: Social Media in the Next Evolution of Terrorist Recruitment, Hearing before Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, U.S. Senate, 114th Cong. (May 7, 2015) (statement of Peter Bergen, Director, International Security Program, New America and Professor of Practice at Arizona State University)
51 Fisher, “Swarmcast.”
52 Berger, The ISIL Twitter Consensus, 2-4.
(Arabic for “Syrian”)—are overwhelmingly more frequent than other terms. Additionally, jihadists and sympathizers tweet repeatedly in short bursts to disseminate important content. Prolonged bursts of coordinated activity cause hashtags to trend, making them seen by more users and trending into search results. Finally, ISIL supporters have been observed using manipulative tactics to artificially inflate the volume of retweets, furthering the reach of their propaganda and attempting to display more support than exists. By using a wide variety of bots and apps, supporters mimic spam-like services to promote content automatically, without the need of an individual manually posting. Many of these bots and apps are augmented from third-party automation services that Twitter is unlikely to shut down because they are frequently used for harmless purposes by ordinary users.

The online jihadist community plays a customer service role. If recruits have a problem locating a specific piece of content, they can simply ask members who provide the content or point them to a site where it is accessible (see figure 3).

In addition to spreading propaganda, online supporters also reach out and screen potential recruits. They make initial contact on open platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, and once conversations become more serious, they switch to encrypted messaging and e-mail apps to evade law enforcement.

### 3.3. Broad Content

In addition to sophisticated approaches to where and how terrorist organizations distribute their propaganda through social media, they are also developing inventive content targeted directly to potential foreign fighters. By sharing first-person accounts, providing media and charismatic propagandists in multiple languages, and adapting popular video games they are making a direct connection to individuals in America. The
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purpose is to elicit sympathy and motivate activism for a cause these potential fighters may not have supported otherwise.

One of the most engaging aspects of social media is the ability to share and interact on a personal level. For terrorist organizations, this is done effectively through first-person perspectives from their fighters and ideologues. Utilizing the dispersed network of supporters described previously, jihadists chronicle and share “rich audiovisual content from the battlefield in near real-time” highlighted by videos from fighters wearing Go-Pro cameras. Many of the Westerners fighting in Syria and Iraq used social media platforms such as Tumbler, Ask.fm, Twitter, and Facebook to learn about the conflict, and are continuing to use these platforms to share and disseminate their experiences to followers back home. They discuss the need for hiking boots and other camping gear, but also for iPads and smartphones to keep connected with the outside world.

While not a direct peer-to-peer interaction, terrorist organizations are using first-person shooter (FPS) video games to make recruitment efforts more personable and exciting. They are capable of adapting or modifying existing FPS games into ISIL versions, such as “Grand Theft Auto: Salil al-Sawarem [Sound of Swords],” to make them resemble other recruitment videos and first-person accounts. These first-person angles serve as a recruiting tool, foster cohesion, and encourage mobilization among sympathizers and supporters. They appeal to potential jihadists who desire a sense of adventure with carefully choreographed and produced special effects making the battlefield look “cool” and exciting.

To ensure that these engagement efforts are beneficial, terrorist organizations have developed culturally relevant materials utilizing languages spoken by Westerners. These materials include videos, digital magazines, and audio recordings in English, German, French, and Dutch, among other languages. For example, al-Shabaab has pursued this strategy by “producing English-language videos, presented as news reports and press releases, and by building a strong presence on Twitter.” The group characterizes its mission through religious imagery and paints a conflict between Islam and nonbelievers, attempting to create tensions for Muslims in the West and forcing them to “pick a side.” Also, an analysis of ISIL’s Twitter strategy identified that many supporters tweeted in more than one language to target external audiences, including the use of hashtags in English and Arabic. These targeted materials are reinforced by native-speaking jihadist recruiters (male and female) who are able to establish a strong connection with potential

59 Fisher, “Swarmcast.”
60 Byman and Shapiro, Be Afraid. Be a Little Afraid, 15.
62 Jihad 2.0 (Gartenstein-Ross statement).
63 Meleagrou-Hitchens, et al., Lights, Camera, Jihad.
64 Meleagrou-Hitchens, et al., Lights, Camera, Jihad.
65 Berger, The ISIL Twitter Consensus.
foreign fighter recruits. Sharing a language lowers the barriers to entry for recruits while also allowing recruiters to convey shared cultural experiences.

In other cases, digital magazines such as *Inspire* and *Dabiq* have been effective at providing a range of information and inspiration to Western audiences. Written in English and other languages, these magazines are specifically intended to arouse adherents in Western countries to take action (either as lone actors domestically or as foreign fighters overseas). These digital offerings are released in formats similar to traditional periodicals, and they remain relevant and impactful by focusing on current events. ISIL’s *Dabiq* is a high-quality product that merges religious and apocalyptic imagery with commentary on the organization’s goals and accomplishments and encouragement for acts of terrorism.66 *Inspire* is a publication from al-Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula (AQAP) that is widely known for encouraging lone-actor terror attacks by providing practical advice on how to construct bombs and avoid Western security measures.67

Social media platforms also provide a conduit for potential recruits to interact directly with foreign fighters and senior members of the organization.68 They offer advice about traveling overseas, preparing for combat, and expectations for daily life in the organization. Omar Hammami, an American who joined al-Shabaab in Somalia, reached out to motivate sympathizers in the United States: “The real point is that it’s a bit like a Slim-Fast commercial: If I can do it, you can do it too!”69 He offered guidance on the physical demands of armed jihad and talked about personal difficulties in a manner that resonated with other Americans and Westerners. Jabhat al-Nusra promoted a video called *The Story of an American Muhajir [Foreigner] in Sham [Syria].* In the video, an unidentified jihadist is shown burning a U.S. passport and saying, in English, that “Jihad is protecting Islam, it is [a] *haqq* [right] on you to protect your brothers and [the] oppressed, it is [a] *haqq* on you to fight.”70 These examples and numerous others demonstrate that foreign fighter narratives are an essential part of jihadist outreach and engagement.

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69 Ibid.
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4. FOREIGN FIGHTER TRAVEL

While participation in foreign jihadist conflict zones is not a recent phenomenon, the unprecedented numbers of persons currently joining the fight in Syria is attracting a broader population of individuals than have entered previous conflicts. This now includes women and youths. As a result of their volume and diversity, efforts to counter terrorist travel are challenging. Potential Western foreign fighters utilize land, air, and sea transit routes that often involve Turkey, which borders Syria.

4.1. Turkey: The Gateway for Western Foreign Fighters

Travel into Syria through Turkey has been the predominant path for foreign fighters from Western countries since early in the conflict. In the war’s early years, foreigners would typically fly to Turkey and simply cross the border by land into Syria. In 2012, Turkey did little to stop foreign fighter smuggling, and foreign fighters could move about freely in the border region. Merchants could openly sell weapons, armor, and paraphernalia to them. Now fighters and merchants try to avoid attention. Moreover, security improvements in recent years have prompted them to find new routes and methods of travel.

Nonetheless, ISIL continues to succeed using Turkey as a gateway for foreign fighters, capitalizing on social media outreach and its network of operatives in the border region.

ISIS online recruiters will assist potential foreign fighters in planning the trip and connect them with people who will take them to a safe house, after which they will be driven to a border crossing and smuggled into Syria, where ISIS fighters will be waiting to pick them up. Getting smuggled across the border can cost as little as $25 and is generally organized and paid for by ISIS. On the other side of the border, recruits go through training and then, depending on their skills, are deployed to various cities under ISIS control in Iraq and Syria.

ISIL also uses intimidation as a tactic, compelling Turkish border smugglers to bring recruits into Syria on threat of death or elimination of their livelihood.

The Turkish government argues it is doing all it can to stem the flow of foreign fighters. In February 2015, Turkey announced the compilation of a list of 10,000 people, whose

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73 Masi and Sender, “How Foreign Fighters Joining ISIS Travel to the Islamic Group’s ‘Caliphate.’” ISIL is also known as ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or the Islamic State).

74 Arango and Schmitt, “A Path to ISIL, Through a Porous Turkish Border.”
names came from other countries and were confirmed by Turkey, with suspected IS ties who would be banned from entering. But Turkey lacks sufficient border security personnel and equipment to screen and monitor travelers effectively. The government has sent security forces undercover into airports, train stations, and bus depots. They scrutinize travelers for possible indicators of jihadist intentions. These include one-way tickets as well as physical attributes, such as long beards. But recruits have adapted by trying harder to blend in, trimming facial hair and wearing Western clothes.

Turkish officials say intelligence sharing with Western countries has improved, most notably with the compilation of the no-entry list, but it remains inadequate, including for identification of individuals to interdict on their exit from Syria back into Turkey. Turkish officials also blame European countries for allowing the conditions leading to radicalization to fester.

4.2. Routes to Turkey

Notwithstanding recent attempts to improve information sharing with Turkey and border security there, many Europeans and U.S. citizens heading for Syria encounter few difficulties reaching Turkey. Foreign fighters take multiple air, land, and sea routes into Turkey. “The majority of itineraries often utilize pre-existing trade, migrant or tourist routes, where an aspiring ISIS recruit can blend in with other travelers.”

ISIL supporters realize the importance of open access to these travel pathways, which their recruits often have to navigate on their own. An ISIL supporter published a document online on Scribd, “Hijrah to the Islamic State,” with tips on travel, including advice to purchase a round-trip ticket to avoid suspicion. Moreover, ISIL may be avoiding or discouraging attacks in countries that serve as frequent stopovers on the way to Syria, such as Spain, Bulgaria, and Tunisia. “The locations are strategic for travel to and from the so-called caliphate, and an attack would just increase security on the borders and make it much harder for ISIS to route its flow of recruits through these spots.”

ISIL recruits have adapted to security countermeasures to continue to fly to Turkey. Those facing scrutiny in their home country can simply travel by land to a neighboring

75 Countering Violent Islamist Extremism: The Urgent Threat of Foreign Fighters and Homegrown Terror: Hearing Before the House Committee on Homeland Security, 114th Cong. (2015) (statement of Nicholas J. Rasmussen, Director, National Counterterrorism Center); Masi and Sender, “How Foreign Fighters Joining ISIS Travel to the Islamic Group’s ‘Caliphate.’”
77 Arango and Schmitt, “A Path to ISIL, Through a Porous Turkish Border.”
78 Ibid.; and McCaul, “Europe has a Jihadi Superhighway Problem.”
79 Arango and Schmitt, “A Path to ISIL, Through a Porous Turkish Border.”
80 Masi and Sender, “How Foreign Fighters Joining ISIS Travel to the Islamic Group’s ‘Caliphate.’”
81 Ibid.; hijrah is the Arabic word for “journey.”
82 Ibid.
country and fly from there to Turkey. Hayat Boumeddiene, the wife of the French citizen who killed four people in January at a kosher supermarket in Paris, traveled by land to Spain and then flew to Syria because France was monitoring her husband. As for U.S. recruits, flights to Turkey remain the most common mode of travel.

Land routes are also popular with European or North African recruits who “aren’t able to take advantage of the EU’s relaxed border policy because they do not hold a passport from the EU, may already be on a no-fly list or lack proper documentation.” Those traveling from northern and eastern Europe can drive or take a bus through the Balkans, entering northern Turkey via Bulgaria. Another option is to fly or drive to Greece and cross into Turkey there. The latter, a longstanding route for Turkish expatriates living in Germany to travel to see family, is also believed a common route for weapons smuggling.

Sea routes are becoming more popular but remain risky. “Potential ISIS fighters can use existing sea lanes used for trade or routes used by migrants trying to flee their countries toward Europe—except in reverse.” Tunisia and Libya, whose shared border area features many jihadist training camps, are frequent departure points for foreign fighters traveling by sea to Syria. For about $500, recruits can be smuggled in Tunisia onboard cargo ships headed for Turkey. Other options include the daily ferries running from Cyprus, Lebanon, and other Mediterranean locations to Turkey, as well as cruise ships, due to lax security at Turkish seaports.

4.3. Return Travel

As with their entry into Syria, ISIL recruits returning to their home countries most frequently depart Syria through Turkey. “But from there fighters often disperse. Some go through Tunisia, one of the biggest suppliers of foreign fighters to ISIL and also where the militant group is reportedly doing much of its finance and banking. Others go through Greece, where they can pretend to be tourists and, if they have a European passport, can then freely travel within the European Union. Fighters leaving from the militant group’s strongholds in Iraq have been known to go through the Balkans before entering [other parts of] Europe.”

As discussed above, EU law forbids member states from checking EU citizens against terror watch lists when they return to the Schengen Area, creating a vulnerability that
returning foreign fighters could exploit. Other EU security vulnerabilities that returning fighters could exploit include “the lack of an advanced EU-wide air passenger information screening system and inadequate fraudulent document detection capabilities”91

Finally, the potential for ISIL recruits to use deception to return to the West has raised concerns. They might hide among refugee groups fleeing Syria.92 Some recruits have recently faked their deaths or lied to their Consulates or Embassies about their intention to defect from ISIL in an attempt to infiltrate their home countries more easily and carry out terrorist operations.93 An interview with the Department of State also revealed instances of fraud with suspected foreign fighters seeking to return home. They approach U.S. representatives in Turkey claiming to have lost their passport to avoid scrutiny regarding entry and exit visa stamps.94

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91 McCaul, “Europe has a Jihadi Superhighway Problem.”
92 Ibid.
93 Masi, “ISIS Fighters Are Faking Defections.”
94 Interview with Department of State, Diplomatic Security, Protective Intelligence Investigations, August 17, 2015.
5. **KEY FINDINGS FROM FOREIGN FIGHTER DATA SET**

In addition to characterizing the foreign fighter threat in sections 3 through 5, we also collected research on individual cases of U.S. foreign fighters to provide context and identify any trends related to all aspects of their travel or attempted travel. Our study includes 63 U.S. foreign fighters who traveled, or attempted to travel, between December 2011 and May 2015. The following section provides an overview of these cases and highlights terrorism-related behaviors involving their social media use and travel planning.

5.1. **Overview**

While the primary focus of our study was on identifying terrorism-related behaviors that were common among the perpetrators, we also looked at demographic variables to identify any similarities across the data set. We found there is no useful profile or type of individuals who have become foreign fighters. Demographic characteristics varied considerably, with ages ranging from 15 to 47, with a median age of 22. Individuals in our data set are from 19 different states and include both males and females.

![Location of U.S. Foreign Fighter Cases](image)

In addition to looking at the demographic variables, we also sought to identify any similarities in the descriptive information provided about the individuals. Open-source reporting commonly included statements made about the individuals by those who knew them, including family members, peers, school personnel, and religious leaders. These descriptive observations—many of which were noted in hindsight—did not prove helpful in identifying what type of young persons become involved in violent extremism and terrorism. Some of the individuals were described as disenfranchised and loners while others were known to be outgoing and charismatic. Our cases include good students,
former members of the armed services, and individuals with families—including children. There also did not appear to be any commonality among individuals regarding their religious devotion.

We also identified cases where foreign fighters voluntarily returned to the United States (not in the custody of law enforcement). Of these 10 cases, only one was arrested on charges of plotting a domestic terrorist attack—Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud. Two others traveled as foreign fighters a second time, with Moner Mohammad Abusalha becoming the first known American suicide bomber in the Syrian conflict.

We also identified instances where the perpetrator overtly expressed a desire or intent to travel overseas in support of a jihadist organization. For example:

- A 34-year-old male from Wisconsin told a roommate that he did not like living in the United States, and spoke about jihad while folding $100 bills into shapes of a missile and the World Trade Center.95

- According to court documents, a 23-year-old male from Ohio, spoke with an unnamed individual about his intent to join his brother in Syria to kill U.S. allies on the battlefield, his need to get a visa in Istanbul, Turkey, and his desire to sell an iPad once in Turkey to help fund his trip.96

Over the past year, ISIL has reportedly made a concerted effort to recruit Western women. The roles that women have played range from serving as nurses, to developing propaganda to lure other women, to fighting alongside ISIL fighters. Many Western women have traveled to Syria and surrounding areas with the intention of marrying ISIL members.

Our data set included eight women ranging in age from 15 to 33.

- Two of the women were arrested prior to leaving the United States
- Three of the women made it to Frankfurt, Germany before being turned back by German authorities
- Three of the women successfully traveled abroad

Of the three women who made it into Syria

- One was the first American killed in Syria (killed in battle in May 2013)
- One of the women, who stole her friend’s passport in order to travel, called her family to let them know she had arrived in Syria and has not been heard from since
- One of the women appears to have joined ISIL’s “Al Khansaa Brigade,” a group of mostly Western women who are prolific online trying to radicalize and recruit other young women to join the group

95 United States v. Joshua Van Haften, Criminal Complaint, United States District Court, Western District of Wisconsin, October 2014.

96 United States v. Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud, Criminal Indictment, United States District Court, Southern District of Ohio, April 2015.
A 19-year-old female from Colorado asked for her father’s blessing to travel to Syria and join her husband—an ISIL fighter she had met online.\textsuperscript{97}

For some cases, witnesses to the individuals’ behaviors deemed them suspicious enough to alert law enforcement. However, for many of the cases, court documents and press reports do not clearly identify how law enforcement first became aware of the perpetrator. A family member was clearly identified as the initial source for the intervention in only one case, that of three Denver teenagers. While other cases identified family members or friends as being suspicious enough to hide passports or refuse to provide money, no information was available on a possible role they played in notifying law enforcement.

5.2. Social Media Characteristics from Data Set

To date, much of the literature regarding the exploitation of the Internet and social media by terrorist organizations has focused on how they effectively and sophisticatedly distribute their propaganda to radicalize, recruit, and incite potential adherents. As discussed above, the proliferation of this material is an important element in the recruitment of foreign fighters. However, by analyzing terrorism-related behaviors of American foreign fighters, we found that social media is more than a venue for foreign fighter recruits to receive jihadist propaganda. They are also actively pushing content across a variety of platforms, which has allowed for a very often public view of their ideological transformation and beliefs.

American foreign fighters (and potential foreign fighters) have used social media to communicate with other likeminded individuals, including their co-conspirators as well as other foreign fighters and terrorist recruiters or facilitators located overseas. While some of these communications are available for public view, many persons have taken steps to ensure the security of their planning and discussions. Of those who have successfully traveled abroad, many have continued to use social media to provide status updates, post propaganda, and encourage others to join them in the conflict zone.

5.2.1. Posting Content Online

While some of the persons in our data set were “passive” viewers of online propaganda, there were many others who sought to actively promulgate the materials. Posting content online, in public forums, was common among many of the individuals examined.

Several persons in the data set posted violent propaganda online via social media sites. Common platforms included Facebook and Twitter, with some persons posting materials from multiple accounts. Anwar al-Awlaki lectures and texts figured prominently among the materials posted by the individuals, as did videos of operations, prisoner beheadings, executions, and other atrocities committed by ISIL. Much of this content was not new, with individuals re-tweeting messages from others or posting existing links on their Facebook pages. For example:

\textsuperscript{97} United States v. Shannon Maureen Conley, Criminal Complaint, United States District Court, District of Colorado, April 2014.
• Over more than seven months, a 29-year-old male from North Carolina used his Facebook page to post pictures, videos, and links to articles and videos that exemplified his support for ISIL, Jabhat al-Nusrah, and al-Qaeda as well as distaste for the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and Western countries.98

• A 44-year-old male from North Carolina posted several statements over six months discussing his support for ISIL and jihad. He often included quotes by al-Awlaki, comments criticizing Muslims who would not participate in jihad, and links to ISIL’s online magazine *Dabiq*. In addition, he discussed his plans to travel overseas.99

• Two co-conspirators, both 24-year-old males from California, had a significant presence on social media, with each maintaining Facebook profiles and numerous Twitter accounts. One reportedly had at least 15 public Twitter accounts under various usernames. Both men openly used social media to post pro-ISIL messages, to threaten or disparage critics of the terrorist group, and to declare their desire to die as martyrs.100

5.2.2. Communications

The persons in our data set, with few exceptions, used the Internet and social media to communicate with like-minded individuals, including their co-conspirators and fighters or facilitators located overseas. These communications were often alleged in court documents and, in many cases, appear to have brought some individuals to the attention of law enforcement. However, while many persons’ communications were available for public view, some did take actions they thought would safeguard their discussions.

Facebook messenger was commonly used by individuals who were communicating with their co-conspirators as well as with foreign fighters and facilitators overseas. For example:

• Two co-conspirators (a 26-year-old male from New York and another male from Missouri whose age is unknown) used Facebook to communicate with each other, posting photos, making comments and “likes,” and providing status updates. They also used Facebook Messenger to send private photos, videos, and messages.101

• A 20-year-old male from Texas used Facebook messenger to communicate with a foreign fighter facilitator located abroad. They discussed the most economical

99 United States v. Donald Ray Morgan, Grand Jury Indictment, United States District Court, Middle District of North Carolina, May 2014.
100 United States v. Nader Elhuzayel and Muhanad Badawi, Criminal Complaint, United States District Court, Central District of California, May 2015.
routes to get into Turkey as well as bus routes within Turkey that would position him closer to the Syrian border.\(^{102}\)

- A 20-year-old male from Minnesota exchanged Facebook messages with an acquaintance who had already traveled abroad to fight with al-Shabaab. The acquaintance offered advice on being a foreign fighter and helped to connect him with others from his area who had already traveled overseas.\(^{103}\)

It was apparent that as the plans of some aspiring foreign fighters progressed, they took actions to safeguard their online communications. This included using code words, shifting to encrypted online messenger services, or deleting social media account profiles. For example:

- A prolific tweeter, a 44-year-old male from North Carolina, maintained multiple Twitter accounts where he encouraged others to take violent action. He would frequently delete one Twitter account and replace it with another that employed a different username. However, all accounts included the same four numbers in the Twitter handle.\(^{104}\)

- An 18-year-old male from Virginia communicated with another ISIL supporter outside the United States using Surespot, an encrypted messenger. The two regularly discussed travel plans, including updates regarding the status of another acquaintance who had already made it into Syria.\(^{105}\)

- In anticipation of leaving the country, a 23-year-old male and a 21-year-old male—both from California—deleted everything associated with Islam from their Facebook pages in an attempt to keep a low profile. In addition, they reverted to their given names online, abandoning the “vanity names” they had been using.\(^{106}\)

- A 30-year-old female from Pennsylvania deactivated her Twitter account so as not to draw attention of any "non-believers" who could interfere with her plans to travel abroad.\(^{107}\)


\(^{103}\) *United States v. Abdullahi Yusuf and Abdi Nur*, Criminal Complaint, United States District Court, District of Minnesota, November 2014.

\(^{104}\) *United States v. Donald Ray Morgan*, Grand Jury Indictment, United States District Court, Middle District of North Carolina, May 2014.


5.2.3. Post-Travel Use

Many of the persons who successfully traveled abroad continued to use social media to provide status updates to their families and friends or to share information regarding their activities overseas. Some individuals used their foreign fighter status to try to persuade others to also take action. For example:

- While in Syria, a 24-year-old male from California sent Facebook messages to a friend in the United States, including discussing his work for a Sharia court. He also regularly posted information and pictures on Facebook depicting his activities.\(^{108}\)

- A 30-year-old male from Arizona regularly posted photos and videos of himself in Syria to his Facebook account, including depictions of him carrying rocket propelled grenades and other weapons. He often corresponded with Facebook “friends” who commented on these postings.\(^{109}\)

- Since traveling abroad, a 20-year-old female from Alabama has been prolific at tweeting messages calling for attacks against the homeland and imploring other American women to enlist in the ranks of ISIL.\(^{110}\)

5.3. Travel Characteristics from Data Set

Once the decision to travel overseas and join a terrorist organization has been made, it requires a significant amount of planning and logistics to execute. The individuals in our data set often needed to acquire travel documents such as passports and visas in addition to plane tickets. They relied on co-conspirators or existing foreign fighters to facilitate and coordinate their itineraries. Many did not have easy access to money to pay for their trip and expenses overseas. They also prepared for combat by engaging in physical fitness training and gathering appropriate gear.

5.3.1. Document Acquisition

The individuals in our data set frequently needed to obtain travel documents as part of their planning and mobilization, often a passport. Often, the applications for passports occurred within close proximity to their intended travel as they were applying for the document to travel as soon as possible. For some, it was a replacement passport because

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\(^{108}\) United States v. Mohamad Saeed Kodaimati, Criminal Complaint, United States District Court, Southern District of California, April 2015.

\(^{109}\) United States v. Eric Harroun, Criminal Complaint, United States District Court, Eastern District of Virginia, March 2013.

concerned family members took theirs away. Others were applying for their first passports, making their trip to join a foreign terrorist organization their first overseas travel experience. There are also several cases of fraud or desires to obtain fake documents.

- An 18-year-old male from Minnesota aroused the suspicions of a passport specialist while applying for a passport. He did not appear excited about his ‘vacation’ to Turkey, avoided eye contact, and responded to routine questions by becoming soft-spoken and nervous.\(^\text{111}\)

- A 19-year-old male from Florida successfully applied for an expedited passport before traveling to Israel en route to Yemen.\(^\text{112}\)

- Two 21-year-old males from Minnesota drove from Minneapolis to San Diego, California, with plans to purchase fake passports, cross into Mexico, and travel from there to Syria.\(^\text{113}\)

- A 23-year-old male from Texas applied for certified copies of birth certificates for himself, his wife, and their children in support of their passport applications. He also discussed the best approach to acquire Turkish visas, deciding it would be less suspicious if they applied for the visas after arrival in Denmark.\(^\text{114}\)

- A 26-year-old male from Alabama didn’t want to use his existing passport because he thought an Egyptian visa that it contained might raise suspicions. He lied on his application for a new passport, claiming his old one had been misplaced.\(^\text{115}\)

- A 21-year-old male from New Jersey had his passport taken away by a family member who had concerns that he was being recruited to join ISIL.\(^\text{116}\)

### 5.3.2. Travel Coordination and Logistics

As mentioned above, it appears that the planning to become a foreign fighter was the first overseas travel for many cases in our data set. It is not surprising then that, in addition to

\(^{111}\) United States v. Abdallahi Yusuf and Abdi Nur, Criminal Complaint, United States District Court, District of Minnesota, November 2014.

\(^{112}\) United States v. Shelton Thomas Bell, Grand Jury Indictment, United States District Court, Middle District of Florida, July 2013.


\(^{114}\) United States v. Michael Todd Wolfe, Criminal Complaint, United States District Court, Western District of Texas, June 2014.

\(^{115}\) United States v. Mohammad Abdul Rahman AbuKhdaireh and Randy Wilson, Criminal Complaint, United States District Court, Southern District of Alabama, December 2012.

\(^{116}\) United States v. Samuel Rahamin Topaz, Criminal Complaint, United States District Court, District of New Jersey, June 2015.
frequent social media engagements, potential foreign fighter recruits reached out to others to assist the coordination and logistics of their travel itineraries. These efforts frequently involved discussing ways to avoid suspicion by security services and practical aspects like place to meet contacts and bus routes.

- A 30-year-old female from Pennsylvania read an ISIL manual that suggested traveling through popular tourist destinations. She purchased a round-trip ticket from Philadelphia to Barcelona, Spain. She also tried to find a bus that could take her from Barcelona to Turkey.\footnote{United States v. Keonna Thomas, Criminal Complaint, United States District Court, Eastern District of Pennsylvania, April 2015.}

- Four men from California, ages 21, 23, 23, and 34, discussed how they could avoid suspicion by staggering their departures, traveling in pairs, and traveling through Mexico en route to Afghanistan. They specifically sought to avoid travelling through the United Kingdom because of security measures.\footnote{United States v. Sohief Omar Kabir, Ralph Kenneth Deleon, Miguel Alejandro Santana Vidriales, and Arifeen David Gojali, Criminal Complaint, United States District Court, Central District of California, November 2012.}

- A 20-year-old male from Texas communicated through Facebook Messenger with a foreign fighter facilitator about the most economical and efficient way to get to Turkey. They also discussed bus routes from Istanbul, Turkey, that would get him close to the Syrian border.\footnote{United States v. Asher Abid Khan, Criminal Complaint, United States District Court, Southern District of Texas, May 2015.}

- A 36-year-old male from Colorado searched for one-way flights from Denver to Istanbul.\footnote{United States v. Jamshid Muhtorov, Criminal Complaint, United States District Court, District of Colorado, January 2012.}

### 5.3.3. Funding Travel Plans

Becoming a foreign fighter appears to be driven by emotion. As a result, few cases in our data set were financially prepared to embark on their travel prior to their decision to mobilize. Individuals engaged in a variety of means to acquire the funding for their plane tickets and minimal spending money. Some reached out to family or friends for assistance. Others committed financial aid fraud, were not intending to pay off credit card debts, or sold material items to raise quick cash.

- Several individuals in a group of foreign fighters from Minnesota committed financial aid fraud by withdrawing funds from their aid to pay for plane tickets in support of travel to Syria. This includes a 20 year old male who withdrew $5,000...
from his federal educational financial aid debit card in the weeks leading up to his departure.\textsuperscript{121}

- A 27-year-old male from Ohio asked his brother to help him raise money for living expenses while in Syria. They raised $1,000 from an associate.\textsuperscript{122}

- An 18-year-old male from Minnesota used his newly acquired passport to open a checking account and used his debit card to purchase a plane ticket in support of travel to Syria through Kayak.com.\textsuperscript{123}

- A 19-year-old male from Illinois kept a notebook to plan his travel to Syria. It included an itemized list of financial needs to complete his trip, including $4,000 for plane tickets to Istanbul, using a credit card to purchase supplies, $70 for a hotel room in Istanbul, and expected costs for the bus to the Syrian border.\textsuperscript{124}

- A 21-year-old male from North Carolina considered borrowing money from his mother to pay for his travel.\textsuperscript{125}

- A 23-year-old male from California decided to sell his car to get the money he would need for his travel. Posted an advertisement to Craigslist indicating “Getting rid of because I’m leaving the country ASAP. Need money fast.”\textsuperscript{126}

- A 20-year-old male from California signed up for a Target Visa credit card, which he then used to purchase his plane tickets online in support of travel to Syria. It appears he had no intentions of paying off the credit card.\textsuperscript{127}


\textsuperscript{123} United States v. Abdullahi Yusuf and Abdi Nur, Criminal Complaint, United States District Court, District of Minnesota, November 2014.

\textsuperscript{124} United States v. Mohammed Hamza Kahn, Criminal Complaint, United States District Court, Northern District of Illinois, October 2014.


\textsuperscript{126} United States v. Sohiel Omar Kabir, Ralph Kenneth Deleon, Miguel Alejandro Santana Vidriales, and Arifeen David Gojali, Criminal Complaint, United States District Court, Central District of California, November 2012.

\textsuperscript{127} United States v. Nicholas Michael Teausant, Criminal Complaint, United States District Court, Eastern District of California, March 2014.
• Once he decided to travel to Somalia to join al-Shabaab, a 26-year-old male from Maryland cashed out his thrift savings plan retirement account and used some of the $3,500 to purchase his plane ticket.  

5.3.4. Preparing for Combat

As mentioned above, terrorist organizations have become adept at using peer-to-peer and first person narratives to connect with foreign fighter recruits. A significant element of these engagements is communicating to recruits what they should expect on the battlefield. This is partly to limit cases of disenfranchisement and partly to make sure that recruits are capable of supporting the organization. Several of the individuals in our data set took steps to prepare for living in a combat zone prior to their travel. For example:

• Two males from California, ages 21 and 23, took several steps to prepare for the physical requirements of combat, including strength training, and going multiple times to a shooting range and paintball facility.

• A 23-year-old male from Texas purchased new eyeglasses that had a head strap and were durable enough to hold up on the battlefield.

• A 22-year-old from Illinois obtained military manuals that he intended to bring with him to Syria.

• A 19-year-old male from Florida and a co-conspirator went to Wal-Mart and purchased supplies, including gauze pads, an external hard drive, razors, athletic tape, and batteries.

5.3.5. Itinerary Takeaways

In addition to focusing on terrorism-related behaviors exhibited by the perpetrators prior to their travel or attempted travel, we also believed examining their travel itineraries could provide insights. Using publicly available information—primarily allegations made in U.S. court documents—we identified the actual or intended travel itineraries for each individual in our data set. These itineraries included information, where available, on

128 United States v. Craig Benedict Baxam, Criminal Complaint, United States District Court, District of Maryland, January 2012.
129 Fisher, “Swarncast.”
131 United States v. Michael Todd Wolfe, Criminal Complaint, United States District Court, Western District of Texas, June 2014.
133 United States v. Shelton Thomas Bell, Grand Jury Indictment, United States District Court, Middle District of Florida, July 2013.
dates of travel, one-way or round-trip tickets, their departure location (not necessarily where they resided), each leg of their journey, and whether the perpetrator returned to the United States of his or her own volition. We also captured the mode of transportation for each leg of their journey, and if they were successful or unsuccessful in completing each leg of the journey. Of the 63 cases, only four did not progress to the point of having a notional itinerary.

We then geographically mapped each itinerary to derive insights about foreign fighter planning with regard to travel pathways (see maps below). While each separate itinerary is mapped, not each pathway is visually represented. Pathways common to more than one foreign fighter only display one line. It is also important to note that for foreign fighters who were interdicted before traveling, these itineraries were notional and may have changed had the travel been successful.

**Foreign Fighter Travel Itinerary: 2011**
Foreign Fighter Travel Itineraries: 2012

Foreign Fighter Travel Itineraries: 2012 Closer Look
Foreign Fighter Travel Itineraries: 2013

Foreign Fighter Travel Itineraries: 2013 Closer Look
Foreign Fighter Travel Itineraries: 2014

Foreign Fighter Travel Itineraries: 2014 Closer Look
Foreign Fighter Travel Itineraries: 2015

Foreign Fighter Travel Itineraries: 2015 Closer Look
Based on these itineraries, a few insights are apparent.

- First, cases in our data set exhibited varying amounts of sophistication and precaution against security measures. Some cases were rather direct, looking for one-way flights from their hometown to their destination. Others were much more cautious, and took circuitous routes. Some sought to avoid suspicion by departing through Canada or Mexico.

- Second, for the most part, transit countries that perpetrators visited to mask their intentions are in Europe. It also appears these transit countries are changing over time. In 2011, 2012, and 2013, European transit countries were predominately in northern Europe (e.g., Germany, United Kingdom, Poland, and Amsterdam). Recently, these transit points may be shifting south to include France, Spain, Austria, and Greece. ISIL manuals suggesting popular tourist destinations as transit points may influence these itineraries. However, strong conclusions on the variances of transit countries cannot be made, because it is difficult to distinguish perpetrators’ own choices from the travel options presented to them by airlines within their budget constraints.

- Third, these maps highlight Syria as the primary destination for foreign fighters since December 2011, with Somalia, Yemen, and Afghanistan represented less frequently. Additionally, a few individuals’ travel ceased in transit countries for various reasons.
6. **FOREIGN FIGHTER IMPLICATIONS FOR HOMELAND SECURITY**

Concerns regarding the foreign fighter threat continue to be expressed by U.S. government officials. The unprecedented number of persons joining the fight in Syria, the relative ease of travel to the conflict, and inadequate intelligence resources are some of the unique security challenges. From a homeland security perspective, there are implications for border security, intelligence, immigration, law enforcement, and countering violent extremism.

*Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) efforts can be strengthened by incorporating travel behaviors of foreign fighters.*

Foreign fighters exhibited several terrorism-related travel behaviors that do not appear to be covered by existing CVE efforts. They frequently needed to acquire documentation (e.g., passports) prior to traveling abroad. This presents an opportunity to expand current CVE initiatives with the State Department, by informing passport officials to be aware of suspicious behaviors that could be exhibited by potential foreign fighters. To date, the State Department has been looked to for coordination of international engagement efforts and engaging with interested domestic communities for frank discussions on U.S. foreign policy. It does not appear that its passport capabilities have been substantively considered as a part of CVE efforts. Doing so could increase the potential interactions between informed and well-trained staff with foreign fighters who may exhibit suspicious behaviors while applying for a passport.

Additionally, a few perpetrators engaged in financial aid fraud to finance their travel. Incorporating institutes of higher education and the Department of Education’s Office of Inspector General in CVE efforts could help identify potential foreign fighters through improved reporting and investigation of fraud cases. So far, the Department of Education and education systems have been looked to as a key CVE resource in community engagement. They are asked to coordinate with other Departments and agencies on trainings for public safety, violence prevention, and resilience approaches. It does not appear financial aid fraud has been discussed as part of broader CVE activities.

A broader integration of non-security partners in CVE is important to expand opportunities that can identify suspicious behaviors. However, incorporating these capabilities must be done carefully (for a perspective on CVE engagement with educators, see appendix B, “Engaging Non-Traditional Partners in Efforts to Combat Violent Extremism: The Education Community”).

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134 Interview with representatives from an education system in a “Three City Pilot” indicated that their participation in the CVE pilot was uneven. They have a good relationship with a few partners, including the U.S. Attorney’s Office (running the CVE pilot). But interactions with law enforcement came across as one-directional, with officers engaging when they needed information about an individual who was under investigation. School efforts to participate in CVE programs also often become entangled with Muslim community tensions and perceptions of being targeted. Interviewees communicated that they did not feel schools were an appropriate “community hub” for CVE efforts; the focus of educators is correctly on
To date, engagement with other non-security partners has been confusing, sporadic, under-resourced, and occasionally confrontational with law enforcement.

**Counter-terrorism travel programs are only as good as the information that serves them.**

Counter-terrorism travel programs are successful at interdicting known or suspected terrorists when they can leverage comprehensive and accurate information. While this inference is straightforward, our study found that those perpetrators who were prevented from traveling were stopped as a result of ongoing federal law enforcement investigations. In most cases, the FBI knew of their plans to travel overseas and join a terrorist group, and the timeframe they were considering.

In cases where it appears there was no active investigation, foreign fighters were successful leaving the United States—in two instances, multiple times. According to our data set, 23 of 63 cases involved foreign fighters leaving the U.S., with the remainder arrested prior to their attempted travel. Of the 23 who left the country, 10 were able to return (some were under law enforcement scrutiny, but we do not count individuals who were in custody overseas and returned as part of these 10).

Relying on a range of international, federal, state, local, community partners, and families is critical for the U.S. to continue focusing on efforts to identify potential foreign fighters as early as possible. For example, DHS continues to collaborate with Canada and Mexico through improved information sharing to ensure efficient and secure border security.\(^{135}\) These efforts support interdicting foreign fighters who may wish to mask their travel overseas by departing from Canadian or Mexican cities. Out of concern about the potential threat of foreign fighters who are European nationals exploiting the Visa Waiver Program to travel to the United States and carry out terrorist attacks, DHS expanded the types of information it collects from Electronic System for Travel Authorization applicants in November 2014.\(^{136}\) Also, the National Counterterrorism Center is working with partners to “identify, enhance, and expedite the nomination of Syrian foreign fighter records to the Terrorist Screening Database for placement in U.S. government screening

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*student achievement, and that safety and security trainings for staff needs to be multi-purpose (gang violence, targeted school violence, and general mental health issues) and need not specifically address CVE. See also Lorenzo Vidino and Seamus Hughes, *Countering Violent Extremism in America* (Washington: Center for Cyber and Homeland Security, George Washington University, June 2015).*


Continuing to improve and develop these pre-departure screening programs will strengthen security by mitigating risks from overseas.

**Foreign fighters are adaptive adversaries, requiring constant reevaluation of their intent and capabilities.**

Terrorist organizations, exemplified by ISIL, have successfully demonstrated an ability to remain relevant by developing a dispersed, persistent, and cohesive online presence. They also employ innovative technical capabilities and focus messaging to circumvent security efforts. These include outreach efforts providing recommendations on travel paths that limit suspicion, and informing potential foreign fighters about the need to communicate on encrypted messaging services.

Our study demonstrates an evolution in terrorism-related behaviors and travel itineraries as more foreign fighter cases are uncovered. As a result, foreign fighters will continue to challenge security services and counterterrorism programs. Law enforcement and intelligence agencies will need to constantly reevaluate the intent to attack the United States by terrorist organizations that draw foreign fighters. For example, ISIL is currently encouraging supporters abroad to carry out acts of terrorism in their countries, while also continuing to recruit foreign fighters. If conditions change, ISIL may be amenable to dispatching its significant numbers of Western foreign fighters to conduct attacks in their native countries. It will also be important to understand the current capabilities of foreign fighters. Focusing on the operational and tactical skills foreign fighters are exposed to, or acquire, in foreign combat zones can inform and improve countermeasures and CVE efforts.

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137 Cybersecurity, Terrorism, and Beyond: Addressing Evolving Threats to the Homeland, Hearing before the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate, 113th Cong. (September 10, 2014) (statement by Nicholas J. Rasmussen, Deputy Director, National Counterterrorism Center).

138 There Will Be Battles in the Heart of Your Abode (Jenkins statement).

139 Ibid.
APPENDIX A. SUMMARIES OF FOREIGN FIGHTER CASES

This appendix contains background information about the 63 U.S. foreign fighter cases included in our data set. Our study examined individuals who were indicted, arrested, convicted, or self-identified as joining designated jihadist foreign terrorist organizations overseas between December 2011 and May 2015. Each case was identified from publicly accessible open sources. We relied primarily on court documents, such as criminal complaints and indictments. When court documents were not available (for example, the individual was killed while fighting overseas before charges could be brought), we relied on academic studies and press reports. The sources that informed the summaries below can be found in appendix D: Selected Bibliography. The cases are listed in alphabetical order.

Zacharia Yusuf Abdurahman, 19, was arrested along with several other Somali-Americans in April 2015 for trying to travel to Syria to join ISIL. Abdurahman was charged with conspiracy to provide material support to ISIL and attempting to provide material support to ISIL. He traveled by bus with three companions from Minneapolis to New York City's JFK Airport and had intended to travel from JFK to Athens, Greece, with a stopover in Moscow. He was prevented from boarding the flight to Athens and returned to Minneapolis, where he was later arrested.

Bilal Abood, 37, of Mesquite, Texas, was arrested on 14 May 2015, and faces federal charges of lying to FBI agents about his support for ISIL. An Iraqi-born naturalized U.S. citizen, Abood was denied boarding when he attempted to travel to Syria on 29 March 2013. He claimed then that his intent was to support the Free Syrian Army (FSA). In April 2013, he crossed into Mexico and made his way to Turkey, and then into Syria. He returned to the United States in September 2013, citing frustration over a lack of action with the FSA. He contacted the FBI after his return in an effort to have himself removed from the no-fly list. After the FBI searched his computer, agents claimed to have found evidence of his support for ISIL, the basis for arresting him.

Mohammad Abdul Rahman Abukhdair, 26, and Randy Lamar Wilson, 25, pleaded guilty in 2013 to federal charges of conspiring to provide material support to terrorists, knowing or intending that their support was to be used in preparation for, or in carrying out, a conspiracy to kill persons or damage property outside the United States. They were both sentenced to 15 years in prison and three years of supervised release. Both native-born U.S. citizens, they had planned to travel to Mauritania, and possibly Mali afterward, to fight for a jihadist cause, but it is unclear which group they expected to help. Abukhdair had planned to take a bus from Augusta, Georgia, to Montreal, Quebec, and to fly from Montreal to Casablanca, Morocco, where he would rendezvous with Wilson before departing together for Mauritania. Wilson intended to fly from Atlanta to Casablanca. Abukhdair attempted to travel via Canada because he had learned that he was on the no-fly list. But Abukhdair was arrested at the Augusta bus station and Wilson at the Atlanta airport. Abukhdair had been arrested in Egypt in 2010 on suspicion of terrorist activities and deported to the United States in 2011. He met Wilson online while in Egypt and later formed plans to travel overseas to participate in violent jihad. Agents monitored the men's plans through an informant and an undercover FBI employee.
Moner Mohammad Abusalha, 22, traveled from Orlando, Florida, to Germany, then on to Turkey, where he slipped across the border into northern Syria in October 2012. Two months later, he traveled to a grandparent’s home in Amman, Jordan, and then flew back to Florida in May 2013. He fled to Texas around June 2013 and traveled to Syria a second time sometime before January 2014. A native-born U.S. citizen, Abusalha was killed conducting a suicide bombing in Syria in May 2014.

Abdifatah Aden, 27, left the United States in May 2013 and fought for Jabhat al-Nusra from the following August until he was killed in battle on or about 3 June 2014. He was born in Somalia and became a naturalized U.S. citizen in 2006.

Hamzah Naj Ahmed, 19, was indicted in February 2015 in St. Paul, Minnesota, for conspiring to provide material support to ISIL, attempting to provide material support to ISIL, and making a false statement in a terrorism investigation. He had allegedly traveled in November 2014 by bus from Minneapolis to New York’s JFK Airport with Mohamed Abdihamid Farah, Hanad Mustafe Musse, and Zacharia Yusuf Abdurahman. He was booked on the flight with Farah to Madrid, Spain, with a stopover in Istanbul. He and Farah allegedly planned to miss the connection and travel from Istanbul to ISIL-controlled territory.

Muhanad Badawi and Nader Salem Elhuzayel, both 24, of Orange County, California, were indicted 3 June 2015, on federal charges of providing material support and resources to ISIL. Using Badawi’s credit card, Elhuzayel allegedly purchased a one-way ticket from Los Angeles to Tel Aviv via Istanbul. A native-born U.S. citizen of Palestinian descent, Elhuzayel was arrested on 21 May 2015, upon receiving his boarding pass at the Turkish Airlines counter. He allegedly told the agents arresting him he had intended to travel from the Istanbul layover to ISIL-controlled territory to fight for jihad. Badawi, a Sudanese immigrant, also allegedly expressed interest in future travel to fight for ISIL, but it was unclear when and where.

Craig Baxam, 26, of Laurel, Maryland, pled guilty to destroying records that might be used in a terrorism investigation and was sentenced to seven years in federal prison and five years of supervised release. A native-born U.S. citizen, he was a former U.S. Army intelligence specialist. Knowing of U.S. capabilities for gathering data based on Internet protocol addresses, he destroyed his computer before leaving for Kenya en route to Somalia to join al-Shabaab in December 2011. He had purchased a round-trip ticket to avoid suspicion. Kenyan police arrested him, on suspicion of intending to travel to Somalia to join al-Shabaab, as he was traveling north by bus soon after his arrival.

Shelton Thomas Bell, 19, pleaded guilty on 19 March 2014, to conspiring and attempting to provide material support to terrorists (Ansar al-Sharia). He was sentenced 14 January 2015 to 20 years in federal prison and a lifetime of supervision. On 25 September 2012, Bell and an unnamed juvenile traveled on one-way tickets from Jacksonville, Florida, to Tel Aviv, with stops in New York and Warsaw, Poland. The Israelis deported them back to Poland; from there they traveled to Turkey and then to Amman, staying there with the juvenile’s relatives. They bought airline tickets to Oman, intending to walk across Oman’s border with Yemen and fight alongside Ansar al-Sharia, but were deported from Jordan to the United States on 21 November 2012 for overstaying visas. A native-born U.S. citizen,
Bell converted to Islam and radicalized after finding extremist content online, including the speeches of Anwar al-Awlaki. He conspired to train for combat in overseas jihad from May to July 2012 and recruited a juvenile to join his efforts. Law enforcement became aware of him in June 2012, when leaders of the Islamic Center of Northeast Florida in Jacksonville provided a tip to the FBI that Bell had been discussing jihad and trying to recruit juveniles.

*Avin Marsalis Brown (aka Musa Brown),* 21, was arrested in March 2014 at Raleigh-Durham International Airport in North Carolina before departing on a flight to Turkey. He allegedly intended to travel from Turkey to Syria and expressed desire to join groups such as al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, ISIL, and Jabhat al-Nusrah. A native-born U.S. citizen, Brown was indicted for providing material support to terrorists on 1 April 2014 and he pled guilty to conspiring to provide material support to terrorism on 12 August 2014.

*Shannon Maureen Conley,* 19, pled guilty to one federal count of conspiracy to provide material support to ISIL. One condition of the plea deal was that she cooperate with law enforcement to provide information on individuals involved in providing or attempting to provide material support to a terrorist organization. Another was that she receive a personality and psychological exam and that she is prohibited to possess explosive materials. She wanted to provide support to ISIL as a nurse and/or fighter. She was arrested trying to board an April 2014 one-way flight from Denver, Colorado, to Adana, Turkey, via Frankfurt, Germany, and Istanbul. A native-born U.S. citizen, she came under law enforcement scrutiny after a local church contacted the Denver Joint Terrorism Task Force to report her suspicious activities on its grounds.

*Adam (or Fadi Fadi) Dandach,* 20, was arrested in July 2014 and charged by federal authorities with one count of attempting to provide material support and resources to ISIL, two counts of making of a false statement on a passport application to facilitate international terrorism, and one count of obstruction of justice. He was arrested attempting to board a flight from Orange County, California, to Istanbul. He had allegedly intended to travel to Syria to aid ISIL.

*Abdirahman Yasin Daud,* 21, was arrested in April 2015 in San Diego—around the same time as others from the same group of Somali Americans from Minneapolis—on federal charges of conspiracy to provide material support to ISIL and attempting to provide material support to ISIL. He and Mohamed Abdihamid Farah had allegedly driven to San Diego with a friend who had become an informant. The informant had said he could obtain forged passports for them to enter Mexico; from there, they allegedly intended to travel to Syria. Unlike his coconspirators, Daud had no previous travel attempts and had not booked a flight at the time when he was arrested.

*Leon Nathan Davis,* 37, pled guilty on 27 May 2015 to charges of attempting to provide material support to ISIL. He had bought a one-way ticket for travel from Atlanta to Turkey and planned to enter ISIL territory from Turkey. He was arrested at Atlanta Hartsfield Airport in October 2014 on a parole violation. FBI agents had been investigating him for more than a year after he tried to contact ISIL members through social media.
Ralph Deleon: see Sohiel Omar Kabir

Hasan Rasheed Edmonds, 22, of Aurora, Illinois, was arrested on 25 March 2015, at Chicago Midway Airport when attempting to board a flight to Cairo, Egypt. An Army National Guard specialist, Edmonds allegedly intended to travel to Derna, Libya, to join ISIL forces there. His cousin, also arrested, allegedly planned to stay in the United States to conduct a terrorist attack. Both were charged in federal court with conspiring to provide material support and resources to a foreign terrorist organization. Edmonds allegedly intended to use his military training to help ISIL, and his cousin allegedly planned to use Edmonds's uniforms and guidance in staging an attack on a military installation in northern Illinois.

Nader Salem Elhuzayel—see Muhanad Badawi.

Adnan Farah, 19, was arrested in April 2015 in Minneapolis with several other Somali Americans and charged with one federal count of conspiracy to provide material support to ISIL. His travel plans were unclear.

Mohamed Abdihamid Farah, 21, was arrested in April 2015 in San Diego—around the same time as others from the same group of Somali Americans from Minneapolis—on federal charges of conspiracy to provide material support to ISIL, attempting to providing material support to ISIL, and making a false statement to federal authorities. He and Abdirahman Yasin Daud had allegedly driven to San Diego with a friend who had become an informant. The informant had said he could obtain forged passports for them to enter Mexico; from there, they allegedly intended to travel to Syria. He had also allegedly attempted to leave the country in November 2014, when he was booked on a flight with Hamzah Naj Ahmed from New York’s JFK Airport to Sofia, Bulgaria, with a stopover in Istanbul. He and Ahmed allegedly planned to miss the connection and travel from Istanbul to ISIL-controlled territory.

Omar Ali Farah, 21, and Mohamed Guled Osman, 19, left home in Minneapolis for Somalia in mid-July 2012, allegedly to join al-Shabaab. No other information about them is available; they remain at large.

Arifeen David Gojali: see Sohiel Omar Kabir

Mohammad Hassan Hamdan, 22, was convicted of conspiring to provide material support to Hizbollah. He was arrested on 6 March 2014 at Detroit Metropolitan Airport attempting to board a flight to Paris, en route to Lebanon, where he was allegedly hoping to join Hizbollah.

Eric Harroun, 30, reached Istanbul after a journey from the United States to Thailand, China, Cambodia, and Vietnam. He intended to help the Syrian people overthrow Assad. When he arrived in Istanbul, he met up with the FSA, received weapons, and joined them for an attack on a Syrian Army camp. After the battle, he got into a truck that he later concluded belonged to Jabhat al-Nusra that took him to what he presumed was that group’s camp. Initially they treated him like a prisoner but eventually accepted him and let him join them for another attack, in which he saved the life of a member of his team. Harroun then voluntarily spoke with the FBI during visits to the U.S. consulate in
Istanbul in March 2013, seeking to provide intelligence from his time with what he thought was al-Nusra. The FBI removed him from the no-fly list so he could return to the United States but arrested him on 27 March 2013, soon after his arrival. He was charged with conspiracy to use a weapon of mass destruction outside the United States. During his trial, a video showed he was not with al-Nusra but unwittingly with another group (the al-Nasser Brigade of the al-Aqsa Islamic Brigades) not on the designated foreign terrorist organization list. As part of a plea deal, he was sentenced to time served and released on condition of continuing to cooperate with law enforcement and intelligence agencies and put on probation for three years. He died of an accidental drug overdose on 8 April 2014.

Amir Farouk Ibrahim, 32, is presumed killed fighting for ISIL against Kurdish militia in Syria in July 2013. Ibrahim was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1980 but moved with his family to Saudi Arabia and then to Egypt before returning to the United States for college in 2003. After graduating in 2008, he had hoped to stay in the United States to proselytize but his family “tricked” him into returning to Egypt, where he worked for an Islamic university. He moved to Turkey around February 2013 and later told his family he went into Syria to provide humanitarian aid.

Yusra Ismail, 20, allegedly departed the Minneapolis/St. Paul airport in August 2014 on a flight to Amsterdam, Netherlands, and later that month traveled from Amsterdam to Oslo, Norway. She came to law enforcement attention when a woman contacted police complaining that Ismail had stolen her passport. She was charged in federal court in absentia with misusing a passport.

Akba Jihad Jordan, approximately 21, was arrested on in March 2014 and charged with providing material support to terrorists. He pled guilty to conspiring to provide material support to terrorism in October 2014. He had expressed an interest in joining several different groups, including al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, ISIL, and Jabhat al-Nusra, and wavered between choosing to travel to Syria or Yemen. But he never purchased airline tickets. His accomplice, Avin Marsalis Brown, had planned to travel ahead and get established with a local ISIL group.

Abdurasul Hasanovich Juraboev, 24, was indicted in March 2015 in federal court on charges of attempting and conspiring to provide material support to ISIL. He had purchased a round-trip ticket for a flight from New York City to Istanbul, departing 29 March 2015. He allegedly intended to travel from there to ISIL-controlled territory. A lawful permanent resident of the United States from Uzbekistan, he came to law enforcement attention in August 2014 after allegedly posting on a pro-ISIL Uzbek website, which appeared in a law enforcement review of open-source social media material. His message allegedly pledged allegiance to ISIL and expressed interest in undertaking jihad in the United States, including assassinating President Obama. Federal agents traced the message to an IP address associated with Juraboev’s residence in Brooklyn. The next month, he met an FBI confidential informant at a mosque.

Sohiel Omar Kabir, 34, was convicted of conspiring to provide material support to terrorists and conspiring to murder U.S. military and government personnel. A naturalized U.S. citizen of Afghan origin and former U.S. military serviceman, he was sentenced to
25 years in federal prison. He traveled from the United States to Germany on 28 December 2011 and stayed in Germany through July 2012, when he traveled to Afghanistan to train with the Taliban and fight alongside al-Qaeda. Kabir then persuaded three California men—Ralph Deleon, 23; Arifeen David Gojali, 23; and Miguel Alejandro Santana Vidriales, 21—to join him, claiming he had connections to terrorist groups. Gojali, Deleon, and Vidriales trained at gun ranges and paintball facilities before planning to travel in November 2012. They had planned to drive into Mexico and fly from Mexico City to Istanbul en route to Afghanistan. Kabir and the other three men intended to kill U.S. and allied military personnel. Authorities tracked Kabir’s travels and flagged violent extremist messages posted online by Santana. U.S. military personnel took Kabir into custody, and FBI agents arrested Deleon, Gojali, and Vidriales when they departed for Mexico. Deleon was convicted along with Kabir. Gojali and Vidriales had previously pled guilty.

Justin Kaliebe, 18, pled guilty on 8 February 2013 to federal charges of attempting to provide material support to terrorists and to a designated foreign terrorist organization (al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula). He was arrested on 21 January 2013 by the New York Police Department and Joint Terrorism Task Force when he attempted to board a flight for Oman via London and Bahrain. He had planned to travel overland from Oman to Yemen, where he had hoped to fight for al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula against the Yemeni government and any U.S. forces in Yemen, martyr himself, and go to paradise. A native-born U.S. citizen, Kaliebe came to law enforcement attention when he met an undercover operative socially at his mosque.

Asher Abid Khan, 20, of Spring, Texas, was arrested on 26 May 2015 and charged by federal authorities with providing material support to ISIL. While living with a relative in Australia, Khan allegedly devised a plan with a friend to work with a Turkish-based facilitator to join ISIL in Syria. He traveled to Turkey via Malaysia in February 2014 only to return to the United States before entering Turkey upon hearing false information from his family about his mother’s health.

Mohammed Hamzah Khan, 19, was charged in October 2014 with attempting to provide material support to ISIL. He was arrested on 4 October 2014 at Chicago O’Hare International Airport attempting to fly to Turkey with his 17-year-old sister and 16-year-old brother. A native-born U.S. citizen, he allegedly told the FBI he intended to serve as a police officer, humanitarian aid worker, or combat personnel for ISIL.

Mohamad Saeed Kodaimati, 24, of San Diego, was arrested on 22 April 2015 on two federal counts of making false statements (to the FBI and the State Department’s Bureau of Diplomatic Security) involving international terrorism. He allegedly made false statements during an interview at the U.S. Embassy in Ankara, Turkey, about his recent activities and associations in that country. He had reported to the embassy after being denied a flight to the United States. A native of Syria and a naturalized U.S. citizen, Kodaimati had departed San Diego in December 2012 for Istanbul, and he also spent time in Syria. He allegedly participated in firefights alongside al-Qaeda forces, was involved in a sharia court, and maintained terrorist contacts overseas.
Nicole Lynn Mansfield, 33, of Flint, Michigan, was killed in Syria, reportedly fighting for the al-Nusra Front, on 29 May 2013. A native-born U.S. citizen, Mansfield went to Syria to help overthrow Assad but the details of her travel, affiliations, and activities there are uncertain.

Douglas McAthur McCain, 33, a one-time aspiring rapper and basketball fan who converted from Christianity to Islam about a decade ago, was killed in 2014 in Syria while fighting for ISIL against the FSA. He was a childhood friend of Troy Kastigar, who was killed while fighting with al-Shabaab in 2009.

Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud, 23, of Columbus, Ohio, was charged with one federal count of attempting to provide and providing material support to terrorists, one federal count of attempting to provide and providing material support to a designated foreign terrorist organization, and one federal count of making false statements to the FBI. He allegedly traveled to Syria in April 2014 via Istanbul, a stopover for a connection to Athens that he did not take, and he allegedly trained and fought with Jabhat al-Nusra while in Syria. He returned to the United States, allegedly to engage in an attack, in June 2014, told someone about his plans, and was arrested in February 2015.

Donald Ray Morgan, 44, pled guilty in October 2014 to one count of attempting to provide material support to ISIL and possession of a firearm by a felon. He traveled to Beirut, Lebanon, in January 2014 and flew from there to Istanbul in May 2014 in an attempt to reach Syria and help ISIL. But Turkish authorities sent him back to Lebanon. In August 2014, he returned to the United States and was arrested on arrival at JFK International Airport on a warrant for a parole violation. A native-born U.S. citizen, Morgan first drew law enforcement attention as a potential supporter of terrorism when he tweeted support for ISIL, but he was also under monitoring for a probation violation.

Jamshid Muhtarov, 36, was arrested on 21 January 2012, at Chicago’s O’Hare International Airport before boarding a flight to Istanbul. He was charged with providing and attempting to provide material support for a designated foreign terrorist organization (Islamic Jihad Union, a group opposed to the Uzbek government). An Uzbek refugee and U.S. lawful permanent resident, he allegedly intended to reach Uzbekistan and help attack the government there. The FBI investigation was prompted by his alleged e-mail communications with the administrator of the website www.sodiqlar.com, a facilitator of the IJU.

Abdirahmaan Muhumed, 29, was killed in 2014 in Syria while fighting for ISIL against the FSA.

Hanad Mustafe Musse, 19, was arrested in April 2015 in Minneapolis with several other Somali-Americans and charged with conspiracy to provide material support to ISIL, attempting to provide material support to ISIL, and financial aid fraud. He traveled by bus with three companions from Minneapolis to New York City’s JFK Airport, and he had intended to travel from JFK to Athens, with a stopover in Moscow. He was prevented from boarding the flight and returned to Minneapolis, where he was later arrested.
**Hoda Muthana**, 20, of Hoover, Alabama, traveled to Syria in November 2014 allegedly to support ISIL. She may have married an ISIL fighter and may be aiding the group in recruiting other Western Muslim women. She remains at large.

**Sinh Vinh Ngo Nguyen**, 24, of Orange County, California, pled guilty on 27 December 2013 in federal court to one count of attempting to provide material support to al Qaeda. He was sentenced on 30 June 2014 to 13 years in federal prison. He traveled to Syria from December 2012 to April 2013, where he fought for Jabhat al-Nusra against Assad regime forces. A native-born U.S. citizen, Nguyen apparently came to the attention of law enforcement after posting on Facebook about his first “confirmed kill” in Syria and talking to associates about his offer to provide weapons training to al-Qaeda in Syria (which the group declined). He returned to the United States, met with an FBI undercover operative posing as an al-Qaeda recruiter, and made plans to travel to Pakistan to train fighters. After purchasing a bus ticket for travel to Mexico City and an airline ticket for a flight between Mexico City and Peshawar, Pakistan, he was arrested upon his departure from Santa Ana, California, on 11 October 2013.

**Reza Niknejad**, 18, of Prince William County, Virginia, was charged with conspiring to kill and injure people abroad and with conspiring to provide material support to terrorists and ISIL. With the help of another Northern Virginia teenager, Niknejad took a 14 January 2015 flight from Dulles International Airport to Athens by way of Istanbul; he is believed to have stayed in Turkey and crossed from there into Syria. He had told his family he was going on a camping trip with an unknown friend.

**Abdi Nur**, 20, traveled to Syria in May 2014 and did not travel on his return ticket as scheduled in June 2014. A naturalized U.S. citizen of Somali origin, he allegedly went to Syria to support ISIL and helped Abdullahi Yusuf in his attempt to travel. Family members alerted Minneapolis police when he went missing, and he was already under FBI investigation at the time. He remains at large.

**Guled Ali Omar**, 20, was arrested in April 2015 in Minneapolis with several other Somali Americans and charged with conspiracy to provide material support to ISIL and attempting to provide material support to ISIL. He had allegedly traveled from Minneapolis to San Diego and was stopped from boarding a flight to the Middle East to join ISIL.

**Mohamed Guled Osman**: see **Omar Ali Farah**.

**Abdullah Ramo Paraza** traveled from St. Louis, Missouri, to Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and then to Syria during May-July 2013 to join ISIL and the al-Nusrah Front. A naturalized U.S. citizen and native of Bosnia, Paraza was named in a federal indictment but is now believed killed in action in Syria in 2014. He allegedly served as a coordinator and distributor of military gear and a handler of funds for a larger group of individuals who were arrested in February 2015. He had communicated with the group on social media while in Syria.

**Tairod Nathan Webster Pugh**, 47, was indicted in March 2015 on federal charges of attempting to provide material support to ISIL and obstruction and attempted obstruction of justice. A U.S. citizen, Pugh had served in the U.S. Air Force as an avionics instrument
specialist before doing avionics and mechanical work for several companies in the United States and Middle East. After his dismissal from a job as an airplane mechanic in Kuwait in December 2014, he allegedly traveled to Egypt and then to Turkey in January 2015 in an attempt to cross into Syria and join ISIL. But Turkish authorities sent him back to Egypt, and Egypt deported him to the United States after he was allegedly carrying a photograph of a machine gun and other suspicious items. He was arrested soon after his deportation to the United States.

**Nihad Rosic**, 26, of Utica, New York, faces federal charges of conspiring to provide material support to ISIL and to kill and maim persons in a foreign country. A native Bosnian and naturalized U.S. citizen, he tried to board a flight from New York City to join ISIL in Syria in July 2014 but failed to board for unknown reasons. He was arrested along with others of Bosnian origin on 6 February 2015.

**Akhror Saidakhmetov**, 19, was indicted in March 2015 in federal court on charges of attempting and conspiring to provide material support to ISIL. On 19 February 2015, Saidakhmetov purchased round-trip airfare from JFK Airport to Istanbul departing 25 February 2015 and returning 31 March 2015. He allegedly had intended to travel from Istanbul into ISIL-controlled territory. He was arrested at JFK before boarding a flight to Istanbul. A friend of **Abdurasul Hasanovich Juraboev** and a lawful permanent resident of the United States from Kazakhstan, he met the confidential informant at a mosque along with Juraboev.

**Basit Javed Sheikh**, 29, was charged in November 2013 with a federal offense of providing material support to Jabhat al-Nusrah. As of January 2015, a psychological exam declared him unfit to stand trial, and his case would be reviewed again after six months. The trial is on hold until further notice. He was arrested at Raleigh-Durham International Airport attempting to board a flight to Turkey en route to Syria, in hopes of allegedly joining Jabhat al-Nusrah. He allegedly succeeded in traveling to Syria during October-November 2012 in support of the FSA, although he reportedly became disillusioned and came back to the United States. A legal permanent resident of the United States originally from Pakistan, Sheikh came to the attention of law enforcement when he visited a Facebook page for extreme Muslims that is apparently run covertly by the FBI and started posting and speaking with an FBI informant.

**Nicholas Michael Teausant**, 20, was arrested near a border crossing into Canada, where he planned to get on a flight that would get him to Syria. After taking a train to Seattle, he took a bus across the border into Canada, but he was taken off the bus and arrested. His case was delayed due to possible mental illness.

**Keonna Thomas**, 30, of Philadelphia, was arrested in April 2015 on federal charges of attempting to provide material support and resources to ISIL. She had allegedly tried to travel overseas to fight with and martyr herself for ISIL. She had allegedly purchased a round-trip ticket to fly on 29 March 2015 from Philadelphia International Airport to Barcelona, Spain, and had allegedly researched buses from Barcelona to Istanbul. She was arrested after federal agents searched her home on 27 March 2015 and seized evidence.
Samuel Rahamin Topaz, 21, a U.S. citizen from Fort Lee, New Jersey, awaits trial after his 17 June 2015 arrest on charges of conspiring with three others in New Jersey and New York to travel abroad to provide services and personnel to ISIL. Topaz had discussions with coconspirators about traveling to Turkey and then to ISIL-held territory and about how to fund the trip. The FBI received a tip about him from a friend.

Abdella Ahmad Tounisi, 18, was arrested in April 2013 on federal charges of conspiring to provide material support and resources to Jabhat al-Nusrah. He was arrested at Chicago O’Hare Airport attempting to board a flight to Turkey en route to Syria, where he was allegedly hoping to join Jabhat al-Nusrah. A native-born U.S. citizen, he is also a known associate of Adel Daoud, a person convicted of attempting to detonate a bomb outside a bar in downtown Chicago, and was connected with providing research to Daoud for this attempted attack.

Joshua Van Haften, 34, of Madison, Wisconsin, was arrested in April 2015 on federal charges of attempting to provide material support and resources—namely himself—to ISIL. He had traveled from Chicago to Istanbul in August 2014, ran out of money and failed to reach ISIL territory, was brought into Turkish government custody in October 2014, and returned to the United States in custody on an international flight from Turkey to Chicago. He was arrested immediately upon arrival.

Miguel Alejandro Santana Vidriales: see Sohiel Omar Kabir

Randy Lamar Wilson: see Mohammad Abdul Rahman Abukhdair.

Michael Todd Wolfe, 23, was convicted of attempting to provide material support and resources to ISIL. A native-born U.S. citizen, he was arrested on 17 June 2014 in Houston, Texas, attempting to board a flight to Denmark that travelled through Toronto, Ontario, and Iceland, with the intention eventually to reach Syria to join ISIL. Law enforcement authorities originally were investigating his wife, who told an undercover agent she supported Wolfe’s desire to travel to wage violent jihad.

Abduallahi Yusuf, 18, was arrested in May 2014 for allegedly providing, and conspiring to provide, material support to ISIL. He was arrested at Minneapolis/St. Paul International Airport, attempting to board a flight en route to Istanbul, where he was allegedly hoping to travel to Syria and join ISIL. A naturalized U.S. citizen of Somali origin, his behavior attracted the attention of a passport specialist who found his reaction to routine questions suspicious when he applied for a passport.

Marcos Alonso Zea, 25, pled guilty on 9 September 2014 to federal charges of attempting to provide material support to a designated foreign terrorist organization (al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula). A native-born U.S. citizen, Zea had boarded a flight from New York City’s JFK Airport to London en route to Yemen on 4 January 2012. He had hoped to fight for al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula in Yemen. British customs authorities stopped him in London and returned him to the United States because he lacked a visa for travel to Yemen. Law enforcement interviewed and surveilled Zea after British authorities returned him to the United States.
Three unidentified girls from Denver, Colorado, ages 15, 16, and 17, departed Denver for Istanbul in October 2014, reportedly to join ISIL. Authorities detained them on a stopover in Frankfurt, Germany, after which the FBI returned them home to their families. No charges have been filed, and their names have not been publicly reported. Apparently the FBI became aware of their travel after receiving calls from their parents after they went missing. The FBI then flagged their passports, leading to their detention by German authorities who put them on a plane back to the United States.
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Appendix B. Engaging Non-Traditional Partners in Efforts to Combat Violent Extremism: The Education Community

This appendix was prepared by Mr. William Modzeleski, who is a Distinguished Visiting Fellow for HSSAI. Mr. Modzeleski is a former associate assistant deputy secretary of the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools. For over two decades, he held senior positions at the Department of Education where he was instrumental in designing and implementing programs, policies, training, and technical assistance for school safety. Mr. Modzeleski served as the Department of Education’s representative on matters pertaining to countering violent extremism (CVE). He was a member of the Interagency Policy Committee on Countering and Preventing Extremism in the United States, where he participated in the development of the White House’s strategy and implementation plan for preventing violent extremism. Mr. Modzeleski has authored several studies on school safety, terrorism, and domestic radicalization.

In August 2011, the White House released the National Strategy for Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States. The purpose of the strategy was to outline how the federal government will support and help empower American communities and their local partners in efforts to prevent violent extremism. According to the strategy:

The best defenses against violent extremist ideologies are well-informed and equipped families, local communities, and local institutions. Their awareness of the threat and willingness to work with one another and government is part of our long history of community-based initiatives and partnerships dealing with a range of public safety challenges.\footnote{140}{The White House, \textit{Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States} (Washington: August 2011), 2-3.}


The SIP calls for “Whole-of-Government Coordination,” stating that traditional national security or law enforcement agencies such as the Justice Department, the Department of Homeland Security, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation should be supplemented in their efforts through utilization of nontraditional partners who are responsible for a “broader set of good governance programs, including those that promote immigrant integration and civic engagement, protect civil rights, and provide social services, which may also help prevent radicalization that leads to violence.”\footnote{142}{Ibid., 4.}
To this end, the SIP identified the education system, with its “substantial expertise in engaging communities and delivering services,” as having a role to play in countering violent extremism. The plan pointed to the “array of tools that [the Department of Education] can contribute to this effort by providing indirect but meaningful impact on CVE, including after school programs, networks of community-based organizations … and violence prevention programs.”

While acknowledging that nontraditional partners such as Education should play an essential role in preventing violent extremism, the SIP did not articulate specific or detailed activities or responsibilities. This was due in part to the recognition that education was essentially a state and local responsibility, with the needs and capabilities of school districts differing immensely. The SIP did call for Education to continue to provide information, speakers, and other resources for U.S. Attorneys’ community engagement activities. It also called for Education to partner with other lead agencies such as DOJ, DHS, and the National Counter Terrorism Center to support community engagement efforts, conduct research, and assist with the development of CVE training modules that can be incorporated into existing programs related to public safety, violence prevention, and resilience.

It has been more than three years since the release of the national strategy and implementation plan. In that time, the education sector has yet to actively embrace violent extremism as an issue that receives much focus or effort. There are three primary reasons for this:

- The problem of violent extremism has not been clearly articulated to include the nature and extent of the threat as well as its effect on the teaching and learning environment.

- The educators’ role in confronting extremism has not been clearly communicated. This includes roles of those within the U.S. Department of Education, state Departments of Education, local school districts, and individual schools.

- A discrete and targeted funding stream has not been established to enable schools to fund CVE-related prevention activities, including prevention or technical assistance programs or training. Guidance has not been provided to schools on how to utilize existing funds to support CVE issues.

These obstacles are discussed in more detail below.

**The threat posed by violent extremism has not been clearly articulated.**

Data on the problem of violent extremism have not been published in such a way that they are meaningful to or actionable by schools. While there are a countless number of news articles, government reports, and research studies addressing the extent and nature
of violent extremism, the resources are not put into a context that educators can grasp or that reinforces why it is important to them. From an educator’s perspective, there is likely no relevance when five, 10, or even 100 persons are recruited to fight overseas; the fighting those persons are planning to engage in is happening thousands of miles away, not in their schools.

There haven’t been any terrorist attacks against schools in the United States. In addition, there is little evidence to support that any of the students who have been arrested on terrorism-related charges in the United States either posed a threat or caused problems while they were in school. Many of the persons who have been arrested in the United States were not attending school at the time of their arrest; most had either left school (through graduation or by dropping out) before they were arrested or had never attended a public school. Further, of the relatively small number of school-aged youth who have been arrested under a “violent extremist” label, most were charged with providing material support to terrorism because they had made plans to travel abroad to join or support terrorist groups overseas. Very few school-aged youth have been charged with engaging in or planning to engage in an attack on the homeland. With these factors in mind, it is easy for educators to feel the problem will never happen in their school.

Further, violent extremism has not been linked either directly or indirectly with the primary goal of schools, which centers on teaching and learning. The fundamental goal of all public schools is to provide students with a high-quality education. Every school and school district in the country is under pressure to achieve certain academic standards (including teacher quality, closing the achievement gap, passage of state tests, and graduation rates). Superintendents, principals, and teachers can lose their positions if they fail to meet academic standards. However, few of them are measured on standards related to school safety or the wellbeing of students (including how well they partner with other agencies, organizations, and groups that provide a host of ancillary services to students). At present, there is little to no incentive for educators to engage in CVE activities.

Adding to that, schools face other issues that are more relevant, numerous, and problematic, in terms of both how educators must deal with them and the damage they can cause. There are more than 100,000 schools located throughout the United States. These schools, which vary in type (elementary and secondary) and size (from a couple hundred to several thousand), confront a dizzying array of problems on a daily basis that interfere with teaching and learning. A day doesn’t go by that school officials don’t have to deal with students who come to school sick; who are suffering from depression; who live in poverty; who are hungry; who are homeless; who live in dysfunctional or violent homes; who abuse alcohol and drugs on a regular basis; who don’t speak

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**The Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2014 report finds that:**

- In a 10-year period (2001/02 to 2011/2012) 480 students, faculty, and non-students were victims of school-associated violent deaths
- In 2013, five percent of students reported carrying a weapon (gun, knife, club) on school property at least one day in the previous 30 days
- In the 2009/2010 school year, about 74 percent of public schools recorded one or more violent incidents of crime
- During the 2009/2010 school year, Twenty-three percent of schools reported that bullying occurred among students on a daily or weekly basis
- In 2013, twelve percent of students in grades 9 through 12 reported being in a physical fight on school property
- In 2013, twelve percent of students ages 12 to 18 reported that gangs were present in their schools
English; who are victims of crime, both inside and outside the school; or who display (or are the victims of) behavioral issues such as bullying and harassment.

**The educators’ role in confronting extremism has not been clearly communicated.**

Given the range of issues faced by school administrators on an almost daily basis, it is no wonder why educators view issues related to violent extremism as a burden that someone else—law enforcement, social services, churches, fraternal organizations, or youth-serving organizations—should address. Educators have yet to be provided with evidence or sound data that violent extremism is an issue requiring their time and resources. Educators need to have a better understanding, based on facts and data, of how violent extremism could have a significant impact on their ability to maintain a safe and orderly learning environment.

Further, most educators would point out that almost every school in the country is already engaged in a wide variety of programs, policies, and practices that address many of the factors that put youth at risk of becoming radicalized to the point they want to engage in some sort of violent behavior. Until it is clearly demonstrated otherwise, schools will continue to view their multiple overlapping prevention efforts—such as those developed to deal with gangs, alcohol and drugs, violence, and bullying—as sufficient to deal with the radicalization of some of their students.

**A discrete and targeted funding stream has not been established to enable schools to fund CVE-related prevention activities.**

There are generally two factors that help demonstrate whether an issue is viewed as important: (1) adequate funding is devoted on an annual basis to address the issue, and (2) predetermined goals are established to ensure the results of the funding (e.g., targeted programs) are effective. Even a small amount of funding, in the $5 million to $10 million range, would send the signal that addressing CVE is important.

From 2011 to the present (FY12 to FY15), funds have neither been requested by the Department of Education or the White House nor appropriated for CVE-related activities. Since the SIP was released, neither the Senate nor the House has held hearings held to assess the need for funding nontraditional agencies to engage in CVE-related activities. In fact, there has been a general lack of discussion regarding funding for discrete activities related to violent extremism. It would appear the situation is unlikely to change in the near future, as neither Education nor the White House has requested future funding. Additionally, there have not been any CVE-related funding requests made by Congress on behalf of Education in early markups.
Absent a dedicated funding source, educators have been encouraged to utilize their existing resources to engage in activities directly related to CVE. However, because there are few examples of effective CVE activities to emulate, schools are reluctant to use their limited resources or limited staff to engage in any activity—CVE or otherwise—that not only lacks solid evidence of effectiveness but also hasn’t been directly linked to academic performance.

Direct funding for violent extremism activities aside, every school district—and every school in the United States—is doing something to address the multiple risk factors that many students have that impede learning. These activities include a host of programs under banners such as gang prevention, alcohol and drug prevention, bullying prevention, and social emotional learning. Because those who engage in violent extremism may share some of the same risk factors as those who are served by these programs, it would be possible to add issues specific to violent extremism into existing activities and programs. Yet there has been little support to go down this path.

**The Way Forward**

If the government (federal, state, and local) wants schools to take an active part in preventing violent extremism, it should consider taking the following actions.

*Define the problem in terms educators clearly understand and tie the problem directly to teaching and learning.*

Policy makers who deal exclusively with national security issues (such as violent extremism) need to convince education policy makers that violent extremism cannot be ignored despite the multitude of other problems they confront on a daily basis.

*Provide clear direction to educators on what they should be doing to counter violent extremism.*

Once educators are made aware of the extent and nature of the problem, as well as its current and potential effect on schools, they need to be directed as to what they should do about it. It is not sufficient to tell them to get involved. Educators need to be provided with clear direction, or they’re apt to either do nothing or to do the wrong thing. Along these lines, it is important to consider the following:

Federal funding for school safety initiatives has declined appreciably over the past decade or more.

$746 million was appropriated for a variety of school safety initiatives in 2002. Funding had decreased $90 million by 2014.

The following factors should be taken into consideration in discussions regarding the role(s) of schools in countering violent extremism:

- All recommended actions must be legal and must not be prejudicial—or viewed to be prejudicial—to any group.
- Input and support of parents and students should be actively sought.
- The programs, policies, and practices must be designed and implemented in a flexible manner, recognizing that both the problems schools face and their solutions will vary from district to district.
- The recommended actions should not add to the burden of the school, to include the expenditure of additional funds or staff resources.
- The actions taken should contribute to the overall mission of the school.
- The school has to be viewed as one part of a broader “community wide” CVE strategy.
• Should educators be expected to focus on prevention-type activities, early intervention activities, or both?

• Should educators monitor social media to identify students who may be on a path toward engaging in a violent act related to violent extremism or otherwise?

• Should educators be expected to share information with law enforcement about students of concern?

• Should educators be expected to build partnerships with religious or other community groups? If so, what should those partnerships entail?

Provide educators support for engaging in CVE activities.

Educators not only need to be provided some direction on what activities they should engage in, but they also need support for engaging in those activities. Support can be provided in two basic ways: financial support or indirect support through training and technical assistance. While it is not likely that resources will be appropriated to the Department of Education for the prevention of violent extremism (in the coming fiscal year), it does appear that Education will continue to have a significant amount of training and technical assistance resources available. A substantial amount of these resources broadly address school safety issues. Consideration should be given to targeting some of these resources to combatting violent extremism.

Provide educators with accurate, timely, and relevant information about violent extremism.

Educators are provided very little information on the issue of violent extremism. When they receive any information, it often comes from a state agency, a fusion center, an NGO, a news article, or the Internet/social media. Unfortunately, information coming from this diverse set of organizations may be contradictory, outdated, not relevant to schools, or not written in format or style that is conducive to educators (e.g., with an intelligence focus). Further, there is so much information coming from these cumulative sources that it is impossible to discern what is critical to educators.

Accurate, timely, relevant information that is presented in a style and format educators need—not what others feel they need—is essential to fact-based decision making. Educators need to be provided with information on a regular basis—not once or twice a year—or they won’t take action on the issue. Consideration should be given to publishing a monthly newsletter for educators on the issue of violent extremism. The newsletter could provide information on a wide range of topics, from recent cases of students arrested for engaging in violent extremism

Education constituency groups include:

• National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP)
• National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP)
• National Education Association (NAE)
• American Federation of Teachers (AFT)
• National School Boards Association (NSBA)
• School Superintendents Association (AASA)
to descriptions of promising programs or activities to a summary overview of recent research on the issue.

It may also be useful to encourage researchers to collaborate with various education constituency groups to ensure that articles on CVE that are relevant to education policy and practice are submitted for inclusion in their journals, posted on their websites, or presented at their annual conferences.

**Sponsor research on violent extremism that is school-focused and specifically addresses the threat to school aged youth**

The Departments of Justice and Homeland Security sponsor a considerable amount of research that is focused on violent extremism. However, a small percentage of this research has any direct focus on schools. Further, much of the research being engaged in spans several years from inception of the study to the final product. The education community would benefit from school-focused and youth-focused research that is timely, useful, and operational. Educators’ views should be sought on the topics that require study as well as research questions that should be addressed. Schools could greatly benefit from additional knowledge.

**Possible school-focused research topics:**

- Are current threat assessment procedures useful in identifying students on a path to violent extremism?
- Are current methods for addressing violent extremism effective?
- Are programs designed to address gang violence effective in addressing violent extremism?
- What are the pros and cons of schools using social media to help identify students who may be at risk?
- Do other countries have any promising practices in place in schools to prevent violent extremism?
- Is there a use for technology in a school’s effort to counter violent extremism?

**Develop a strategy to address the proliferation of violent extremist propaganda targeting students online.**

There is a significant amount of violent extremist propaganda online, much of which is available in English and on social media platforms that are popular among youth. Given the proliferation of Internet propaganda, it is not possible to effectively address issues related to violent extremism—or violence in general—without tackling a host of issues related to social media. Twenty-first century problems need twenty-first century solutions.

It would be useful to provide schools with a model of a School-Based Social Media Strategy aimed at countering violence and violent extremism. The strategy should address the following types of issues: why the social media strategy is important (e.g., specific issues it is intended to address); what the legal considerations are regarding the monitoring of social media sites; what the students’ rights and responsibilities are; how the information collected will be analyzed and utilized; and what the limits are to social media monitoring (i.e., what sites can/cannot be monitored and when).
**Continue to support efforts that promote positive school climates.**

Schools and school districts must continue to address issues such as bullying and harassment. Schools should be welcoming places, where students are not permitted to bully others because of their race, religion, sexual orientation, or country of origin. Some school systems have experienced an increase in discrimination against Muslim and Arab students in the years following 9/11. The Office of Civil Rights at the U.S. Department of Justice should be encouraged to continue to investigate and where necessary bring action against those school districts that violate the civil rights of those being discriminated against because of religion. It is essential to counter misperceptions and negative stereotypes to ensure that all students are able to learn in an environment that is safe and free of harassment.

School climate has been found to influence students’ decisions to share information with school staff regarding potential threats. A study by the U.S. Secret Service and the Department of Education found that students who have come forward with information regarding a potential act of school violence indicated they were influenced to do so as a result of having positive relations with one or more adults, teachers, or staff. In addition, students were more likely to speak up if they felt the information would be taken seriously and addressed appropriately. Ensuring a positive school climate is an important step toward safeguarding against all forms of violence.

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APPENDIX C. METHODOLOGY

This study involved seven activities: conducting a literature review on the foreign fighter phenomena; developing a U.S. persons foreign fighter incident list; determining research variables; collecting data; coding data; analyzing the coded data for themes and trends; and developing findings and recommendations. We relied entirely upon open-source data to inform this study. These activities are described in detail below.

Literature Review

We conducted a review of relevant literature on foreign fighters, terrorists’ use of the Internet, the terrorism threat to homeland security, travel security, and efforts to counter violent extremism. This activity was necessary to characterize broader trends regarding foreign fighters, as well as possible implications for homeland security in countering the threat.

Develop Incident List

At the outset of this study, we conducted research to identify all cases of U.S. foreign fighters that have occurred in the United States since 11 September 2001. Once we developed a complete list of cases, we scoped it down to include cases occurring between December 2011 and June 2015. This was done to address time and resource constraints.

We used a variety of open-source materials to find information about the incidents and individuals involved. We retrieved data about the cases from governmental reports on terrorism and counterterrorism initiatives, academic and private sector research, books, legal documents, and media reports. We also compared and contrasted a number of terrorist event chronologies that had been published by other researchers.

During the study, additional terrorism incidents involving school-aged youth were uncovered or made public. Cases that occurred before 1 March 2011 were added to our incident list and included in our research.

Determine Research Variables

We developed a list of variables to guide our research and data collection efforts. For each of the cases we identified, we attempted to collect information that fell into three categories of variables:

- **Information about the terrorist offense**—includes basic information about the nature of the offense (official charges, targets, tactics, involvement of others, etc.) as well as what led to the case being uncovered (e.g., law enforcement intervention or public tip)
- **Demographic information about the perpetrator**—includes information about the individual (name, age, sex, citizenship, and State of residence)
Behavioral information about the perpetrator—includes activities the perpetrator is said to have engaged in, including terrorism-related activities that occurred both prior to, and following their travel. It also includes descriptions of the individuals provided by persons who knew them, including family members, friends, and those religiously affiliated.

Collect Data

As described above, for each of the terrorism cases we identified, we sought to collect detailed information about the perpetrator and his offense. The data we collected were derived entirely from open-source materials. We relied heavily on legal documents for each case, including criminal complaints, indictments, plea agreements, and sentencing memos (as available). These court documents often provided detailed accounting of the behaviors that led to the charges being filed. We also drew upon many of the same sources that were used in developing the incident list, including government reports, academic and private sector research studies, books, and media reporting.

Our data collection efforts were centered on identifying behaviors that could have been relevant to the perpetrator’s radicalization to violence or to his participation in operational planning or terrorist activities. We focused particular attention on identifying and collecting data on behaviors that occurred in a social media setting, or that were relevant to travel planning.

Code Data for Research Variables

Once we finished collecting information for each of the cases, we coded the data according to the research variables described above. For each case, we pulled out relevant information pertaining to the individual’s offense, demographic information, and behaviors exhibited. Given the varying levels of information available for each case, we were not able to identify and code all variables for all of the cases.

Identify Themes and Trends

We analyzed the descriptive and behavioral information identified across the entire data set to identify key themes and trends in each of the following areas:

- Use of social media and the Internet
- Stated motivations or justifications
- Description of the perpetrator provided by family, peers, religious affiliates
- Description of travel-related activities

We took an inter-rater reliability approach to ensure objectivity in the development of the themes and trends. First, three analysts independently reviewed the data to identify themes and trends within each area. Next, the analysts met to discuss individual findings and develop a preliminary list of themes/trends that were agreed upon by all. The study team was cautious not to overreach when developing themes and trends. In addition, the
study team considered the absence of common characteristics or behaviors to be noteworthy.

**Develop Key Findings**

The key findings reflect careful analysis of the coded data set, based on the themes and trends. They specifically concern what information was known—or could be known—about the individuals before they engaged in jihadist terrorism as foreign fighters.
APPENDIX D. SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

In conducting this study, we compiled an extensive list of court documents, academic reports, government sources, and news media articles to inform our literature review and case study analysis. Listed below are sources we found informative and of potential use for others studying the foreign fighter phenomenon.

Court Documents

United States v. Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud, Criminal Indictment, United States District Court, Southern District of Ohio, April 2015.


United States v. Adam Dandach, Grand Jury Indictment, United States District Court, Central District of California, September 2014.


United States v. Craig Benedict Baxam, Criminal Complaint, United States District Court, District of Maryland, January 2012.

United States v. Donald Ray Morgan, Grand Jury Indictment, United States District Court, Middle District of North Carolina, May 2014.


United States v. Jamshid Muhtorov, Criminal Complaint, United States District Court, District of Colorado, January 2012.

United States v. Joshua Van Haften, Criminal Complaint, United States District Court, Western District of Wisconsin, October 2014.


United States v. Keonna Thomas, Criminal Complaint, United States District Court, Eastern District of Pennsylvania, April 2015.


United States v. Michael Todd Wolfe, Criminal Complaint, United States District Court, Western District of Texas, June 2014.

United States v. Mohamad Saeed Kodaimati, Criminal Complaint, United States District Court, Southern District of California, April 2015.

United States v. Mohammad Abdul Rahman Abukhdair and Randy Wilson, Criminal Complaint, United States District Court, Southern District of Alabama, December 2012.

United States v. Mohammad Hassan Hamdan, Criminal Complaint, United States District Court, Eastern District of Michigan, March 2014.

United States v. Mohammed Hamza Kahn, Criminal Complaint, United States District Court, Northern District of Illinois, October 2014.


United States v. Samuel Rahamin Topaz, Criminal Complaint, United States District Court, District of New Jersey, June 2015.

United States v. Shelton Thomas Bell, Grand Jury Indictment, United States District Court, Middle District of Florida, July 2013.


United States v. Tairod Nathan Webster Pugh, Grand Jury Indictment, United States District Court, Eastern District of New York, March 2015.

United States v. Yusra Ismail, Criminal Complaint, United States District Court, District of Minnesota, December 2014.

Other Sources


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