

Foundations of the Foreign Fighter Problem

Investigating Blindspots Relating to Gender, Minors, and Families

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INTRODUCTION

Citizens and residents of foreign countries have long crossed borders to join local insurgencies and terrorist organizations. The extraordinary influx of foreign travelers and fighters into Syria and Iraq during the height of the Islamic State's campaign presented a series of novel challenges and motivated new international efforts (and research) to better understand the dimensions of this problem. The influx of foreign men, women, and children into local conflicts and insurgencies has been described by U.S. defense and security leaders as "a measurable threat to global peace and security."¹ Indeed, these individuals—including those who have remained in conflict zones, have returned to their countries of origin or nationality, or relocated to third countries—"continue to pose a serious threat to international peace and security."²

Recent advancements in the research have uncovered important information on the various forms of support that foreign travelers provide local militant organizations,³ the active role of women recruits,⁴ and the roles that foreign fighters played in war crimes committed by local militants against non-combatants, including gender-based violence.⁵ The unprecedented surge of foreign travelers to Iraq and Syria prompted a parallel surge of resources and attention to understanding the foreign fighter problem. While significant gains have been made towards understanding these actors, their motivations for traveling, their experiences in theater, and effects upon returning, the study of foreign fighters features some notable blindspots. In particular, there is a dearth of attention to gender dynamics within these movements, minor travelers and returnees, and foreign fighter families.

¹ General William E. Ward, Commander of U.S. Africa Command. "The Foreign Fighters Problem, Recent Trends and Case Studies: Selected Essays." *Program on National Security at the Foreign Policy Research Institute* (2011):2 https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/ForeignFightersProblem_Noonan.pdf

² United Nations, Security Council. Resolution 2396. New York, NY: UN Headquarters, 2017. <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/content/sres23962017>

³ Bacon, Tricia, and Daisy Muibu. "The Domestication of Al-Shabaab." *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 10, no. 3 (2019): 279-305. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/21520844.2019.1658986> ; Malet, David. *Foreign fighters: Transnational identity in civil conflicts*. Oxford University Press, 2013. <https://oxford.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199939459.001.0001/acprof-9780199939459>

⁴ Winter, Charlie, and Devorah Margolin. "The mujahidat dilemma: Female combatants and the Islamic State." *CTC Sentinel* 10, no. 7 (2017): 25-30. <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-mujahidat-dilemma-female-combatants-and-the-islamic-state/> ; Milton, Daniel, and Brian Dodwell. "Jihadi brides? Examining a female guesthouse registry from the Islamic State's caliphate." *CTC Sentinel* 11, no. 5 (2018): 16-22. <https://ctc.usma.edu/jihadi-brides-examining-female-guesthouse-registry-islamic-states-caliphate/> ; Mironova, Vera. "Foreign Fighters: Crowdfunding the Women of the Islamic State." *Lawfare*. Lawfare, October 29, 2020. <https://www.lawfareblog.com/crowdfunding-women-islamic-state>.

⁵ Doctor, Austin C., and John D. Willingham. "Foreign fighters, rebel command structure, and civilian targeting in Civil War." *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2020): 1-19. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09546553.2020.1763320> ; Doctor, Austin C., Foreign Fighters and Conflict-Related Sexual Violence, *International Studies Quarterly*, Volume 65, Issue 1, March 2021, Pages 69–81, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqaa087>

First, while in a conflict zone, a foreign fighter spouse (i.e. women) may have been a target of criminal activity, a perpetrator of criminal activity, or both.⁶ Thus, the line of agency separating women's victimhood and culpability is often blurred by mixed experiences and contradicting narratives. For instance, many of the women who traveled to Iraq and Syria had the agency to do so but, due to the gendered system of control of the Islamic State, that agency was often limited or removed once 'in-territory'.⁷ The gap in the academic literature on this point corresponds with a gender imbalance in policy instrumentation. To date, membership of a terrorist organization is the most widely used charge in the prosecution of female returnees and has led to convictions of women in several countries, including in Europe and the Middle East. But in many of these cases, very little account is taken of specific roles or the extent to which a woman's association with a foreign terrorist organization was voluntary or coerced. Conversely, women are less likely to be prosecuted, and receive more lenient charges when they are.⁸ Failure to investigate and prosecute returning women upon their return risks creating a dangerous gap in security processes.⁹ In sum, the failure to view this issue through a gendered lens inhibits the development of effective threat mitigation and reintegration protocol.

Second, research often focuses on adult foreign travelers and their roles as combatants with little attention to minor travelers and their experienced trauma in transit and in-theater. This includes the impact of forced travel, a lack of agency, exposure to violence, and their experiences in detention camps.¹⁰ While recent events have highlighted the need to address minor travelers, research on the foreign fighter phenomenon has often ignored minors, either not counting their travel, or codifying them as adults. The need to create a unique lens for minors is vital to the proper contextualization of their experiences, and ensure proper care in the process of their repatriation and reintegration.

Third, while research engages with adults, or highlights the need to focus on minors, it ignores the interconnectivity of the family unit. Another important but underexplored issue remains that of foreign fighter families. Foreign terrorist fighters sometimes travel to conflict zones with their spouses and children---or establish new families once "in-territory." Internal personnel records

⁶ Doctor, Austin C. 2021. "Foreign Fighters and Conflict-Related Sexual Violence." *International Studies Quarterly*, 65(1): 69-81.; Ingram, Haroro J. "Stigma, Shame, and Fear: Navigating Obstacles to Peace in Mindanao." Washington, DC: RESOLVE Network. 2021. <https://doi.org/10.37805/pn2020.14.vedr>.; Holmer, Georgia, and Adrian Shtuni. 2017. "Returning foreign fighters and the reintegration imperative." Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace.; Margolin, Deborah and Charlie Winter. "Women in the Islamic State: Victimization, Support, Collaboration, and Acquiescence." *The ISIS Files*, the George Washington University, 2021. <https://isisfiles.gwu.edu/concern/reports/fl881k934?locale=en>

⁷ Margolin, Deborah and Charlie Winter. "Women in the Islamic State: Victimization, Support, Collaboration, and Acquiescence." *The ISIS Files*, the George Washington University, 2021. <https://isisfiles.gwu.edu/concern/reports/fl881k934?locale=en>

⁸ Alexander, Audrey, and Rebecca Turkington. "Treatment of Terrorists: How Does Gender Affect Justice?" *CTC Sentinel*. 2018. 11(8): 24-29. <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/treatment-terrorists-gender-affect-justice/>

⁹ Turkington, Rebecca and Agathe, Christien. "Women, deradicalization, and rehabilitation: Lessons from an expert workshop." *Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace, and Security* (2018). <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/resource/women-deradicalization-and-rehabilitation/>

¹⁰ van der Heide, E. J., and A. Alexander. "Homecoming: Considerations for Rehabilitating and Reintegrating Islamic State-Affiliated Minors." *Homecoming: Considerations for Rehabilitating and Reintegrating Islamic State-Affiliated Minors* (2020). <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Homecoming.pdf>

from the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in the 2011-2014 period, for instance, indicate that approximately one-third of incoming foreign fighters in the group reported being married to at least one woman. Some foreign recruits to the group even went home temporarily for the stated purpose of collecting their families and returning.¹¹ Later research examining global trends of the Islamic State in the 2014-2019 period highlight that certain regions had higher rates of travelers arriving in-territory as family units, including women and minors making up 42% of travelers from Western Europe, 44% of travelers from Eastern Europe, and 70% of travelers from Eastern Asia.¹²

Recognizing these gaps, this report is motivated by two primary sets of objectives. First, we aim to assess the foundations of the broader foreign fighter problem. What are foreign fighters' core motivational drivers? What does the arrival of foreign travelers mean for the groups they join and the dynamics of violence in local conflict theaters? And what does the foreign fighter problem mean for the countries of origin to which many of these individuals plan to return? Second, we aim to leverage this discussion to better understand foreign fighter families' common pathways, roles, and fates. The academic and policy communities tend to focus on men, women, and children separately, ignoring the interconnectivity of family radicalization and, conversely, demobilization and reintegration.

With these objectives in mind, this report focuses on four primary themes. We examine foreign fighters' motivational drivers; the nature of support foreign fighters provide to violent non-state groups; the myriad roles adopted by foreign terrorist fighter spouses and children; and the often-overlooked gendered dynamics of the foreign fighter phenomenon. Towards this end, we will conceptualize the foreign fighter phenomenon, highlight important trends in the foreign fighter lifecycle, and analyze the complexity of this issue as it relates to the experiences and return of foreign fighter families. We conclude by pointing to current gaps in theory and practice relating to these themes.

DEFINITIONS

The foreign fighter phenomenon is not new. Over the past 250 years alone, nearly 100 civil wars have included the participation of fighters from abroad.¹³ Colloquially, "foreign fighter" was first used to speak about individuals from around the world that traveled to Afghanistan to fight for Al-

¹¹ Dodwell, Brian, Daniel Milton, and Don Rassler. The caliphate's global workforce: An inside look at the Islamic States foreign fighter paper trail. United States Military Academy Combating Terrorism Center West Point United States, 2016. <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/the-caliphates-global-workforce-an-inside-look-at-the-islamic-states-foreign-fighter-paper-trail/>

¹² Cook, Joana, and Gina Amy Vale. "From Daesh to 'Diaspora': Tracing the women and minors of Islamic State." (2018). <https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ICSR-Report-From-Daesh-to-%E2%80%98Diaspora%E2%80%99-Tracing-the-Women-and-Minors-of-Islamic-State.pdf>

¹³ Nir Arielli. 2017. *From Byron to Bin Laden: A History of ForeignWar Volunteers* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Qaeda.¹⁴ More recently, the term has been used to discuss the foreign travelers joining the insurgency in Iraq and Syria.

Some definitions of foreign fighters emphasize the aspect of fighting. For example, Frank Cilluffo, Jeffrey Cozzens, and Magnus Ranstorp define foreign fighters as “violent extremists who leave their Western states of residence with the aspiration to train or take up arms against non-Muslim factons in jihadi conflict zones.”¹⁵ Others, such as Tricia Bacon, Grace Ellis and Daniel Milton argue, “foreign fighters [are] individuals who operate within the confines of an insurgency based on a personal decision; are not affiliated with an official military organization and have not been sent by their government; are not primarily motivated by personal gain; and lack citizenship in the country of the conflict.”¹⁶

For this paper, we use an all-encompassing definition, defining foreign fighters as *non-citizens of a state experiencing civil conflict, who arrive from an external state, to join a local insurgent organization*.¹⁷ Thomas Hegghammer has perhaps best summarized the spirit of the phenomenon, describing foreign fighters as “insurgents in every respect but their passports” .¹⁸

Unlike in conflicts of the past, which largely attracted male foreign fighters,¹⁹ the conflict in Syria and later Iraq saw an increasing number of women and minors traveling to conflict zones.²⁰ While widely used, the term foreign fighter is gendered. Throughout history, men have taken the more public-facing role of combatants and fighters. For example, when looking at violent Islamist groups

¹⁴ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. *Investigation, Prosecution and Adjudication of Foreign Terrorist Fighter Cases for South and South-East Asia*. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2018. https://www.unodc.org/documents/terrorism/Publications/FTF%20SSEA/Foreign_Terrorist_Fighters_Asia_Ebook.pdf

¹⁵ Cilluffo, Frank J., Jeffrey B. Cozzens, and Magnus Ranstorp. *Foreign fighters: Trends, trajectories and conflict zones*. Homeland Security Policy Institute, 2010. <https://cpb-us-e2.wpmucdn.com/wordpress.auburn.edu/dist/8/7/files/2021/01/foreign-fighters-trends-trajectories-and-conflict-zones.pdf>

¹⁶ Bacon, Tricia, Grace Ellis, and Daniel Milton. "Helping or hurting? The impact of foreign fighters on militant group behavior." *Journal of Strategic Studies* (2021): 1-33. Doi:<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01402390.2021.1982702>

¹⁷ Similarly, the United Nations Security Council defines Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs) as “Individuals who travel to a State other than their States of residence or nationality for the purpose of the perpetration, planning, or preparation of, or participation in, terrorist acts or the providing or receiving of terrorist training”. Malet, David. *Foreign fighters: Transnational identity in civil conflicts*. Oxford University Press, 2013.; Malet, David. "Foreign fighter mobilization and persistence in a global context." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 27, no. 3 (2015): 454-473.

¹⁸ Hegghammer, Thomas. "The rise of Muslim foreign fighters: Islam and the globalization of Jihad." *International Security* 35, no. 3 (2010): 53-94. doi:https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00023

¹⁹ Cilluffo, Frank J., Jeffrey B. Cozzens, and Magnus Ranstorp. *Foreign fighters: Trends, trajectories and conflict zones*. Homeland Security Policy Institute, 2010. <https://cpb-us-e2.wpmucdn.com/wordpress.auburn.edu/dist/8/7/files/2021/01/foreign-fighters-trends-trajectories-and-conflict-zones.pdf> ; Mendelsohn, Barak. "Foreign fighters—recent trends." *Orbis* 55, no. 2 (2011): 189-202. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2011.01.002>.

²⁰ Cook, Joana, and Gina Amy Vale. "From Daesh to 'Diaspora': Tracing the women and minors of Islamic State." (2018). <https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ICSR-Report-From-Daesh-to-%E2%80%98Diaspora%E2%80%99-Tracing-the-Women-and-Minors-of-Islamic-State.pdf>

operating in Syria and Iraq, male members have traditionally taken up the mantle of combat, except in specific (sometimes theoretical) defensive circumstances.²¹ Despite this, over the last decade countless countries have reported that not only men have traveled to join foreign conflicts; rather, men, women, and children from around the world have traveled to join foreign terrorist organizations and insurgencies.

To address this issue, other researchers have used the term travelers,²² or affiliates.²³ For example, Seamus Hughes, Emily Blackburn, and Andrew Mines argue that the term travelers “assumes that not all individuals who travel abroad to join insurgencies choose to fight. Rather, some of these individuals assume logistical, recruitment, and/or familial roles within these organizations.”²⁴ As such, we have decided to use the terms “foreign fighter” and “foreign traveler” interchangeably, recognizing these conflict actors to be a gender-diverse set of individuals who perform a wide range of roles in local insurgent organizations, both on and off the battlefield.²⁵

EMPIRICAL TRENDS

Prior to the rise of the Islamic State, which has dominated discussions for the last decade, several other conflicts around the world have attracted foreign fighters. Thomas Hegghammer notes that between 1980 and 2010, “between 10,000 and 30,000 such fighters have inserted themselves into conflicts from Bosnia in the west to the Philippines in the east.”²⁶

²¹ Margolin, Deborah. “The Changing Roles of Women in Violent Islamist Groups” In *Perspectives on the Future of Women, Gender, & Violent Extremism*. The Program on Extremism at George Washington University. 2019.

<https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Perspectives%20on%20the%20Future%20of%20Women%20C%20Gender%20and%20Violent%20Extremism.pdf>; Lahoud, Nelly. “Can women be soldiers of the Islamic state?” *Survival* 59, no. 1 (2017): 61-78. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2017.1282675>; Winter, Charlie, and Deborah Margolin. “The mujahidat dilemma: Female combatants and the Islamic State.” *CTC Sentinel* 10, no. 7 (2017): 25-30. <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-mujahidat-dilemma-female-combatants-and-the-islamic-state/>

²² Hughes, Seamus, Emily Blackburn, and Andrew Mines. “The other travelers: American jihadists beyond Syria and Iraq.” *Report. Washington, DC: Program on Extremism* (2019).

<https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/The%20Other%20Travelers%20Final.pdf>

²³ Cook, Joana, and Gina Amy Vale. “From Daesh to ‘Diaspora’: Tracing the women and minors of Islamic State.” (2018). <https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ICSR-Report-From-Daesh-to-%E2%80%98Diaspora%E2%80%99-Tracing-the-Women-and-Minors-of-Islamic-State.pdf>

²⁴ Hughes, Seamus, Emily Blackburn, and Andrew Mines. “The other travelers: American jihadists beyond Syria and Iraq.” *Report. Washington, DC: Program on Extremism* (2019).

<https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/The%20Other%20Travelers%20Final.pdf>

²⁵ Henshaw, Alexis Leanna. “Where women rebel: Patterns of women’s participation in armed rebel groups 1990–2008.” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 18, no. 1 (2016): 39-60. doi:

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2015.1007729>; Winter, Charlie, and Deborah Margolin. “Women in the Islamic State: Victimization, Support, Collaboration, and Acquiescence.” *The ISIS Files*, the George Washington University, 2021. <https://isisfiles.gwu.edu/concern/reports/fl881k934?locale=en>; Loken, Meredith. “‘Both needed and threatened’: Armed mothers in militant visuals.” *Security Dialogue* 52, no. 1 (2021): 21-44. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0967010620903237>

²⁶ Hegghammer, Thomas. “The rise of Muslim foreign fighters: Islam and the globalization of Jihad.” *International Security* 35, no. 3 (2010): 53-94. doi:https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00023

In the 1970s to 1990s conflicts in Afghanistan, and later Bosnia, Chechnya, and Kashmir enticed foreign fighters from around the world to travel to join these “theaters of jihad”, including between 1,000-2,000 American citizens.²⁷ Many of the foreigners involved in joining these conflicts were from the Middle East and North Africa, with between 3,000 to 4,000 individuals fighting in Afghanistan between 1984 and 1992.²⁸ Mohammed Hefez argues that by 1992 as the Afghanistan conflict quieted, many of these individuals either returned to their home countries, moved to safe havens in Pakistan, or took the lessons they learned to join conflict zones in Bosnia, Algeria, and Egypt.²⁹ The foreign fighter phenomenon is not exclusive to jihadist circles; foreign fighters have also taken part in secular or revolutionary civil wars such as in Algeria,³⁰ Liberia,³¹ and Colombia.³²

The September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States and the July 7, 2005 attacks on the United Kingdom highlighted the tangible threat played by foreign fighters, and triggered a new wave of research on the topic.³³ In both of these cases individuals had either been born in, or spent significant time in, the West and then received training in “theaters of jihad” before returning to the west to carry out attacks. After 2001, many of the foreign fighters traveled to the Federally Administered Tribal Area along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. Others traveled to Somalia, Chechnya, Bosnia, Kashmir, as well as other conflicts in southeast Asia, central Asia and the

²⁷ Wiktorowicz, Quintan. *Radical Islam rising: Muslim extremism in the West*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005.; For examples see: <https://ctc.usma.edu/american-journeys-to-jihad-u-s-extremists-and-foreign-conflicts-during-the-1980s-and-1990s/> ;

Also: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0030438711000056>

²⁸ Hafez, Mohammed M. "Jihad after Iraq: lessons from the Arab Afghans." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 32, no. 2 (2009): 73-94. doi:<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10576100802639600>

²⁹ Hafez, Mohammed M. "Jihad after Iraq: lessons from the Arab Afghans." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 32, no. 2 (2009): 73-94. doi:<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10576100802639600>

³⁰ Cragin, R.K., 2021. Preventing the next wave of foreign terrorist fighters: Lessons learned from the experiences of Algeria and Tunisia. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 44(7), pp.543-564. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1057610X.2019.1568005>

³¹ Dufka, Corinne. *Youth, Poverty and Blood: the lethal legacy of West Africa's regional warriors*. Vol. 15. Human Rights Watch, 2005.; Doctor, Austin C., and John D. Willingham. "Foreign fighters, rebel command structure, and civilian targeting in Civil War." *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2020): 1-19. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03056249708704268>

³² Cosoy, N. (2016, July 10). The Chilean fighting in a foreign conflict in Colombia. BBC News. Retrieved November 17, 2021, from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-36707191>.; Bakke, Kristin M. "Help wanted? The mixed record of foreign fighters in domestic insurgencies." *International Security* 38, no. 4 (2014): 150-187. <https://direct.mit.edu/isec/article-abstract/38/4/150/12286/Help-Wanted-The-Mixed-Record-of-Foreign-Fighters>

³³ Cilluffo, Frank J., Jeffrey B. Cozzens, and Magnus Ranstorp. *Foreign Fighters: Trends, Trajectories and Conflict Zones*. Homeland Security Policy Institute, 2010. <https://cpb-us-e2.wpmucdn.com/wordpress.auburn.edu/dist/8/7/files/2021/01/foreign-fighters-trends-trajectories-and-conflict-zones.pdf>

Maghreb.³⁴ Citizens from the US,³⁵ UK,³⁶ Germany,³⁷ Saudi and Yemen, to name a few, could be found in many of these conflict zones.³⁸

With the start of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, researchers and security officials began to track the influx of foreign fighters into Syria and later Iraq. These numbers grew at a shockingly exponential rate. For example, in 2013 initial numbers were estimated at 6,000 foreign fighters,³⁹ by August 2014, those numbers increased to approximately 12,000 foreign jihadists,⁴⁰ from 77 countries.⁴¹ In 2015 that number increased again to 20,000,⁴² and by 2017 to 40,000 individuals originating from 110 countries.⁴³ At last count, researchers found that between 2011 and the collapse of the so-called Caliphate in 2019, over 50,000 estimated individuals from approximately 80 countries

³⁴ Hafez, Mohammed M. "Jihad after Iraq: lessons from the Arab Afghans." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 32, no. 2 (2009): 73-94. doi:<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10576100802639600> ; Cilluffo, Frank J., Jeffrey B. Cozzens, and Magnus Ranstorp. Foreign fighters: Trends, trajectories and conflict zones. Homeland Security Policy Institute, 2010. <https://cpb-us-e2.wpmucdn.com/wordpress.auburn.edu/dist/8/7/files/2021/01/foreign-fighters-trends-trajectories-and-conflict-zones.pdf>; Kerry, John. "Al Qaeda in Yemen and Somalia: A Ticking Time Bomb: a Report to the Committee on Foreign Relations." (2010). <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/S%20Prt%20111-40%20Al%20Qaeda%20in%20Yemen%20and%20Somalia%20A%20Ticking%20Time%20Bomb.pdf>

³⁵ Meleagrou-Hitchens, Alexander, Seamus Hughes, and Bennett Clifford. The travelers: American jihadists in Syria and Iraq. Program on Extremism, The George Washington University, 2018. <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/TravelersAmericanJihadistsinSyriaandIraq.pdf> ; Hughes, Seamus, Emily Blackburn, and Andrew Mines. "The other travelers: American jihadists beyond Syria and Iraq." Report. Washington, DC: Program on Extremism (2019).

³⁶ Leapman, B. (2007, July 15). 4,000 in UK trained at Terror Camps. The Telegraph. Retrieved November 17, 2021, from <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1557505/4000-in-UK-trained-at-terror-camps.html>.

³⁷ Smith, Nicola, and Bojan Pancevski. "German Militants Seen in Taliban Border Unit." The Times. The Sunday Times, August 29, 2010. <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/german-militants-seen-in-taliban-border-unit-b6pgr0887sx>.

³⁸ Oppel, Richard A. "Foreign Fighters in Iraq Are Tied to Allies of U.S." The New York Times. The New York Times, November 22, 2007. <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/22/world/middleeast/22fighters.html>.

³⁹ Barnard, A., & Schmitt, E. (2013, August 9). As Foreign Fighters Flood Syria, Fears of a New Extremist Haven. The New York Times. Retrieved November 17, 2021, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/09/world/middleeast/as-foreign-fighters-flood-syria-fears-of-a-new-extremist-haven.html>; Armed Conflict. 2020. "ISIS Foreign Fighters after the Fall of the Caliphate." Armed Conflict Survey 6 (1): 23–30.

⁴⁰ AFP. (2014, August 21). Americans among 12,000 foreign fighters in Syria: US. Yahoo! News. Retrieved November 17, 2021, from <https://www.yahoo.com/news/americans-among-12-000-foreign-fighters-syria-us-225059981.html>.

⁴¹ Dodwell, Brian, Daniel Milton, and Don Rassler. The caliphate's global workforce: An inside look at the Islamic States foreign fighter paper trail. United States Military Academy Combating Terrorism Center West Point United States, 2016. <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/the-caliphates-global-workforce-an-inside-look-at-the-islamic-states-foreign-fighter-paper-trail/>

⁴² Neumann, Peter R. "Foreign fighter total in Syria/Iraq now exceeds 20,000; surpasses Afghanistan conflict in the 1980s." *ICSR Insight* 26, no. 01 (2015): 1-5. ; Armed Conflict. 2020. "ISIS Foreign Fighters after the Fall of the Caliphate." Armed Conflict Survey 6 (1): 23–30.

⁴³ United Nations, Security Council. Greater Cooperation Needed to Tackle Danger Posed by Returning Foreign Fighters, Head of Counter-Terrorism Office Tells Security Council. United Nations Meetings Coverage and Press Releases, 2017. <https://www.un.org/press/en/2017/sc13097.doc.htm>.

traveled to join the conflicts in Syria and Iraq.⁴⁴ While important for documenting these numbers, many of these early studies looking for foreign fighters traveling to Syria and Iraq did not differentiate between male, female, and minor travelers. Indeed, much of the discussion around regional and global jihadism has treated the issue as mostly a phenomenon exclusive to male fighters.⁴⁵ This conception was strongly challenged as academics, practitioners, and media reporters covered *en masse* the campaign of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria; they quickly discovered that men and women both played important roles in the organization on and off the battlefield.⁴⁶

One of the last and most extensive studies on the foreign traveler phenomenon was also one of the most nuanced. Authored by Joana Cook and Gina Vale in 2019,⁴⁷ an update of their earlier work published the year before,⁴⁸ the authors not only broke down the statistics by region and country, but also by gender and identified those who traveled as minors. The authors found that in 2018 that 4,761 (or 13%) of those who traveled were recorded to be women.⁴⁹ By 2019, the authors estimated those numbers to be 6,902 foreign women.⁵⁰

Furthermore, when it came to children, many early studies ignored the distinction between minors and adults. However, one study by the Counter Terrorism Center at West Point noted that of the approximately 4,000 fighter records they examined, 400 prospective “fighters” were under the age of 18, with 41 of those being 15 or younger when they arrived.⁵¹ Cook and Vale’s work also

⁴⁴ Cook, Joana, and Gina Vale. "From Daesh to 'Diaspora' II: The Challenges Posed by Women and Minors After the Fall of the Caliphate." *CTC Sentinel* (2019): 30-46. <https://ctc.usma.edu/daesh-diaspora-challenges-posed-women-minors-fall-caliphate/>

⁴⁵ Bergema, Reinier, and Marion Van San. "Waves of the black banner: An exploratory study on the Dutch jihadist foreign fighter contingent in Syria and Iraq." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 42, no. 7 (2019): 636-661. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2017.1404004>; Cilluffo, Frank J., Jeffrey B. Cozzens, and Magnus Ranstorp. Foreign fighters: Trends, trajectories and conflict zones. Homeland Security Policy Institute, 2010. <https://cpb-us-e2.wpmucdn.com/wordpress.auburn.edu/dist/8/7/files/2021/01/foreign-fighters-trends-trajectories-and-conflict-zones.pdf>

⁴⁶ Margolin, D. and Winter, C. 2021. Women in the Islamic State: Victimization, Support, Collaboration, and Acquiescence. The ISIS Files Peresin, A. and Cervone, A., 2015. The Western muhajirat of ISIS. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 38(7), pp.495-509. ; Winter, C. and Margolin, D., 2017. The mujahidat dilemma: Female combatants and the Islamic State. *CTC Sentinel*, 10(7), pp.25-30 ; Vale, G., 2019. *Women in Islamic State: From Caliphate to Camps*. International Centre for Counter-Terrorism.

⁴⁷ Cook, Joana, and Gina Vale. "From Daesh to 'Diaspora' II: The Challenges Posed by Women and Minors After the Fall of the Caliphate." *CTC Sentinel* (2019): 30-46. <https://ctc.usma.edu/daesh-diaspora-challenges-posed-women-minors-fall-caliphate/>

⁴⁸ Cook, Joana, and Gina Vale. "From Daesh to 'Diaspora': Tracing the women and minors of Islamic State." (2018). https://kclpure.kcl.ac.uk/portal/files/110621596/ICSR_Report_From_Daesh_to_Diaspora_Tracing_the_Women_and_Minors_of_Islamic_State.pdf

⁴⁹ Cook, Joana, and Gina Amy Vale. "From Daesh to 'Diaspora': Tracing the women and minors of Islamic State." (2018). <https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ICSR-Report-From-Daesh-to-%E2%80%98Diaspora%E2%80%99-Tracing-the-Women-and-Minors-of-Islamic-State.pdf>

⁵⁰ Cook, Joana Lee Irene, and Gina Amy Vale. "From Daesh to 'Diaspora' II: The Challenges Posed by Women and Minors After the Fall of the Caliphate." *CTC Sentinel* (2019): 30-46. <https://ctc.usma.edu/daesh-diaspora-challenges-posed-women-minors-fall-caliphate/>

⁵¹ Dodwell, Brian, Daniel Milton, and Don Rassler. The caliphate's global workforce: An inside look at the Islamic States foreign fighter paper trail. United States Military Academy Combating Terrorism Center

examined minors, estimating the number of minor travelers to Syria and Iraq to be 4,640 by 2018,⁵² and 6,577 foreign minors by 2019.⁵³

A point of interest, especially for our research agenda, is that the Cook and Vale found that certain regions had higher rates of travelers arriving in the conflict area as family units, including women and minors making up 36 to 42 percent of travelers from Western Europe, 46 to 54 percent of travelers from Eastern Europe, and 70 percent of travelers from Eastern Asia.⁵⁴ While many of the earlier studies acknowledged that women and minors were traveling to join this foreign conflict, this was the first study of its kind to break down the numbers so clearly.

Several studies have tried to quantify the number of Americans who traveled to join the recent conflict in Syria and Iraq.⁵⁵ For example, Cook and Vale contend that of 272 individuals who were identified as having traveled from the United States to Syria and Iraq, 38 were women and 12 were minors. The methodology used to find this number was a calculation based on U.S. House of Representatives "Final Report of the Task Force on Combating Terrorist and Foreign Fighter Travel",⁵⁶ FBI statements which estimate these numbers to be 300,⁵⁷ and a dataset maintained by George Washington University's Program on Extremism.⁵⁸

While the majority of foreign fighter travel in the last decade has been to Syria and Iraq, it is important to remember that foreign fighters and travelers have also joined other extremist groups and conflict zones around the world during this time. A June 2021 U.N. report estimates that

West Point United States, 2016. <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/the-caliphates-global-workforce-an-inside-look-at-the-islamic-states-foreign-fighter-paper-trail/>

⁵²Cook, Joana, and Gina Amy Vale. "From Daesh to 'Diaspora': Tracing the women and minors of Islamic State." (2018). <https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ICSR-Report-From-Daesh-to-%E2%80%98Diaspora%E2%80%99-Tracing-the-Women-and-Minors-of-Islamic-State.pdf>

⁵³ Cook, Joana Lee Irene, and Gina Amy Vale. "From Daesh to 'Diaspora' II: The Challenges Posed by Women and Minors After the Fall of the Caliphate." *CTC Sentinel* (2019): 30-46. <https://ctc.usma.edu/daesh-diaspora-challenges-posed-women-minors-fall-caliphate/>

⁵⁴ Cook, Joana, and Gina Vale. "From Daesh to 'Diaspora' II: The Challenges Posed by Women and Minors After the Fall of the Caliphate." *CTC Sentinel* (2019): 30-46. <https://ctc.usma.edu/daesh-diaspora-challenges-posed-women-minors-fall-caliphate/>

⁵⁵ For example, see: Jensen, Michael, Patrick James, and Herbert Tinsley. 2016. "Overview: Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States-Foreign Fighters (PIRUS-FF)." College Park, MD: START. https://www.start.umd.edu/sites/default/files/publications/local_attachments/START_PIRUS-FF_InfographicSeries_April2016_0.pdf; U.S. House of Representatives, Final Report of the Task Force on Combating Terrorist and Foreign Fighter Travel, (Washington: Homeland Security Committee, 2015). <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CPRT-114HPRT97200/pdf/CPRT-114HPRT97200.pdf>

⁵⁶ U.S. House of Representatives, Final Report of the Task Force on Combating Terrorist and Foreign Fighter Travel, (Washington: Homeland Security Committee, 2015), 16, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CPRT-114HPRT97200/pdf/CPRT-114HPRT97200.pdf>

⁵⁷ Meleagrou-Hitchens, Alexander, Seamus Hughes, and Bennett Clifford. *The travelers: American jihadists in Syria and Iraq*. Program on Extremism, the George Washington University, 2018. <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/TravelersAmericanJihadistsinSyriaandIraq.pdf>

⁵⁸ Meleagrou-Hitchens, Alexander, Seamus Hughes, and Bennett Clifford. *The travelers: American jihadists in Syria and Iraq*. Program on Extremism, the George Washington University, 2018. <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/TravelersAmericanJihadistsinSyriaandIraq.pdf>

between 8,000 and 10,000 foreign fighters are currently active in Afghanistan.⁵⁹ In another report, The Program on Extremism at George Washington University found that between January 2011 and July 2019, 36 individuals (35 men and one woman) traveled or attempted to travel from the US to conflict theaters in Afghanistan-Pakistan, Libya, Mali, Nigeria, the Sinai Peninsula, Somalia, and Yemen.⁶⁰ Furthermore, conflicts in Somalia and Kenya,⁶¹ specifically groups like Al-Shabaab, have attracted European subjects, from the UK and Germany,⁶² including the infamous “White Widow”, British citizen Samantha Lewthwaite.⁶³

In order to address these empirical trends, specifically in relation to the foreign fighter family, this paper will delve into the foreign traveler life cycle for men, women, and minors. In doing so, it will highlight the unique challenges faced when trying to counter these movements, which have often been viewed through a gender-neutral or adult-focused lens that does not highlight the unique experiences of men, women, and minors associated with these groups.

FOREIGN FIGHTERS AND TRAVELERS

It is important that any discussion on the dynamics and dilemmas unique to foreign fighter families be rooted in the foundations of the issue, i.e., the foreign fighter problem is not a single-faceted challenge. Indeed, the foreign fighter issue presents a multitude of nested and interwoven problems that are gendered in nature, and which “mirror the life cycle of the foreign fighter phenomenon”.⁶⁴

Drawing on the work of Stephanie Kaplan, Arie Perlinger, Daniel Milton and others, we conceptualize the foreign fighter lifecycle as occurring in three sequential stages: pre-departure, in-theater, and return.⁶⁵ Delineating the foreign fighter problem into these chronological phases

⁵⁹ United Nations, Security Council. Resolution 1988. New York, NY: UN Headquarters, 2021. (18).
<https://www.undocs.org/pdf?symbol=en/S/2021/486>

⁶⁰ Hughes, Seamus, Emily Blackburn, and Andrew Mines. “The other travelers: American jihadists beyond Syria and Iraq.” *Report. Washington, DC: Program on Extremism* (2019).
<https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/The%20Other%20Travelers%20Final.pdf>

⁶¹ Doctor, A. C. (2020, August 18). The Looming Influx of Foreign Fighters in Sub-Saharan Africa. War on the Rocks. Retrieved November 17, 2021, from <https://warontherocks.com/2020/08/the-looming-influx-of-foreign-fighters-in-sub-saharan-africa/>;
Kruber, Samantha, and Stephanie Carver. “Insurgent Group Cohesion and the Malleability of ‘Foreignness’: Al-Shabaab’s Relationship with Foreign Fighters.” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2021): 1-15. DOI: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1057610X.2021.1889091>

⁶² Jokinen, Christian. ““Deutsche Shabab”: The Story of German Foreign Fighters in Somalia, 2010-2016.” *CTC Sentinel* 11, no. 5 (2018): 30-37. <https://ctc.usma.edu/deutsche-schabab-story-german-foreign-fighters-somalia-2010-2016/>

⁶³ Campbell, J. (2015, June 19). Al-Shabaab and Foreign Fighters in Kenya. Council on Foreign Relations. Retrieved November 17, 2021, from <https://www.cfr.org/blog/al-shabaab-and-foreign-fighters-kenya>.

⁶⁴ Kaplan, Stephanie. “The Foreign Fighters Problem, Recent Trends and Case Studies: Selected Essays.” *Program on National Security at the Foreign Policy Research Institute* (2011):2-3 https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/ForeignFightersProblem_Noonan.pdf

⁶⁵ Similarly, Daniel Byman and Jeremy Shapiro present a “standard schematic model” of foreign fighter radicalization, which includes five sequential stages: Decide to travel, travel, train and fight, return, and plot;

facilitates the practical evaluation of the unique set of activities that foreign fighters carry out in-transit, in-country, and, upon their return, in their respective countries of origin. In this section, we provide an overview of the foreign traveler lifecycle stages for both adult men and women, highlighting some of the prominent characteristics of each, including their motivational drivers prior to departure, their activities in conflict theaters, and the complexities and risks involved in their return. When carrying such an analysis it is vital to look at gendered aspects of the foreign fighter lifecycle. This lens allows for a nuanced understanding of both men and women's mobilization and participation in the pre-travel, in-theater, and return of foreign fighter families.

Stage one: Pre-departure

The foreign fighter does not spontaneously generate, appearing *ex nihilo* in a local conflict environment. Their journeys begin in their countries of origin. It is in this stage that the foreign traveler decides to travel, makes arrangements to travel, and initiates the journey. To better understand the foundations of the foreign fighter phenomenon, it is important to take stock of the various conditions and circumstances that characterize the pre-departure period. Towards this end, in this section, we summarize notable similarities and differences in foreign fighters' backgrounds and the logistics of their recruitment and transit.

The global corps of foreign travelers comprises a kaleidoscope of talents and motivations. Like the broader populations of violent extremists or guerrilla fighters, foreign fighters come in all shapes, sizes, and genders. Some are military veterans, others are students or self-employed.⁶⁶ While a meaningful proportion leave high skill or white collar jobs behind, most seem to have occupational backgrounds in low skill or laborer positions.⁶⁷ Some are native-born and others are

Perliger, Arie, and Daniel Milton. *From cradle to grave: The lifecycle of foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria*. US Military Academy-Combating Terrorism Center West Point United States, 2016.

⁶⁶ Dodwell, Brian, Daniel Milton, and Don Rassler. Then and now: comparing the flow of foreign fighters to AQI and the Islamic State. US Military Academy-Combating Terrorism Center West Point United States, 2016.; Fritz, Jason, and Joseph K. Young. "Transnational volunteers: American foreign fighters combating the Islamic state." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 32, no. 3 (2020): 449-468. ; Meleagrou-Hitchens, Alexander, Seamus Hughes, and Bennett Clifford. *The travelers: American jihadists in Syria and Iraq*. Program on Extremism, the George Washington University, 2018. <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/TravelersAmericanJihadistsinSyriaandIraq.pdf>; Patin, Nathan. "The other foreign fighters: An open-source investigation into American volunteers fighting the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria." *A Bellingcat Investigation* (2015):2-3

⁶⁷ Dodwell, Brian, Daniel Milton, and Don Rassler. Then and now: comparing the flow of foreign fighters to AQI and the Islamic State. US Military Academy-Combating Terrorism Center West Point United States (2016): 21.

first or second generation immigrants.⁶⁸ While most are men, a significant number are women.⁶⁹ A small number of these individuals can best be described as “career foreign fighters,” or persons who travel from conflict theater to conflict theater to join local insurgencies connected by a common ideological or political network.⁷⁰ In the United States for example, some of these individual men, women, and minors were US Citizens, others were residents. They came from a variety of socio-economic, racial, and religious backgrounds.⁷¹ Uniting them was the decision to leave the US to travel to an active conflict zone.

Corresponding with these background experiences, foreign travelers vary in the talents they can offer the local militant commanders, who must find ways to incorporate their foreign recruits into the group’s active operations. Some prospective recruits are highly skilled having combat expertise, bomb making proficiency, social media talents, mechanical competencies, or fluency in multiple languages. As Daniel Byman and Jeremy Shaipro put it, “[a] few foreign fighters may be medics, mechanics, or otherwise have valuable skills, though this is the exception, not the rule...others recruit foreign fighters because they make good cannon fodder and suicide bombers.”⁷² Some groups, like the Islamic State, want to build a society and not just fight an insurgency, and in turn seek to recruit individuals regardless of gender with skills to further their

⁶⁸ Dawson, Lorne L. *A Comparative Analysis of the Data on Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq: Who Went and Why?*. International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), 2021. <https://icct.nl/app/uploads/2021/02/Dawson-Comparative-Analysis-FINAL-1.pdf> ; Marone, Francesco, and Lorenzo Vidino. *Destination Jihad: Italy's Foreign Fighters*. International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2019. <https://icct.nl/app/uploads/2019/03/Marone-Vidino-Italys-Foreign-Fighters-March2019.pdf> ; Mironova, Vera. "The Challenge of Foreign Fighters: Repatriating and Prosecuting ISIS Detainees." *Middle East Institute* (2021). <https://www.mei.edu/publications/challenge-foreign-fighters-repatriating-and-prosecuting-isis-detainees> ; Verwimp, Philip. "Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq and the socio-economic environment they faced at home: a comparison of European countries." *Perspectives on Terrorism* 10, no. 6 (2016): 68-81. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26297707?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents

⁶⁹ Cook, Joana, and Gina Vale. "From Daesh to 'Diaspora' II: The Challenges Posed by Women and Minors After the Fall of the Caliphate." *CTC Sentinel* (2019): 30-46. <https://ctc.usma.edu/daesh-diaspora-challenges-posed-women-minors-fall-caliphate/>; Milton, Daniel, and Brian Dodwell. "Jihadi brides? Examining a female guesthouse registry from the Islamic State’s caliphate." *CTC Sentinel* 11, no. 5 (2018): 16-22. <https://ctc.usma.edu/jihadi-brides-examining-female-guesthouse-registry-islamic-states-caliphate/> ; Meleagrou-Hitchens, Alexander, Seamus Hughes, and Bennett Clifford. *The travelers: American jihadists in Syria and Iraq*. Program on Extremism, the George Washington University, 2018. <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/TravelersAmericanJihadistsinSyriaandIraq.pdf> ; Perešin, Anita, Melisa Hasanović, and Kujtim Bytyqi. "Female Returnees from Syria to the Western Balkans." *Perspectives on Terrorism* 15, no. 5 (2021): 29-45. https://www.jstor.org/stable/27073435?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents

⁷⁰ Daymon, Chelsea, J. H. de Roy van Zuijdewijn, and David Malet. "Career Foreign Fighters: Expertise Transmission Across Insurgencies." *Career Foreign Fighters: Expertise Transmission Across Insurgencies* (2020).

⁷¹ Meleagrou-Hitchens, Alexander, Seamus Hughes, and Bennett Clifford. *The travelers: American jihadists in Syria and Iraq*. Program on Extremism, The George Washington University, 2018. <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/TravelersAmericanJihadistsinSyriaandIraq.pdf>

⁷² Byman, Daniel, and Jeremy Shapiro. *Be afraid. Be a little afraid: The threat of terrorism from Western foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq*. Brookings, 2014. (6)

state-building ambitions such as doctors and engineers.⁷³ The balance of seasoned and greenhorn foreign travelers, of course, varies across groups and conflict theaters and time.⁷⁴ And some groups have been more willing than others to take in inexperienced fighters and travelers.

Relatedly, local insurgent groups' agency in recruiting foreigners to their ranks varies. Some groups actively seek out and recruit foreign fighters, maintaining bureaucratic infrastructure and propaganda campaigns for this exact purpose. In an April 2020 recruitment video posted via WhatsApp, for example, a member of the Allied Defense Forces, a violent extremist organization operating in Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo with ties to the Islamic State, made this recruitment pitch to foreigners:

*"My appeal to you all that are in countries headed by Infidels is that you should come and join us because the medicine for that virus is here with us. All you have to do is emigrate from infidel-led countries to this Islamic State here such that you can fight to save Islam."*⁷⁵

While some of this messaging to prospective foreign recruits can be generalized in nature, appealing to both men and women, other messaging can also be gendered. Groups can highlight idealized gender binary roles to recruit members, playing on ideas of masculinity and femininity to mobilize supporters to travel to conflict zones.⁷⁶

While some groups actively recruit foreign members, in other cases, foreign fighters may arrive more or less unprompted, on their own initiative. It is then up to local commanders what they will do with the newcomers. Some local militant groups even choose to regulate or even turn away foreign arrivals. For instance, during the Chechen conflict, the rebel forces sought to regulate the number of foreign fighters and, when possible, only accepted those with sufficient military experience.⁷⁷ Syrian al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra was, at times, also reluctant to integrate

⁷³ Khelghat-Doost, Hamoon. "Women of the Caliphate: the Mechanism for Women's Incorporation into the Islamic State (IS)." *Perspectives on terrorism* 11, no. 1 (2017): 17-25.

⁷⁴ "The corps of foreigners that initially traveled to support the campaign against the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, for instance, was largely comprised a "network of largely unskilled individuals from middle- or lower-class backgrounds who were often self-trained and self-funded;" Holmer, Georgia, and Adrian Shtuni. *Returning foreign fighters and the reintegration imperative*. Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2017. (3) <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2017-03/sr402-returning-foreign-fighters-and-the-reintegration-imperative.pdf>

⁷⁵ Doctor, Austin C. (2020, August 18). The Looming Influx of Foreign Fighters in Sub-Saharan Africa. War on the Rocks. Retrieved November 17, 2021, from <https://warontherocks.com/2020/08/the-looming-influx-of-foreign-fighters-in-sub-saharan-africa/>; Weiss, Caleb (2020, July 1). ISCAP Ambushes UN Peacekeepers in the DRC, Exploits Coronavirus. FDD's Long War Journal. Retrieved November 17, 2021, from <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2020/07/iscap-ambushes-un-peacekeepers-in-the-drc-exploits-coronavirus.php>.

⁷⁶ Biswas, Bidisha, and Shirin Deylami. "Radicalizing female empowerment: gender, agency, and affective appeals in Islamic State propaganda." *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 30, no. 6-7 (2019): 1193-1213. ; Ingram, Kiriloi M. "An Analysis of Islamic State's Gendered Propaganda Targeted Towards Women: From Territorial Control to Insurgency." *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2021): 1-17.; Lahoud, Nelly. "Empowerment or Subjugation: An analysis of ISIL's gendered messaging." *UN Women* (2018): 1-13.

⁷⁷ Duyvesteyn, Isabelle, and Bram Peeters. *Fickle Foreign Fighters?: A Cross-case Analysis of Seven Muslim Foreign Fighter Mobilisations (1980-2015)*. ICCT, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2015. (15)

new foreign fighters into its ranks, and put policies in place to limit the number of its foreign recruits.⁷⁸ Even at times when the Islamic State was recruiting and welcoming foreign recruits by the tens of thousands, al-Nusra preferred to hand-pick its foreign fighters and therefore it was very dependent on its networks to screen the large pool of applicants.⁷⁹

Given these obstacles and risks faced in-transit, why do foreigner fighters travel? The sources of foreign recruits' motivation are legion and should not be distilled to a single point. To paraphrase Jason Fritz and Joseph Young, there are as many reasons to go as there are people who go.⁸⁰ That said, certain conceptual frameworks have proven especially useful for imagining the process and pathways of mobilization of foreign fighters. We identify and discuss these here at the individual, group, and environment levels.

At the individual level, recruits may radicalize and choose to join a foreign-based militant organization out of a range of personally-held perceptions and attitudes, including religious or ideological convictions or a search for meaning. Factors like these “push individuals into this marketplace, where they are met on the supply side and pulled by social networks and movements.”⁸¹ In particular, Lorenzo Vidino and Seamus Hughes express that “a search for belonging, meaning, and/or identity appears to be a crucial motivator for many Americans (and other Westerners) who embrace ISIS’s ideology.”⁸² These are deeply important factors to consider. Yet, research has struggled to identify a universal pathway by which individuals are mobilized to support extremist initiatives in foreign territories. Assessing the individual in the context of their social, economic, and geographic circumstances---and making generalizations across these circumstances---offers insight into this seemingly stochastic process.

Individuals also hold collective motives, drawn from their membership in social, demographic, religious, or ideological communities. Certain aspects of this radicalization can also be gendered in nature, with men and women’s experiences following similar pathways but also affected by social constructs relating to being a man or woman.⁸³ Similar to pathways identified in the civil

⁷⁸ Greenwood, Maja Touzari. "Islamic State and al-Qaeda's Foreign Fighters." *Connections* 16, no. 1 (2017): 87-98. (89)

⁷⁹ Mironova, Vera. *From freedom fighters to jihadists: human resources of non-state armed groups*. Oxford University Press (2019): 154.

⁸⁰ Fritz, Jason, and Joseph K. Young. "Transnational volunteers: American foreign fighters combating the Islamic state." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 32, no. 3 (2020): 449-468. DOI: 10.1080/09546553.2017.1377075 (11).

⁸¹ Fritz, Jason, and Joseph K. Young. "Transnational volunteers: American foreign fighters combating the Islamic state." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 32, no. 3 (2020): 449-468. (13)

⁸² Hughes, Seamus, and Lorenzo Vidino. "ISIS in America: from retweets to Raqqa." Program on Extremism, George Washington University.[online] [https://cchs.gwu.edu/sites/cchs.gwu.edu/files/downloads/ISIS \(Rev. 03.03. 2016\) \(2015\). \(16\)](https://cchs.gwu.edu/sites/cchs.gwu.edu/files/downloads/ISIS%20Rev%2003.03.2016%20(2015).%20(16).pdf) ; Similarly, Lorne Dawson and Amar Amarasingham argue that “more attention and significance should be given to investigating this search for greater meaning as a motivation for their hijrah (religiously justified migration) to Syria and Iraq” in [<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/1057610X.2016.1274216?needAccess=true>]

⁸³ Hoyle, Carolyn, Alexandra Bradford, and Ross Frenett. *Becoming Mulan?: Female western migrants to ISIS*. Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2015.; Johnston, Melissa Frances, Muhammad Iqbal, and Jacqui True. "The lure of (violent) extremism: Gender constructs in online recruitment and messaging in Indonesia." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2020): 1-19.; Pearson, Elizabeth. "The case of Roshonara Choudhry:

war literature, group grievances based on cross-cutting inequalities or targeted violence are especially powerful predictors of foreign fighter mobilization. "Group-ness" can be geographically bound (e.g., to a particular city), or felt and expressed widely within kinship networks. Strongly suggestive of the power of group-level explanations of mobilization is that many foreign fighters depart and travel in small groups rather than on their own. For example, in their original report on foreign fighter travel to support Al-Qaeda in Iraq, a precursor to the Islamic State, Brian Dodwell and Daniel Milton finds that "evidence strongly suggests that the individuals traveled together and, in some cases, may have been recruited simultaneously."⁸⁴ Similarly, in their study of American persons who traveled to support the anti-ISIS campaign by joining local militants, Jason Fritz and Joseph Young conclude that the majority shared that a group grievance was a primary motivator. This included feelings of cohesion with any of the social groups under attack from the Islamic State, such as the Kurds, Christians, Yazidis, children, or women.

Finally, environmental conditions---e.g., proximity to conflict or to a militant group's base of operations, unemployment rates, or degrees of public access to ports and airfields---inform an individual's choice to mobilize. Indeed, the structural environment offers considerable leverage over the mobilization puzzle. "[T]he motivations for joining violent extremist groups are so diverse," Nate Rosenblatt argues, "that it is difficult to set a policy that can reliably address any one dimension. Rather, understanding where foreign fighters come from can perhaps serve as a better proxy for why they join. Where fighters come from combines the structural dimensions that contribute to their mobilization with the social network factors that facilitate them."⁸⁵ Indeed, certain areas, even cities, play outsized roles as hubs in the mobilization of foreign fighters to various conflict theaters. In Syria and Iraq, most of the foreign recruits to Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State came from a small number of city neighborhoods and rural towns in the Middle East. Indeed, Rosenblatt concludes that "roughly one in three foreign fighters who joined IS came from one of several dozen recruitment hubs."⁸⁶

By various pathways, differing in levels of agency, processes of recruitment, and methods of transit, foreign travelers begin their journey to the conflict theater. Of course, not all make it. And

Implications for theory on online radicalization, ISIS women, and the gendered jihad." *Policy & Internet* 8, no. 1 (2016): 5-33.; Perešin, Anita. "Fatal attraction: Western muslimas and ISIS." *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 3 (2015): 21-38.; Peresin, Anita, and Alberto Cervone. "The Western muhajirat of ISIS." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 38, no. 7 (2015): 495-509.; Shapiro, Lauren R., and Marie-Helen Maras. "Women's radicalization to religious terrorism: An examination of ISIS cases in the United States." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 42, no. 1-2 (2019): 88-119.

⁸⁴Dodwell, Brian, Daniel Milton, and Don Ressler. Then and now: comparing the flow of foreign fighters to AQI and the Islamic State. US Military Academy-Combating Terrorism Center West Point United States, 2016.; Brian Dodwell Daniel Milton Don Ressler write, "Of the 201 AQI recruits that recorded their date of arrival in Iraq, close to 47% of them arrived on the same day as another individual from their hometown."

⁸⁵ Rosenblatt, Nate (2021, April 15). 'A Caliphate that Gathered': Addressing the Challenge of Jihadist Foreign Fighter Hubs. The Washington Institute. Retrieved November 21, 2021, from <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/caliphate-gathered-addressing-challenge-jihadist-foreign-fighter-hubs>. (24)

⁸⁶ Rosenblatt, N. (2021, April 15). 'A Caliphate that Gathered': Addressing the Challenge of Jihadist Foreign Fighter Hubs. The Washington Institute. Retrieved November 21, 2021, from <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/caliphate-gathered-addressing-challenge-jihadist-foreign-fighter-hubs>. (7)

travelers to some groups have higher levels of success than those that travel to join others. Micheal Jensen, Patrick James, and Herbert Tinsley (2016), for instance, find significant differences between foreign fighters affiliated with the Islamic State and the broader Al-Qaeda Associated Movement (AQAM).⁸⁷ According to the Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS-FF) dataset, 68 percent of the sampled US persons traveling to join the ranks of AQAM affiliates were successful, where only 29 percent of would-be ISIS foreign travelers made it to Syria and Iraq.⁸⁸ Facilitators and existing networks play a considerable role in increasing the probability that foreign travelers' successfully complete the journey.

Stage two: In-theater

Foreign travelers who complete the journey meet in-theater. While all three stages of the foreign traveler lifecycle are of consequence, much of the foreign fighter phenomenon is defined by the characteristics of foreign recruits' membership and observed activity in this stage. Existing research demonstrates that these actors produce meaningful effects on a number of conflict dynamics and outcomes, including: rebel access to finance streams, group cohesion,⁸⁹ conflict outcome,⁹⁰ and the set of military strategies available to opposition groups. In this section, we summarize some of the common organizational roles that foreign fighters adopt and the frameworks for understanding foreign fighter activity in local conflict zones.

First and foremost, while their demonstrated record in this regard is mixed, local commanders hope to use foreign fighters as assets on the battlefield. This operates through a variety of mechanisms. In some cases, foreign travelers---mostly men---are used as infantry grunts and even "cannon fodder," are delegated to dangerous, low skill missions (Doctor and Willingham 2020: 15; Byman and Shapiro 2014). In this way, local commanders may use their foreign recruits to bolster group operations but restrain them from positions of leadership or undue influence. Some groups allow their foreign combatants to indicate their interest in specific "career paths". Brian Dodwell, Daniel Milton, and Don Rassler record, for instance, that ISIS administration staff required male foreign recruits to complete paperwork and interviews upon arrival.⁹¹ Among other

⁸⁷ Jensen, Michael, Patrick James, and Herbert Tinsley. "Overview: Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States-Foreign Fighters (PIRUS-FF)." *College Park, MD: START 1* (2016).https://www.start.umd.edu/sites/default/files/publications/local_attachments/START_PIRUS-FF_InfographicSeries_April2016_0.pdf

⁸⁸ Jensen, Michael, Patrick James, and Herbert Tinsley. "Overview: Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States-Foreign Fighters (PIRUS-FF)." *College Park, MD: START 1* (2016).https://www.start.umd.edu/sites/default/files/publications/local_attachments/START_PIRUS-FF_InfographicSeries_April2016_0.pdf

⁸⁹ Doctor, Austin C. "Foreign fighters and conflict-related sexual violence." *International Studies Quarterly* 65, no. 1 (2021): 69-81.; Kristin M. Bakke. "Help Wanted? The Mixed Record of Foreign Fighters in Domestic Insurgencies." *Quarterly Journal: International Security*, vol. 38. no. 4. (Spring 2014): 150-187.

⁹⁰ Chu, Tiffany S., and Alex Braithwaite. "The impact of foreign fighters on civil conflict outcomes." *Research & Politics* 4, no. 3 (2017): 2053168017722059.

⁹¹ Dodwell, Brian, Daniel Milton, and Don Rassler. The caliphate's global workforce: An inside look at the Islamic States foreign fighter paper trail. United States Military Academy Combating Terrorism Center West Point United States, 2016. <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/the-caliphates-global-workforce-an-inside-look-at-the-islamic-states-foreign-fighter-paper-trail/>

details, new arrivals would be asked to fill out their preference regarding the primary role they wanted to play within the organization and, generally, were asked to select from three general career categories: fighter, suicide bomber, and suicide fighter.⁹²

In other cases, foreign recruits are battle-hardened combat veterans. Indeed, some foreign fighters step quickly into prominent positions as commanders, trainers, and specialists. For instance, Afghan officials reported that the Taliban has relied on their foreign recruits in a number of key theaters. "In some places, foreigners lead the fight...They have all the resources, they plan and lead the fight. They possess modern weapons and sophisticated maps. They use advanced technology and techniques."⁹³ As provincial governor Hayatullah Hayat bemoaned in 2016, "Helmand has now become a target of international terrorists' agenda."⁹⁴ Indeed, in 2018 Afghan security forces captured a German national, *nom de guerre* "Abdul Wadood", who was serving as a military adviser---and resident bomb-making expert---to the Taliban's Red Unit elite force in Helmand. Similarly, foreign recruits played a role in significantly improving elements of al-Shabaab's campaign in Somalia. In particular, foreign travelers enhanced the group's sniper operations in Mogadishu as well as the group's use of improvised explosive devices.⁹⁵

In these circumstances, foreign fighters serve as effective "conduits of organizational learning."⁹⁶ By expanding the set of violent tools available to the armed groups they join, foreign fighters can enhance insurgents' mode of warfare at the operational and tactical levels. For instance, foreign fighters who returned from Iraq to fight alongside al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb "brought back new terrorist techniques that had not been used previously in the Maghreb, effectively broadening the scope of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb's capabilities in terms of casualty rate, lethality, and the execution of multiple, coordinated attacks."⁹⁷ Al-Shabaab now uses improvised explosive devices (including vehicle-borne systems) frequently and to great effect. This skill was originally brought over from veterans of the al-Qaeda campaign in Afghanistan. Foreign recruits also significantly improved al-Shabaab's sniper operations as well as their anti-tank countermeasures. A Syrian insurgent made a similar point about the arrival of foreigners to his unit:

⁹² Similarly, foreign recruits that joined AQI (the predecessor to ISIS) were asked to state their preferences along three possible roles: fighter, suicide bomber, and other.

⁹³ Zahid, N. (2016, August 14). Afghan Officials See Foreign Fighters Playing Key Role in Helmand Fighting. VOA. Retrieved November 21, 2021, from <https://www.voanews.com/a/afghan-officials-see-foreign-fighter-playing-key-role-in-helmand-fighting/3463768.html>.

⁹⁴ It should be noted that this is not the universal approach that the Taliban took towards its foreign fighters. In fact, in many instances, the group intentionally limited the level of authority that its non-Afghan members could achieve in the organization.

⁹⁵ Doctor, Austin C., and Emilia Columbo. "Foreign Fighters and the Trajectory of Violence in Northern Mozambique ." *War on the Rocks* , Texas National Security Review, 13 Apr. 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/04/foreign-fighters-and-the-trajectory-of-violence-in-northern-mozambique/>. ; Muibu, Daisy, and Benjamin P. Nickels. "Foreign technology or local expertise? Al-Shabaab's IED capability." *CTC Sentinel* 10, no. 10 (2017): 33-37.

⁹⁶ Doctor, Austin C. (2020, August 18). The Looming Influx of Foreign Fighters in Sub-Saharan Africa. *War on the Rocks*. Retrieved November 17, 2021, from <https://warontherocks.com/2020/08/the-looming-influx-of-foreign-fighters-in-sub-saharan-africa/>

⁹⁷ Noonan, Michael. "The Foreign Fighters Problem, Recent Trends and Case Studies: Selected Essays." Program on National Security at the Foreign Policy Research Institute (2011):2-3 https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/ForeignFightersProblem_Noonan.pdf

"The [foreign] fighters have brought in rocket propelled grenades and boxes of homemade explosives. And wherever you find improvised bombs, you're likely to find foreign fighters. They brought a lot of bomb making experience from the insurgency in Iraq. With their help, our bombs have [a] 3–7 kilometer detonation range. Now, we can even set them off by mobile phone."

Foreign fighters affect the dynamics of conflict violence off the battlefield as well. Recent research initiatives have found that the arrival of foreign fighters is associated with increases in rebel-inflicted civilian targeting. Austin Doctor and John Willingham⁹⁸ and Pauline Moore,⁹⁹ for instance, find that rebel groups with foreign fighters inflict a greater level of rebel one-sided violence than groups with only local recruits. Thomas Hegghammer emphasizes that foreign fighters influenced the conflict landscape in post-2003 Iraq by promoting sectarian violence and indiscriminate killing.¹⁰⁰ Summarizing this concern, Kristin Bakke concludes that "one of the major worries about transnational insurgents is that they radicalize the domestic movement's tactics toward means that are considered unacceptable by the international community, including the intentional targeting of civilians, hostage takings, extrajudicial killings, and degrading acts of violence."¹⁰¹

Second, foreign travelers also serve non-combatants functions, including as recruiters, public relations personnel, medical aides, cooks, or fundraising staff.¹⁰² Indeed, during the Chechen conflict, rebel commanders reportedly welcomed the arrival of foreign travelers less for their use of the battlefield, but more "for their ability to attract finances and materiel, through purported charities, Islamist political parties and large one-off donations from wealthy individuals in the Gulf States."¹⁰³ In some groups, foreign travelers have served as prominent propaganda figures. In a now infamous 2014 video produced and disseminated by the Islamic State, for instance, British citizen Mohammed Emwazi beheaded American journalist James Foley. In another case, Omar Hammami, a native of Daphne, Alabama traveled to Somalia in 2006 to support the violent extremist organization Al-Shabaab. Hammami quickly claimed a large social media presence, filming YouTube videos that featured him rapping. The U.S. put Hammami on its most wanted terrorist list in March and offered a \$5m reward for information leading to his capture. Following a

⁹⁸ Doctor, Austin C., and John D. Willingham. "Foreign fighters, rebel command structure, and civilian targeting in Civil War." *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2020): 1-19.; Doctor, Austin C. "Foreign fighters and conflict-related sexual violence." *International Studies Quarterly* 65, no. 1 (2021): 69-81.

⁹⁹ Moore, Pauline. "When do ties bind? Foreign fighters, social embeddedness, and violence against civilians." *Journal of Peace Research* 56, no. 2 (2019): 279-294.

¹⁰⁰ Hegghammer, Thomas. "*The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad.*" *Quarterly Journal: International Security*, vol. 35, no. 3. (Winter 2010/11): 53-94.

¹⁰¹ Bakke, Kristin, "Help Wanted? The Mixed Record of Foreign Fighters in Domestic Insurgencies," *International Security* 38, no. 4 (2014): 150–87. (185)

¹⁰² Pells, R. (2016, July 10). A British medical student who joined ISIS has died in Iraq, reports say, but her husband and baby survived. *The Independent*. Retrieved November 21, 2021, from <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/british-medical-student-rowan-kamal-zine-el-abidine-first-female-isis-recruit-killed-a7129886.html>.

¹⁰³ Moore, Cerwyn, and Paul Tumelty. "Foreign fighters and the case of Chechnya: A critical assessment." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 31, no. 5 (2008): 412-433.
doi:<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10576100801993347>

heightened period of internal division within the group---one sparked by tensions between the local and foreign components of Al-Shabaab's membership---Hammami was killed in an ambush ordered by Al-Shabaab's leadership.¹⁰⁴

There are also gendered aspects of the foreign traveler experience in-theater that are important to note. In insurgent movements, women's roles are often dependent on the ideologies of the insurgent groups, with far-left groups more likely to incorporate women into combat and leadership roles, as this aligns with their ideological goals.¹⁰⁵ With a few noted exceptions such as Tanja Nijmeijer, a Dutch citizen who joined Colombian guerrilla group FARC,¹⁰⁶ and Lidwina Janssen who trained with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) in Yemen,¹⁰⁷ there is a gap in the literature on foreign fighter women in non-jihadi groups.

While foreign fighter men have been known to play more public facing roles in leadership or combat positions, foreign traveler women often take up more auxiliary roles. This is specifically true for groups that adhere to violent Islamist ideologies. A group's gendered ideology affects the gender dynamics in-theater, and in turn the experiences of women travelers. While many women who traveled to join groups like the Islamic State had the agency to do so, once in-theater that agency was often removed due to strict gender segregation policies of the group. For example, under the Islamic State women were not able to carry out even the most menial tasks without male escort,¹⁰⁸ and if they traveled from abroad and arrived in-theater without proper male escorts, or their husbands died while in-theater, they were forced to live in special housing for unmarried women.¹⁰⁹ Groups that adhere to strict gender segregation thus severely limit the roles women can play within the organization. However, despite the emphasis by some groups for female foreign travelers to be wives and mothers, the vital role they play in the organization should

¹⁰⁴ Kruber, Samantha and Stephanie Carver. "Insurgent Group Cohesion and the Malleability of 'Foreignness': Al-Shabaab's Relationship with Foreign Fighters." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2021): 1-15.
doi:<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1057610X.2021.1889091>

¹⁰⁵ Asal, Victor, Nazli Avdan, and Nourah Shuaibi. "Women Too: Explaining Gender Ideologies of Ethnopolitical Organizations." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*. (2020). 1-18.; Wood, Reed M, and Jakana L Thomas. "Women on the Frontline: Rebel Group Ideology and Women's Participation in Violent Rebellion." *Journal of Peace Research* 54 (1). SAGE Publications Sage UK: London, England: (2017). 31-46.

¹⁰⁶ Gutiérrez D, José Antonio. "Eating, Shitting and Shooting: A Scatological and Culinary Approximation to the Daily Lives of Rebels." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2021): 1-38.
https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1057610X.2021.1886432?casa_token=WXy2zykvvgAAA%3AUzN94EOkXFxc48oQ7eMFh6Vz3zuuwfy7jYjXNjKv_y73AnxoBffLmWImI0ZvHM2LIRWbasZ4nzbBNQ

¹⁰⁷ Bakker, Edwin, Seran De Leede, and ICCT Background Note. *European female Jihadists in Syria: exploring an under-researched topic*. International Centre for Counter-Terrorism., 2015.
<http://www.icct.nl/app/uploads/download/file/ICCT-Bakker-de-Leede-European-Female-Jihadists-In-Syria-Exploring-An-Under-Researched-Topic-April2015.pdf>

¹⁰⁸ Margolin, Devorah and Charlie Winter. "Women in the Islamic State: Victimization, Support, Collaboration, and Acquiescence." The ISIS Files, the George Washington University, 2021.
<https://isisfiles.gwu.edu/concern/reports/fl1881k934?locale=en>

¹⁰⁹ Khelghat-Doost, Hamoon. "Women of the Caliphate: the Mechanism for Women's Incorporation into the Islamic State (IS)." *Perspectives on terrorism* 11, no. 1 (2017): 17-25.; Milton, Daniel, and Brian Dodwell. "Jihadi brides? Examining a female guesthouse registry from the Islamic State's caliphate." *CTC Sentinel* 11, no. 5 (2018): 16-22.; Moaveni, Azadeh. *Guest house for young widows: Among the women of ISIS*. Random House, 2019.

not be underestimated. Organizations imbue these women with the power to carry on their ideology and mission through the instruction and raising of children, the next generation of supporters. As one IS supporter, Umm Ubaydah wrote about her daily life under the Islamic State, “the best thing for a woman is to be a righteous wife and to raise righteous children,” seemingly making an unusual experience sound normal.¹¹⁰

That being said, women’s experiences in-territory are diverse. Even in groups like the Islamic State, due to strategic reasons, women have sometimes been granted more public-facing roles. For example, in order to implement its gender segregated society, female supporters of the Islamic State ended up “playing a pivotal role in both domestic security and, later, conventional military operations.”¹¹¹ As such, women’s experiences in-theater need to be understood within the context of the group they joined, the ideology of that group, and how that group contextualizes women’s roles within its movement.

With notable exceptions, research suggests that foreign fighters tend to offer a net benefit to local militant organizations by reducing the probability that they experience outright military defeat.¹¹² This is especially true when local commanders are successful in placing their foreign recruits into roles that are well-suited to their personal skills. This is not to suggest that foreign fighters do not sometimes hinder, rather than help, insurgencies. The arrival of foreign fighters may invite unwanted attention from counter-terrorist forces or the international community, for example. The managerial challenges prompted by these actors may also be formidable. The case of al-Shabaab offers ample evidence of the challenge of integrating foreign fighters into a local insurgency. While the group’s foreign fighter cadre initially served as an important part of its fighting force and mid-tier leadership, non-Somali contingents later clashed with al-Shabaab’s leadership. This led to the killing of many of the group’s foreign recruits.

It is worth noting that the activities and responsibilities that local commanders assign their foreign recruits is not entirely fixed, but will evolve with border conflict trends. Indeed, the foreign fighters’ phenomenon is “inseparable from variables such as the technological environment, societal norms, political atmosphere, and counter-insurgency and counterterrorism doctrines.”¹¹³

Finally, it is also important to note that some foreign travelers never cross the threshold from the in-theater stage to the return stage. Sometimes there are gendered aspects of consideration that affect the decision or inability to return. Specifically, for groups that adhere to violent Islamist ideology, which requires women to have a proper male escort, it is extremely difficult for women

¹¹⁰ Hoyle, Carolyn, Alexandra Bradford, and Ross Frenett. *Becoming Mulan?: Female western migrants to ISIS*. Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2015. (22)

¹¹¹ Margolin, Deborah and Charlie Winter. “Women in the Islamic State: Victimization, Support, Collaboration, and Acquiescence.” *The ISIS Files*, the George Washington University, 2021.
<https://isisfiles.gwu.edu/concern/reports/fl881k934?locale=en>

¹¹² Chu, Tiffany S., and Alex Braithwaite. “The impact of foreign fighters on civil conflict outcomes.” *Research & Politics* 4, no. 3 (2017): 2053168017722059.

¹¹³ Mendelsohn, Barak. “Foreign fighters—recent trends.” *Orbis* 55, no. 2 (2011): 189-202. doi:
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2011.01.002>.

to leave in-theater conflict zones.¹¹⁴ To do so would require the assistance of men, who are often unable to help, or unwilling to allow women to leave due to the special role women are perceived to play within state-building insurgent groups.¹¹⁵

More often than not, the lack of transition from the in-theater stage to the return stage is for one of three reasons. First, many foreign fighters are killed in action. Foreign fighting is a dangerous business. Indeed, some foreign travelers depart with the explicit intent of dying in-theater as a martyr---notably those recruited to join violent jihadist extremist organizations. In the case of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, Tyler Evans, Daniel Milton, and Joseph Young find that just over 10 percent of the foreign fighters who joined the group volunteered for a "suicide role".¹¹⁶ While notable, this is a comparatively smaller percentage than the levels of suicide volunteering observed among foreign fighters who joined the group's predecessor, Al-Qaeda in Iraq, between 2006 and 2007, which reached as high as 56 percent (Felter and Fishman 2007: 18; Dodwell, Milton, and Rassler 2016). Relatedly, an estimated 30 percent of the U.S. persons who traveled to join the Islamic State from 2011 to 2014 died in Syria. Deaths from voluntary suicide account for only a small proportion of total casualties sustained by this population of conflict actors. This is likely due to the fact that foreign fighters tend to be assigned particularly risky missions and, in some cases, have less military experience relative to their local counterparts.

Second, in other cases, foreign fighters choose not to return. Rather they opt to continue the fight in the conflict zone or at the next battle (Byman and Shapiro 2014). As Mohammed Hafez argues, "In the recent past, conflicts in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Somalia, and Chechnya have attracted foreign jihadists from around the world. Many of these volunteers eventually moved on to other conflict zones, drawing on their earlier experiences and skills to aid fellow coreligionists in their civil wars or insurgencies. Others returned to their home countries to battle their own regimes, hoping to establish Islamic states in their stead. Some others joined Al Qaeda's terror syndicate and its camps in Afghanistan, forming the backbone of a global network of terrorist trainers, financiers, and ideologues."¹¹⁷ Similarly, Chelsea Daymon, Jeanine de Roy van Zuijdewijn, and David Malet identify and describe the "career foreign fighter" phenomenon, by which foreign travelers eschew typical cycles of recruitment, fighting, and returning, and instead jump from one conflict to another.¹¹⁸ This typically, but not necessarily, occurs within a broader transnational ideological or political network. This is important as foreign fighters who manage to survive their first tours accumulate resources, develop skills, and transfer their abilities to new violent actors

¹¹⁴ Cook, Joana, and Gina Amy Vale. "From Daesh to 'Diaspora': Tracing the women and minors of Islamic State." (2018). <https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ICSR-Report-From-Daesh-to-%E2%80%98Diaspora%E2%80%99-Tracing-the-Women-and-Minors-of-Islamic-State.pdf>

¹¹⁵ Peresin, Anita, and Alberto Cervone. "The Western muhajirat of ISIS." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 38, no. 7 (2015): 495-509.

¹¹⁶ Evans, Tyler, Daniel J. Milton, and Joseph K. Young. "Choosing to Fight, Choosing to Die: Examining How ISIS Foreign Fighters Select Their Operational Roles." *International Studies Review* 23, no. 3 (2021): 509-531. (2)

¹¹⁷ Hafez, Mohammed M. "Jihad after Iraq: lessons from the Arab Afghans." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 32, no. 2 (2009): 73-94. doi:<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10576100802639600>

¹¹⁸ Daymon, Chelsea, J. H. de Roy van Zuijdewijn, and David Malet. "Career Foreign Fighters: Expertise Transmission Across Insurgencies." RESOLVE Network Research Report (2020).

and conflict zones. Indeed, Daymond et al. argue, “first-time foreign fighters following similar trajectories can also become experienced fighters with useful skills and knowledge”.¹¹⁹ The threat posed by these actors is significant, but unique from that posed by those who chose to return to their countries of origin.

Finally, as the recent conflict in Syria and Iraq has brought forth, individuals can be captured and imprisoned in conflict theaters. In these contexts, men have often been separated from women and children. While men have often been imprisoned, women and children have often been held together in detention camps usually run by non-governmental organizations.¹²⁰ Family units, if they remained intact up to this point, were severed. Once detained, some women have sought to actively leave and disengage from a group they once willingly joined. However, these individuals are sometimes policed by other women in the camps,¹²¹ who remained unapologetically committed supporters of Islamic State, forcing others to fall in line.¹²² Thus, while women may have had the agency to travel to join these groups, the agency to leave these groups and return home is often taken from them.

Stage three: Return

Through various sorting processes---i.e., failed or intercepted transit to conflict theater, death on battlefield, indefinite detention camps, etc.---some foreign travelers never have the opportunity to return to their countries of origin. But many do. In some cases, foreign travelers are arrested or detained in-theater and will be repatriated by their governments. For example, the United States as recently as December 2021, noted that it has repatriated 28 U.S. citizens from Syria and Iraq, including 12 adults and 16 children.¹²³ Other individuals will opt to return on their own volition, discreetly making their way back to their home countries and communities. The risks orbiting the returning foreign fighter problem receive considerable attention by local governments who fear an increased terrorism-related threat to their homeland security. In this section, we provide an overview of the return phase with a focus on the foreign fighter “return rate”, the variety of motivations and intentions held by those who return, and the proportion of returnees who commit acts of ideologically-motivated violence.

¹¹⁹ Daymon, Chelsea, J. H. de Roy van Zuijdewijn, and David Malet. "Career Foreign Fighters: Expertise Transmission Across Insurgencies." RESOLVE Network Research Report (2020). Pp. 6.

¹²⁰ Houry, Nadim. "The “Unreturned”: Dealing with the Foreign Fighters and Their Families who Remain in Syria and Iraq." *Militant Jihadism* (2018): 59. ; van der Heide, E. J., and A. Alexander. "Homecoming: Considerations for Rehabilitating and Reintegrating Islamic State-Affiliated Minors." *Homecoming: Considerations for Rehabilitating and Reintegrating Islamic State-Affiliated Minors* (2020).; Vale, Gina. *Women in Islamic State: From Caliphate to Camps*. International Centre for Counter-Terrorism., 2019.

¹²¹ Vale, G., 2019. *Women in Islamic State: From Caliphate to Camps*. International Centre for Counter-Terrorism..

¹²² Khalil, Lydia. "Behind the veil: Women in jihad after the caliphate." (2019).; James, Andre, “The Battle-Hardened Foreign Jihadi Brides Trapped in Syria”, *France 24*, 8 February 2019, <https://www.france24.com/en/20190208-france-24-exclusive-islamic-state-group-foreign-jihadi-brides-trapped-syria-kurdish-camp>.

¹²³ U.S. Department of State. “Country Reports on Terrorism 2020.” Bureau of Counterterrorism. <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2020/>

Foreign fighters may complete the foreign traveler lifecycle, returning to their countries of origin. Most sources indicate that a small percent of foreign travelers ever make their way home. In the case of the Islamic State, as of April 2016, an estimated 30 percent of the EU foreign fighter contingent at the time had already returned to their countries of residence. A year later, the return rate dropped to approximately 22 to 24 percent of foreign fighters returning from Iraq and Syria.¹²⁴ Interestingly, a recent report shows that the ISIS foreign fighters who did return did so relatively quickly after arrival; nearly 90 percent spent less than a year in-theater before returning home.¹²⁵

Of course, rates vary across country cases within the region.¹²⁶ However, overall, there are gendered considerations that play into return, as only between 10-18 percent of returnees are now recorded as women.¹²⁷ However, it is important to note that these numbers may not accurately show the full picture, as some countries may not properly acknowledge the return of women for various reasons.¹²⁸ For instance, foreign traveler women are less likely to be charged than their male counterparts due to gendered aspects of in-theater participation and difficulties in defining their roles within these groups.¹²⁹ Furthermore, when charges are levied, women are likely to receive a less severe sentence for their crimes.¹³⁰ However, as noted by Lydia Khalil, women “may not have participated in combat but they have been exposed to violence and some have received weapons training. Many remain committed to the cause and have been instructed to prepare for Islamic State’s future — either by indoctrinating the next generation or by participating in future attacks.”¹³¹ Thus, while perhaps difficult to prosecute, women’s participation should not be mis-represented or underestimated.

The population of returning foreign travelers exhibit a range of motivations and intentions, complicating risk assessment and reintegration efforts. Some returnees are disillusioned with

¹²⁴ Perliger, Arie, and Daniel Milton. *From cradle to grave: The lifecycle of foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria*. US Military Academy-Combating Terrorism Center West Point United States, 2016. <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Cradle-to-Grave2.pdf>

¹²⁵ Perliger, Arie, and Daniel Milton. *From cradle to grave: The lifecycle of foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria*. US Military Academy-Combating Terrorism Center West Point United States, 2016. <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Cradle-to-Grave2.pdf>

¹²⁶ Scherrer, Amandine, Cecilia Isaksson, F. P. S. M. Ragazzi, and J. M. Walmsley. *The return of foreign fighters to EU soil: Ex-post evaluation*. European Parliament Research Service, 2018. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/621811/EPRS_STU\(2018\)621811_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/621811/EPRS_STU(2018)621811_EN.pdf)

¹²⁷ Dawson, Lorne L. A Comparative Analysis of the Data on Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq: Who Went and Why?. International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), 2021. <https://icct.nl/app/uploads/2021/02/Dawson-Comparative-Analysis-FINAL-1.pdf>; J. Cook and G. Vale, “From Daesh to ‘Diaspora’: Tracing the Women and Minors of Islamic State.” London: ICSR (2018).

¹²⁸ Cook, Joana Lee Irene, and Gina Amy Vale. “From Daesh to ‘Diaspora’ II: The Challenges Posed by Women and Minors After the Fall of the Caliphate.” *CTC Sentinel* (2019): 30-46. <https://ctc.usma.edu/daesh-diaspora-challenges-posed-women-minors-fall-caliphate/>

¹²⁹ Khalil, Lydia. “Behind the veil: Women in jihad after the caliphate.” (2019).

¹³⁰ Alexander, Audrey, and Rebecca Turkington. “Treatment of Terrorists: How Does Gender Affect Justice?” *CTC Sentinel*. 2018. 11(8): 24-29. <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/treatment-terrorists-gender-affect-justice/>; Ester EJ Strømmen, “Jihadi Brides or Female Foreign Fighters? Women in Da’esh — From Recruitment to Sentencing”, GPS Policy Brief 01/2017, PRIO Centre on Gender, Peace and Security, 9 May 2017, <https://www.prio.org/Publications/Publication/?x=10546>.

¹³¹ Khalil, Lydia. “Behind the veil: Women in jihad after the caliphate.” (2019).

terrorist practices and life in conflict zones. Thomas Hegghammer contends, “[m]ost foreign fighters appear not to leave with the intention of returning for domestic attacks.”¹³² Still, others may return with the explicit intent, and even order, to carry out a terrorist operation. Yet another group of returnees, falling in the middle of this spectrum of sustained commitment, are “disengaged but not disillusioned”.¹³³ These are travelers who have returned from a foreign conflict theater for pragmatic or personal reasons, such as family events or battle fatigue, while still subscribing to the overall jihadi ideology. German intelligence services, for example, judged that approximately half of German foreign fighter returnees remained engaged in extremist communities and networks.¹³⁴ Indeed, Alastair Reed, Johanna Pohl, and Marjolein Jegerings conclude that foreign fighters may continue to pose a threat to the homeland security of their home countries mainly by upholding and performing secondary functions within extremist networks.¹³⁵ Supporting this notion, with a dataset on 27 IS-linked attacks and 19 plots from 2014 to 2016 in Western Europe, Kim Cragin finds that 18 of the attacks involved returnees providing operational or logistical support.¹³⁶

A common concern is that returning foreign fighters will carry out domestic attacks in their countries of origin. This is certainly not unwarranted.¹³⁷ In May 2014, a ISIS-affiliated returnee opened fire at the Jewish Museum of Belgium, killing four people. The November 2015 attacks in Paris, which killed 130 persons and injured more than 400 others, were conducted by former Islamic State foreign fighters.¹³⁸ While the Paris attacks cost the attackers as little as \$7,500 to execute, they cost the French economy an estimated \$2.1 billion.¹³⁹ In June 2017, an Indonesian returnee fatally stabbed a police officer.¹⁴⁰ U.S. Representative Michael McCaul captured the spirit of these concerns in a statement given to an October 2013 congressional hearing,

¹³² Hegghammer, Thomas. "The rise of Muslim foreign fighters: Islam and the globalization of Jihad." *International Security* 35, no. 3 (2010): 53-94. Pp. 10. doi:https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00023

¹³³ Amarasingam, Amarnath, and Colin P Clarke. "Where Do ISIS Fighters Go When the Caliphate Falls?" *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 6 Mar. 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/03/isis-foreign-fighter-jihad-syria-iraq/518313/>; Reed, A. G., Johanna Pohl, and Marjolein Jegerings. "The four dimensions of the Foreign Fighter threat: making sense of an evolving phenomenon." *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism Policy Brief* 8, no. 1 (2017).

¹³⁴ Bewarder, M. and F. Flade. "Manche kommen zurück, um sich zu erholen." *Welt Online*, 28 November 2016.

¹³⁵ Reed, A. G., Johanna Pohl, and Marjolein Jegerings. "The four dimensions of the Foreign Fighter threat: Making sense of an evolving phenomenon." *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism Policy Brief* 8, no. 1 (2017).

¹³⁶ Cragin, Kim. 2017. "The Challenge of Foreign Fighter Returnees", *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice* 33(3): 292-312

¹³⁷ Braithwaite, Alex, and Tiffany S. Chu. "Civil conflicts abroad, foreign fighters, and terrorism at home." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 62, no. 8 (2018): 1636-1660.

¹³⁸ Hoffman, Adam, and Marta Furlan. "Challenges posed by returning foreign fighters." *Program on Extremist. The George Washington University* (2020): 15. <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Challenges%20Posed%20by%20Returning%20Foreign%20Fighters.pdf>

¹³⁹ Karaian, Jason. November 26, 2015. "The Paris attacks will cost the French economy more than \$2 billion." *Quartz*. <https://qz.com/559902/the-paris-attacks-will-cost-the-french-economy-more-than-2-billion/>.

¹⁴⁰ Gartenstein-Ross, Daveed, Dr. Colin P. Clarke, and Samuel Hodgson. "Foreign Terrorist Fighters from Southeast Asia: What Happens next?" ICCT. ICCT, February 18, 2020. <https://icct.nl/publication/foreign-terrorist-fighters-from-southeast-asia-what-happens-next/>.

"Today we face a disturbing trend. More than a hundred Americans are fighting overseas supporting terrorism, from the Middle East in Syria or to Africa and Somalia. Individuals in our own communities are being recruited by organizations like al-Shabaab. These individuals directly undermine our homeland security. They have been recruited inside the United States, have left, and could potentially return -- presenting a vast vulnerability in our counterterrorism efforts. Overseas, while fighting and supporting terrorists, they receive military training, combat experience, and grow their jihadist network. Coming back with these skills and connections extends the spider web of extremism to our own backyards."¹⁴¹

Recent assessments offer valuable insight into this potential threat, though some disagreement persists. Some experts describe the threat posed by returnees as a "ticking time bomb." Others express less concern. According to a 2017 statement by former National Counterterrorism Center Director Nicholas Rasmussen, "[counterterrorism authorities] have come to realize it is quality that matters, as much or more than quantity, when it comes to foreign fighters returning home."¹⁴² Indeed, the majority of threat assessments suggest that ideologically-motivated acts of violence by returning foreign fighters are quite rare. Analyzing the role of foreign fighters in Western terrorist plots, for instance, Thomas Hegghammer and Petter Nesser found that approximately 1 in 360 returnees perpetrated an attack after their return.¹⁴³ For context, in the United States, the Federal Bureau of Investigation recorded 379 violent crimes per 100,000 residents in 2019, or approximately 1 per 264 residents.¹⁴⁴ That said, one of the sources of concern in this issue---that the training and experience gained by foreign fighters in-theater will make them more effective perpetrators of violence---appears to be valid. Hegghammer found that attacks conducted by foreign fighters in their home countries were more likely to result in fatalities, relative to terror operations perpetrated by violent extremists who never traveled to fight in a foreign country. Specifically, he finds that domestic attacks involving foreign fighters resulted in an average 7.3 deaths per attack, compared to an average 1.2 deaths in attacks without returnee involvement. These cases emphasize the need for vigilance. Importantly, the severity of the threat does seem to wane over time. David Malet finds that "domestic terror plots by returnees, including successful attacks, occur only within the first few months and that there is no evidence of any long-term threats by returnee sleeper cells."¹⁴⁵

¹⁴¹ Committee on Homeland Security. Report, From Al-Shabaab to al-Nusra: How Westerners joining Terror Groups Overseas affect the homeland: Hearing before the Committee on Homeland Security, House of Representatives, One Hundred Thirteenth Congress, First Session, October 9, 2013 § (2013).

¹⁴² Rasmussen, Nicholas. 2017. "Opening Remarks- CNAS Keynote Policy Address." Center for a New American Security, May 3. https://www.dni.gov/files/NCTC/documents/news_documents/CNASopeningremarks.pdf.

¹⁴³ Hegghammer, Thomas, and Petter Nesser. "Assessing the Islamic State's commitment to attacking the West." Perspectives on Terrorism 9, no. 4 (2015): 14-30.

¹⁴⁴ In contrast, Michael Jensen, Patrick James, and Herbert Tinsley (2016) find that "those who successfully traveled to conflict zones and eventually returned to the United States were involved in plots at a rate of 28%. By comparison, those who publicly expressed an interest in traveling to conflict zones, but made no appreciable attempts to do so, were involved in domestic plots at the rate of 60%."

¹⁴⁵ David Malet and Rachel Hayes, "Foreign Fighter Returnees: An Indefinite Threat?" Terrorism and Political Violence (2018): 1-19; David Malet, "Is it more dangerous to let Islamic State foreign fighters from the West return or prevent them from coming back?", The Conversation, accessed December 18, 2019,

FOREIGN FIGHTER FAMILIES AND CHILDREN

Many facets of the foreign fighter problem are well defined, including their effects on conflict violence and their methods and patterns of transit. In addition to gendered aspects of the process, the issue of foreign fighter families remains a persistent blindspot. This inhibits efforts to identify and develop actionable solutions. Understanding how and why foreign travelers bring their spouses and children with them, build new families when in-theater, and/or return to their home countries with or without family is deeply important.

Research on insurgency shows that familiar connections and kinship anchor members to insurgent movements.¹⁴⁶ Thus, expanding research to address families adds needed nuance to the assessment of the foreign fighter phenomenon and points to both novel constraints and opportunities for successful reintegration. In a 2017 statement, the United Nations Security Council summarized the complexity and seriousness of this issue:

"Recognizing, in this regard, that foreign terrorist fighters may be travelling with family members they brought with them to conflict zones, with families they have formed or family members who were born while in conflict zones, underscoring the need for Member States to assess and investigate these individuals for any potential involvement in criminal or terrorist activities, including by employing evidence - based risk assessments, and to take appropriate action in compliance with relevant domestic and international law, including by considering appropriate prosecution, rehabilitation, and reintegration measures, and noting that children may be especially vulnerable to radicalization to violence and in need of particular social support, such as post-trauma counselling, while stressing that children need to be treated in a manner that observes their rights and respects their dignity, in accordance with applicable international law."¹⁴⁷

In this section, we highlight existing data sources on foreign fighter families, investigate the symbolic and practical roles that they play in establishing local insurgent or extremist campaigns with a focus on foreign fighter children, and discuss some of the political and logistical challenges of overseeing their repatriation and rehabilitation.

<https://theconversation.com/is-it-more-dangerous-to-let-islamic-state-foreign-fighters-from-the-west-return-or-prevent-them-from-coming-back-112588>

¹⁴⁶ Mishali-Ram, Meirav. "When ethnicity and religion meet: Kinship ties and cross-border dynamics in the Afghan-Pakistani Conflict Zone." *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 17, no. 3 (2011): 257-275. ; Rubin, Michael A. "Rebel territorial control and civilian collective action in civil war: Evidence from the communist insurgency in the Philippines." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 64, no. 2-3 (2020): 459-489.

¹⁴⁷ United Nations, Security Council. Security Council Urges Strengthening of Measures to Counter Threats Posed by Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters, Adopting Resolution 2396 (2017). United Nations Meetings Coverage and Press Releases, 2017. <https://www.un.org/press/en/2017/sc13138.doc.htm>

Background on the foreign fighter family

This section provides context on the foreign fighter family. In doing so we set the stage for in-depth discussions into the family unit in order to better create a framework for understanding the phenomenon.

First, and as an important baseline, most foreign travelers do not bring their families with them to conflict zones. A 2016 report from Arie Perliger and Daniel Milton draws on data collected by their research via open source materials on approximately 1,200 individuals who traveled, most from Western countries, during the 2011 to 2015 period to support the Islamic State and other extremist organizations in the region. Perliger and Milton find that 52 percent of the individuals were married, 2 percent were divorced, 46 percent were single. In addition, almost one-third of the married fighters had children before traveling to a zone of conflict. The authors also find that some foreigners in their sample (approximately 8 percent) married upon their arrival in Syria and Iraq.¹⁴⁸

The extent to which foreign recruits travel with their families or establish them in-theater varies within and across conflicts and groups and fighters' countries of origin. Broadly, this dynamic seems to be more common in certain types of insurgency campaigns, notably those with state-building aspirations and, relatedly, intentions to rearrange society around certain conservative ideological commitments. In these movements, the family unit serves as a critical building block of the new vision for the state and society. The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, Al-Shabaab in Somalia, and the Taliban in Afghanistan, for example, have all featured relatively high numbers of foreign fighter families relative to other militant organizations. Noman Benotman and Nikita Malik state it clearly: in building the Caliphate, the Islamic State is "not just a rebel group, but an aspiring state, and it needs societies, not just soldiers."¹⁴⁹ The family and the state are interdependent social forms.¹⁵⁰ Ariel Ahram writes about the neopatriarchal foundations of the Islamic State's vision for society,

*"in which the boundaries between family, society and state are blurred. The state operates as a macrocosm of the family, and neopatriarchy deploys modern techniques of governance to reinforce traditional modes of male domination. Men are the heads of households and expect complete submission, while women are treated as subordinate sources of sexual and reproductive resources, and as family managers."*¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁸ Perliger, Arie, and Daniel Milton. *From cradle to grave: The lifecycle of foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria*. US Military Academy-Combating Terrorism Center West Point United States, 2016.; For example, Abu Ibrahim al-Suedi, a Swedish foreign fighter of Palestinian origin, married Umm Haritha, a 20-year-old Canadian student, merely weeks after she arrived in Syria around January 2015.

¹⁴⁹ Benotman, Noman and Nikita Malik (2016), "The Children of Islamic State," Quilliam, www.quilliaminternational.com/shop/e-publications/the-children-of-islamic-state/ 35.

¹⁵⁰ Tétreault, Mary Ann. (1994). "Chapter One: Women and Revolution: A Framework for Analysis" in *Women and Revolution in Africa, Asia, and the New World*, ed Tétreault, Mary Ann. University of South Carolina Press, 1994. (4).

¹⁵¹ Ahram, Ariel I. (2015) Sexual Violence and the Making of ISIS, *Survival*, 57:3, 58.

This recruitment profile---placing special emphasis on the family---seems often to be by design rather than chance. Indeed, in many cases, the Islamic State aspired to recruit whole families, rather than individuals. The group went so far as to offer increased payments and improved access to education and healthcare services to families with children.¹⁵²

And, in nearly all cases, the notion of foreign fighter families has introduced new gendered elements for consideration. As Mary Ann Tétreault writes, “[w]omen have been more closely associated with the family than men in most cultures.” This tends to be equally true of revolutionary states. For example, the Islamic State leveraged the mother-child relationship, distributing propaganda to mothers with guidance on raising their children. As noted by Meredith Loken, the assumption of women as nonviolent, and specifically as mothers, actually lends militant organizations to highlight their participation in order to humanize their movements and lend legitimacy to their actions.¹⁵³ For many such groups, mothers are the focal point of the family structure. It is important to note that this is not exclusive to the Islamic State. Some of the early research on families and mothers discussed women’s camps in Afghanistan outside of active conflict fronts (or front lines). For instance, in an April 2006 interview with the London-based *Asharq al-Awsat* newspaper, Umm Mohammed, the wife of Abdullah Azzam, noted that she and the other wives of the jihadists were left behind to live together in Peshawar, Pakistan. Describing her time in the women’s camps, she stated that, “I have never met a sister who was with us in Pakistan during the jihad that felt any unhappiness about those days.”¹⁵⁴ Throughout that interview, she discussed the important role played by the wives of the mujahideen aiding Afghan refugees.

In some cases, foreign fighters traveled alone, and married once in-theater. Al-Shabaab, for example, has arranged for many of its foreign fighters to marry local women. As early as 2006, Stig Hansen notes that foreign members of Al-Shabaab, seem to have “gone native” by taking Somali wives and settling down.”¹⁵⁵ Indeed, Phoebe Donnelly records that foreign members of Al-Shabaab were encouraged to marry local Somali women. In an interview with Donnelly one female respondent reports that “Somali Al-Shabaab men were responsible for finding wives for foreign men who came from various countries including America. Foreign men were seen as mujahideen who came to Somalia to liberate [Somalis] and thus this was seen as the least Al-Shabaab could do for these noble men.”¹⁵⁶ In a 2019 report, the International Crisis Group “This practice met fierce resistance from Somali families as it tore at the fabric of Somali society, which traditionally views marriage as a rite that cements or upgrades relations between or among clans.

¹⁵² van der Heide, E. J., and A. Alexander. “Homecoming: Considerations for Rehabilitating and Reintegrating Islamic State-Affiliated Minors.” *Homecoming: Considerations for Rehabilitating and Reintegrating Islamic State-Affiliated Minors* (2020). (7)

¹⁵³ Loken, Meredith. “‘Both needed and threatened’: Armed mothers in militant visuals.” *Security Dialogue* 52, no. 1 (2021): 21-44.

¹⁵⁴ Mohammed, Umm. 2006. “Asharq Al-Awsat Interviews Umm Mohammed: The Wife of Bin Laden’s Spiritual Mentor.” *Asharq Al-Awsat* 30 April 2006.
<https://web.archive.org/web/20170710125517/https://english.aawsat.com/theaawsat/features/asharq-al-awsat-interviews-umm-mohammed-the-wife-of-bin-ladens-spiritual-mentor>.

¹⁵⁵ Stig, Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia: The History and Ideology of a Militant Islamist Group 2005-2012*: 41.

¹⁵⁶ Donnelly, Phoebe G. 2019. *Wedded to Warfare: Forced Marriage in Rebel Groups*. PhD Dissertation: 109.
<https://www.proquest.com/intermediateredirectforezproxy/advanced>

Some families refused to give daughters to foreigners because they feared children from such unions would face stigma from their mother's clan. Still, some girls were married off to fighters from Britain, Canada, the U.S., Australia, and several Arab and Central Asian countries, particularly during Al-Shabaab's peak years from early 2007 to 2012.¹⁵⁷ Additional evidence of local resistance to marriage between local civilians and foreign travelers can be seen in Chechnya, where foreign fighters from Middle Eastern countries faced xenophobia from local populations that often did not want these fighters marrying into their families.¹⁵⁸

Children are a much overlooked component of the foreign fighter family---and indeed represent an especially vulnerable population within such hostile and fragile environments. By foreign fighter children we refer to the minors who were taken to a conflict region by their guardians or other adults as well as infants born to foreign travelers in-theater. The scale of this issue is larger than often acknowledged. According to a 2019 UNICEF estimate, there are "close to 29,000 foreign children [in Syria], most of them under the age of 12. Some 20,000 children are from Iraq while more than 9,000 are from around 60 other countries." The organization estimates that an additional 1,000 children of foreign fighters are detained in Iraq.¹⁵⁹ UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta Fore summarizes their plight succinctly, "They live in appalling conditions amid constant threats to their health, safety and well-being. They have little family support: While most are stranded with their mothers or other caregivers, many are completely alone. These children are 'doubly rejected' – stigmatized by their communities and shunned by their governments."¹⁶⁰ In the remainder of this section, we concentrate on their experiences in-theater and discuss the dynamics of their detention and return.

The experiences of foreign children in-theater

The lives of the children of foreign travelers are multi-faceted and diverse---though all involve varying levels of coercion, manipulation, and trauma. Their myriad experiences can be distilled into a number of categories, including: the roles they adopt in an organization, their exposure to violence and extremist ideology, and their familial connections. While all foreign children should be seen primarily as victims, they also show differing levels of agency in their response to militant groups' recruitment and educational programs.¹⁶¹ This means that some foreign children will have

¹⁵⁷ International Crisis Group. "Women and Al-Shabaab's Insurgency." International Crisis Group. International Crisis Group, June 28, 2019. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/somalia/b145-women-and-al-shabaabs-insurgency>.

¹⁵⁸ Souleimanov, Emil A. "Why jihadist foreign fighter leave local battlefields: Evidence from Chechnya." *Journal of Strategic Studies* (2021): 1-26.

¹⁵⁹ UNICEF. Statement by UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta Fore. "Protect the Rights of Children of Foreign Fighters Stranded in Syria and Iraq." UNICEF, May 21, 2019. <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/protect-rights-children-foreign-fighters-stranded-syria-and-iraq>.

¹⁶⁰ UNICEF. Statement by UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta Fore. "Protect the Rights of Children of Foreign Fighters Stranded in Syria and Iraq." UNICEF, May 21, 2019. <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/protect-rights-children-foreign-fighters-stranded-syria-and-iraq>.

¹⁶¹ On this point, Liesbeth van der Heide and Audrey Alexander reflect that "In some cases, it is hard to discern whether a child's connection to the organization was voluntary, coerced, or something in between." <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Homecoming.pdf> (page 6).

both been perpetrators and survivors of violence, complicating efforts of assessing the risk posed by these persons, reintegrating them to society, and treating their trauma experienced in-theater.

In this section, because of the unprecedented scope of the group's systems for foreign minors, we pay special attention to foreign children associated with the Islamic State. *Dabiq*, the Islamic State's official magazine, underscored the importance of children to the group's ideological platform, referring to its minor members as "Cubs of the Caliphate" destined to become the "Lions of Tomorrow."¹⁶² Some children supported the Islamic State's military efforts. On the battlefield, both foreign children supported adult Islamic State fighters as human shields. This practice was common, for example, in the final stages of the Islamic State's defense of Mosul, where men and women fighters reportedly used their own children as shields to slow the U.S.-led offensive.¹⁶³ Other foreign children have been deployed as suicide bombers.¹⁶⁴ Indeed, a 2016 study by Mia Bloom, John Horgan, and Charlie Winter, which drew on catalogued images of children eulogized by the Islamic State between January 2015 and January 2016 and found out that 39 percent of the children were killed when they detonated vehicle-borne suicide vehicles and 18 percent died in suicide attacks against security personnel behind enemy lines. Another 33 percent of these were killed on the battlefield. Especially relevant to this review, their analysis revealed that at least one in three of the child martyrs publicized by the Islamic State were not from Syria or Iraq—they were foreign.¹⁶⁵ The children of foreign travelers in the Islamic State also often served non-kinetic or logistical military functions, such as messengers, cooks, intelligence assets, and weapon carriers. While less dangerous in nature, these positions and tasks undoubtedly expose children to significant violence and trauma.

Other foreign children were used to support the group's political and propaganda efforts.¹⁶⁶ Infamously, children—both of local and foreign origin—were featured in the group's propaganda films and materials. For instance, Matthew Elhassani, a U.S. citizen and child of foreign traveler Samantha Elhassani, is featured in a 2017 IS video threatening the President of the United States.¹⁶⁷ In some cases, the Islamic State would record its children executing prisoners. In

¹⁶²Vale, Gina. "Cubs in the Lions' Den: Indoctrination and Recruitment of Children Within Islamic State Territory." International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (2018): 16-22 ; Mahmood, Sara. "'CUBS OF THE CALIPHATE' THE ISLAMIC STATE'S FOCUS ON CHILDREN." Counter terrorist trends and analyses 8, no. 10 (2016): 9.

¹⁶³ Paton, Callum. "Isis Female Fighters Using Their Own Children as Human Shields in Last Desperate Moments of Mosul Siege." Newsweek. Newsweek, July 6, 2017. <https://www.newsweek.com/isis-female-fighters-using-their-own-children-human-shields-last-desperate-632934>.

¹⁶⁴ Abi-Rached, Joelle M., Colby Connelly, and Saskia M. van Genugten. "Begin with the Children: Child Soldier Numbers Doubled in the Middle East in 2019." Middle East Institute. Middle East Institute, April 14, 2020. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/begin-children-child-soldier-numbers-doubled-middle-east-2019>.

¹⁶⁵ Bloom, Mia, John Horgan, and Charlie Winter. "Depictions of children and youth in the Islamic State's martyrdom propaganda, 2015–2016." CTC Sentinel 9, no. 2 (2016): 29-32.

¹⁶⁶ Bloom, Mia, John Horgan and Charlie Winter, 'Depictions of Children and Youth in the Islamic State's Martyrdom Propaganda, 2015-2016, 9 (2) CTC Sentinel (2016) 29-32.

¹⁶⁷Hassan, Lila, and Max Green. "American Mom Who Pleaded Guilty to Terrorism Charges Sentenced to 6.5 Years." PBS. Public Broadcasting Service, November 9, 2020. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/american-mom-pleaded-guilty-terrorism-charges-sentenced/>. ; BBC. "It's 'Sweet Relief' to Be Home, Says US Boy Forced to Threaten Trump in Is Video." BBC News. BBC, November 23, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-54995445>.

August 2016, for instance, IS released a video showcasing five young foreign fighter children killing five Kurdish fighters.¹⁶⁸ Other videos show children training, carrying weapons, or learning new weapons systems. Some, like “Jihad Junior”, are as young as 4 years-old.¹⁶⁹ The use of children in these promotional materials has one common set of purposes: to increase fear in opponents and gain greater intentional attention.

For the Islamic State, children were more than extra boots on the ground. They carried symbolic power. The group viewed children as an investment in the future of the movement, as a pillar of their push to alter the composition of society. Gina Vale makes a similar point, “[the Islamic State] is not simply recruiting child soldiers to replace deficiencies in manpower from their adult forces, but instead is seeking to enlist minors on account of their specialised narrative effect – the use of ‘innocent’ children to defend the ‘caliphate’ against the monstrous crusader armies.”¹⁷⁰ A systematic and multidisciplinary education system was at the center of the group’s efforts to mobilize, indoctrinate, and train the minors in its ranks, including foreign children. Indeed, the group took a “comprehensive, systematized, and institutionalized approach” to education in an attempt to graft its own customs and values onto the younger generations of its citizen-fighters.¹⁷¹

In their training, the Islamic State used different approaches when dealing with local and foreign children. Unlike local children, most foreign children had to first learn Arabic, the Quran, and the Hadith, before they could start their military and other physical training.¹⁷² After these foundational courses, the process became exceptionally gendered. As reported by expert Francesca Capone, boys “moved on to physical and military training, while girls, also known as the ‘pearls of the Caliphate’, were given instruction in being a desirable spouse to their husband, bring up their children in line with ISIL’s ideology, and take care of their houses.”¹⁷³

Foreign children displayed varying levels of willing support for the Islamic State. While some foreign children were lured to radicalization by IS recruiters or family members, many had little say in their recruitment and deployment. Indeed, in the Islamic State, the recruitment of foreign fighter children was often done forcibly.¹⁷⁴ For instance, according to an interview, widows of

¹⁶⁸ Browne, Gareth. —‘British child’ shown executing man in shocking new ISIS propaganda video, *I Mirror*. August 26, 2016.; Mahmood, Sara. “‘CUBS OF THE CALIPHATE’ THE ISLAMIC STATE’S FOCUS ON CHILDREN.” *Counter terrorist trends and analyses* 8, no. 10 (2016): 9-12.

¹⁶⁹ Vale, Gina. “Cubs in the Lions’ Den: Indoctrination and Recruitment of Children Within Islamic State Territory.” *International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation* (2018): 15.

¹⁷⁰ Vale, Gina. “Cubs in the Lions’ Den: Indoctrination and Recruitment of Children Within Islamic State Territory.” *International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation* (2018): 9-10.

¹⁷¹ Zeiger, Sara, Farangiz Atamuradova, Lilah Elsayed, and Muna Chung. “Planting the Seeds of the Poisonous Tree: Establishing a System of Meaning Through ISIS Education”. 2021. *The ISIS Files*. <https://isisfiles.gwu.edu/reports/j3860694x?locale=en>

¹⁷² Zeiger, Sara, Farangiz Atamuradova, Lilah Elsayed, and Muna Chung. “Planting the Seeds of the Poisonous Tree: Establishing a System of Meaning Through ISIS Education”. 2021: 23. *The ISIS Files*.

¹⁷³ Capone, Francesca “Worse than Child Soldiers: A Critical Analysis of Foreign Children in the Ranks of ISIL,” *International Criminal Law Review* 17, no. 1 (2017): 179.

¹⁷⁴ Almohammad, Asaad. “ISIS child soldiers in Syria: The structural and predatory recruitment, enlistment, pre-training indoctrination, training, and deployment.” *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism–The Hague* 8 (2018): 1-29.

foreign fighters were coerced to enlist their children, and the enlistment of all male children of foreign fighters was made mandatory.¹⁷⁵

Following the collapse of the Caliphate, some adult foreign fighters were successful in fleeing Iraq and Syria, either en route to a nearby country or to return to their countries of origin. Children, like women, had far less mobility and the vast majority of survivors were placed in large detention camps. In the next section, we summarize existing knowledge and conditions relating to the detention and return of foreign fighter children.

Detained and returning foreign children

Children of foreign fighters experience the three stage lifecycle differently from adult travelers. This gap is perpetuated by differences in agency and power between adults and children. In the case of foreign fighter children, their statuses at the end of the lifecycle fall into one of three categories: they may be deceased, living in detention camps, or already back home.¹⁷⁶ The vast majority of cases fall in the first and second categories. The real number of the “unreturned” is unknown, as foreign fighters both traveled with children and had more children once in Iraq and Syria.¹⁷⁷ But existing estimates provide a useful ballpark baseline. One recent report estimates that as few as 13,500 foreign women and children are still held in various Syrian detention camps, mainly al-Hol.¹⁷⁸ Conversely, UNICEF estimates that, as of February 2021, more than 22,000 foreign children from at least 60 countries remain.¹⁷⁹ The discrepancy in these estimates is likely a joint function of unequal access to these camps as well as whether persons from Iraq are considered local or foreign. Though, how many of these are children is unknown. Thomas Renard and Rik Coolsaet estimate that 610-680 European children are still held in Syrian detention camps, the plurality of which are of French origin.¹⁸⁰ The number of U.S. minors living in these camps remains unclear. Inaction is perilous. U.S. CENTCOM General Kenneth McKenzie summarized the broad implications of ignoring the foreign minors living in detention camps, in a state of limbo. “Al-Hol, one of the largest displaced persons camps in Syria holds nearly 61,000 people. Ninety-four percent of Al-Hol’s occupants are women and children, with two-thirds under

¹⁷⁵ Almohammad, Asaad. “ISIS child soldiers in Syria: The structural and predatory recruitment, enlistment, pre-training indoctrination, training, and deployment.” *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism—The Hague* 8 (2018): 17.

¹⁷⁶ van der Heide, E. J., and A. Alexander. “Homecoming: Considerations for Rehabilitating and Reintegrating Islamic State-Affiliated Minors.” *Homecoming: Considerations for Rehabilitating and Reintegrating Islamic State-Affiliated Minors* (2020): 11.

¹⁷⁷ Houry, Nadim. “The “Unreturned”: Dealing with the Foreign Fighters and Their Families who Remain in Syria and Iraq.” *Militant Jihadism* (2018): 59.
<https://library.oapen.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.12657/24690/9789461663023.pdf?sequence=1#page=60>

¹⁷⁸ Renard, Thomas, and Rik Coolsaet. *From bad to worse: The fate of European foreign fighters and families detained in Syria, one year after the Turkish offensive*. Egmont Institute., 2020: 4.

¹⁷⁹ UNICEF. “UNICEF calls for the safe reintegration and repatriation of all children in al-Hol Camp and across the northeast of Syria”. 2021. <https://www.unicef.org/mena/press-releases/unicef-calls-safe-reintegration-and-repatriation-all-children-al-hol-camp-and-across>

¹⁸⁰ Renard, Thomas, and Rik Coolsaet. *From bad to worse: The fate of European foreign fighters and families detained in Syria, one year after the Turkish offensive*. Egmont Institute., 2020: 5.

the age of 18. Besides the near-term risk of an outbreak of disease or other conditions that could cause a humanitarian catastrophe, efforts by ISIS to radicalize elements of this population pose longer-term concerns.”¹⁸¹

Of course, some foreign children have already been repatriated from Iraq and Syria, but progress has been slow. Western countries have been especially resistant to repatriating foreign fighter families from Iraq and Syria. But there are notable exceptions. In Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, for instance, a 2016 report by Adrian Shtuni finds that children have made up roughly 10 percent and 25 percent, respectively, of returnees from Iraq and Syria.”¹⁸² In January 2020, Tunisia repatriated six orphaned children of ISIS-affiliated parents from Libya.¹⁸³ Relatively, Russia has been more welcoming of returning children. As of March 2021, the country had reportedly repatriated nearly 275 of its foreign traveler children. While countries like Germany and France have been highly adverse to repatriating its Islamic State fighters, they have made some allowances for their children. As of June 2020, France had repatriated approximately 35 foreign traveler children. In December 2020, Germany repatriated 12 more children. Reportedly, as of December 2021, the United States has repatriated 16 foreign fighter children.¹⁸⁴

But many foreign children have not returned. Some were killed in military operations or died of health complications. Others remain in overcrowded, dangerous, and under-resourced detention camps in northeastern Syria. These children are caught in a state of limbo between in-theater and return. This continues to pose a number of serious and escalating security and humanitarian challenges. According to a report by the United Nations’ Human Rights Council, “at least 390 preventable deaths were recorded, mostly due to pneumonia, dehydration or malnutrition, primarily affecting boys and girls as young as 5 years old, either en route to displacement camps in Northeastern Syria or shortly after arrival.” Once on-site, security conditions have only deteriorated from there. In July 2019, a pregnant Indonesian woman, and mother of three, was reportedly beaten, tortured, and killed by other women in the camp who maintained their allegiance to the Islamic State.¹⁸⁵ In April 2019, U.S. General Kenneth McKenzie remarked that

¹⁸¹ Statement by General Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr., a commander for the United States Central Command, and given before the Senate Armed Services Committee on April 22, 2021.

¹⁸² Shtuni, Adrian “Dynamics of Radicalization and Violent Extremism in Kosovo,” Special Report No. 397 (Washington, DC: U.S. Institute of Peace, 2016); Tarras-Wahlberg, Louisa “Promises of Paradise? IS Propaganda towards Women,” ICCT, December 6, 2016; Azinovic, Vlado, and Muhamed Jusic, “The New Lure of the Syrian War: The Foreign Fighters Bosnian Contingent” (Sarajevo: Atlantic Initiative, 2015)

¹⁸³ Hassan, Lila. “Repatriating ISIS Foreign Fighters Is Key to Stemming Radicalization, Experts Say, but Many Countries Don’t Want Their Citizens Back • Ci Review.” PBS Frontline. PBS Frontline, April 6, 2021. <https://www.cireview.org/2021/04/repatriating-isis-foreign-fighters-is-key-to-stemming-radicalization-experts-say-but-many-countries-dont-want-their-citizens-back/>.

¹⁸⁴ U.S. Department of State. “Country Reports on Terrorism 2020.” Bureau of Counterterrorism. <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2020/>

¹⁸⁵ van der Heide, E. J., and A. Alexander. “Homecoming: Considerations for Rehabilitating and Reintegrating Islamic State-Affiliated Minors.” Homecoming: Considerations for Rehabilitating and Reintegrating Islamic State-Affiliated Minors (2020): 13. ; CNA. “Indonesia Probing Report of Pregnant Woman’s Death in Syrian Refugee Camp for IS Members.” CNA. CNA, August 1, 2019. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/indonesia-pregnant-woman-dies-islamic-state-syria-refugee-camp-862196>.; Zelin, Aaron. “Wilayat al-Hawl: ‘Remaining’ and Incubating the Next Islamic State Generation,” Washington Institute, (October 2019): 3.

“increased violence in the Al-Hol displaced persons camp in northeast Syria has impeded the SDF’s access to, and overall safety in, the camp, having a detrimental effect on humanitarian conditions. The adverse and insecure conditions create increased risk for camp populations and camp administration.”¹⁸⁶ This includes humanitarian aid workers. Indeed, recent reports indicate that humanitarian access to the “annexes” in these camps designated for foreign women and children has “become extremely difficult,” with notable implications for medical support or education services.¹⁸⁷ Constraints and health concerns caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have only worsened these circumstances.

The children of foreign fighters are highly vulnerable to continued health, food, and water insecurity, sustained exposure to violence and extremist ideology, and growing gaps in their education. Recent statements from global leaders, including the United States, suggests a growing political will to mitigate this humanitarian and security issue. But significant obstacles to acting on this newfound consensus remain.

POLICY GAPS AND CHALLENGES

As highlighted throughout the preceding report, a variety of policy challenges emerge in foreign terrorist fighter (FTF) management specific to issues of gender, minors, families, and trauma-informed care. However, from a policy perspective it is perhaps more useful to canvass a range of broader FTF management challenges within which greater emphasis needs to be placed on these specific issues. This type of framing helps to better contextualize gender, children, and trauma issues with what could be described as fundamental, persistent, and crosscutting FTF management policy challenges. This approach also helps to avoid the type of policy silos that can contribute to, rather than alleviate, the problems in government and multisector responses already highlighted in this paper. This section focuses on five policy challenges and elaborates on their implications.

Policy cascade and complexity

FTF management policy is a crosscutting issue in the sense that it has direct and indirect implications for a range of policy areas. For example, FTF management directly impacts counterterrorism, national security, as well as preventing and countering violent extremism strategic-policy areas. However, it also has more indirect implications for a variety of other areas including immigration, citizenship, human/civil rights, social welfare, and even health policy. This policy cascade creates governmental, bureaucratic, legal, and communicative complexities that further compound the policy complexity that is inherent to dealing with a complicated

¹⁸⁶ Statement by General Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr., a commander for the United States Central Command, and given before the Senate Armed Services Committee on April 22, 2021.

¹⁸⁷ Renard, Thomas, and Rik Coolsaet. From bad to worse: The fate of European foreign fighters and families detained in Syria, one year after the Turkish offensive. Egmont Institute., 2020: 3.

phenomenon. This creates additional challenges for government and non-government actors for policy design, multisector coordination, and communication strategies.

In many ways, FTF management issues specific to gender, minors and children, and trauma-informed care emerge as not just a microcosm for these issues but areas where the policy cascade and complexity are amplified. For example, gaps in understanding within policy circles are potential areas where flaws in policy design and implementation are more likely to emerge. As this study has demonstrated, gender, children, and trauma-informed care are clearly critical vulnerabilities in this regard. Policy cascade then further disrupts the development of nuanced and timely policy decisions, and this has been evidenced in the responses of government to women, children, and family returnees. An important way to address these challenges is to establish a strong legal foundation upon which FTF management policies are built. However, many western governments have decided to base FTF management decisions on security arguments that may appeal to electorates but fly in the face of legal norms.

Rapidly evolving threat and threat environment

Much of the policy thinking and practice that informs discourse around FTF management has been influenced by, if not explicitly developed in response to, trends in foreign fighter dynamics tied to the Islamic State threat circa 2014-17. While this is understandable, this study has demonstrated how the FTF phenomenon has evolved particularly as foreigners who traveled to support the Islamic State now languish in prisons and camps particularly in the Middle East. This has implications for changes in the FTF life cycle and the potential for women and children to pose new legal and security challenges with camps in Syria and Iraq emerging as incubators of radicalization. More broadly, in the last three years alone the security environment, the global security environment has been in flux.

A handful of examples underscore how fundamentally different the security environment is compared to 3-5 years ago. The Islamic State no longer controls territory and has since shifted to a global insurgency campaign, the Taliban is back in power in Afghanistan boosting the hopes of al-Qaeda affiliates and sympathizers, far-right and far-left extremists have traveled overseas for military training or to fight in foreign wars, and the full impact of COVID-19 on security dynamics is yet to be fully understood. In summary, it is vital to regularly revisit and reassess the FTF policy. However, given the nature of the threat and the most critical issues at present (e.g. foreign women and children held in detention camps), it is especially important to renew FTF policy related to women and children as reflected in the findings of this study.

Uneven impacts

One of the most challenging policy considerations in FTF management concerns the disproportionality of its impacts at every level. While some countries such as Belgium and France had significant flows of nationals traveling to join violent extremists groups, many other countries had comparatively little or no foreign fighter problems at the peak of the Islamic State's territorial control. Yet even in those countries that had significant issues, it was inevitably only certain

communities that were impacted. This tendency can have the effect of making some perceive the potential threat to be overblown while others may perceive that not enough is being done. For those returnees who are most vulnerable, such as potentially women, child, and family returnees, it can make the rehabilitation and repatriation process more complicated and difficult to manage.

Controversial, contentious, and a media magnet

Citizens traveling to another country to join and actively support violent extremists is an emotive and controversial issue but this is significantly amplified when the cases involve women and children. For these reasons, it is an issue which attracts media attention especially since it can have a polarizing impact on public opinion. Controversial, contentious, and a media magnet, FTF management involving women and children is ripe for exploitation by politically motivated actors. There are countless examples of politicians across the political spectrum drawing on FTF management issues to appeal to constituents but it is malign influence actors – whether state or non-state acting strategically or inadvertently – that can spread propaganda and misinformation and sow mistrust which makes policy design and communication very difficult.

It is also worth noting the tendency for FTF cases involving women and children to receive heavier media coverage and emerge as cause célèbre cases that disproportionately set the agenda for public discourse about these issues. From the Shamima Begum case in the UK to Jennifer Wenisch in Germany, the perceived role of women and children in foreign terrorist organizations, the threat they pose on return, and the impact of trauma on their lives will often be shaped by prominent cases. This underscores the importance of government's adopting an holistic approach to the role of strategic communications in FTF management.

The role of strategic communications in FTF management

A consistent gap in FTF management policy, let alone strategies specific to women and children, is the role afforded to strategic communications. Far too-often, strategic communications is absent from major policy documents or is narrowly utilized in a counter-narrative and alternative narrative capacity. There are those who may argue that given the aforementioned challenges – i.e. that FTF management, especially involving women and children, is prone to policy cascade, complex, controversial, and constantly evolving – strategic communications is too risky. Yet, it is precisely because of these challenges that a strategic approach to communications is so vital. Complex threats and policy decisions need to be explained to the public. A contentious information environment characterized by a media may disproportionately skew public discourse and malign influence actors that may fuel misunderstanding and discord underscores the importance of proactive messaging synchronized across multi-sector actors.

A holistic approach to strategic communication in FTF management necessitates the integration of an overarching method, policy messaging, expectation management, media relations, and crisis communications components. By adopting a more holistic approach to messaging activities, policymakers should see strategic communications as a toolkit from which they can draw a range of different strategies and approaches to shape not only the perceptions of target audiences but

the information environment. Strategic communications should be a central consideration in policy design in a variety of ways. For example, the gendered propaganda of violent extremists needs to be analyzed to inform evidence-based approaches to both counter-messaging strategies and gender specific program design. How an issue is framed to the public is also important for shaping perceptions. For example, “foreign fighter returnee” crudely clumps all returnees under the category of a fighter tied to a foreign terrorist organization. Yet, as this study has shown, there is no single profile of a returnee and those individuals may engage in a variety of roles. Moreover, given that this threat may evolve to encapsulate a diversity of ideologies in the future, a broader term like “foreign conflict returnee” as a generic reference to travelers may be more appropriate with FTF’s being applied only to specific cases and upon a legal basis.

CONCLUSION

This review both showcases significant recent advancements and illuminates pressing gaps in our understanding of the foreign fighter problem. The phenomenon is dynamic; and the situation urgent. We summarize these here and highlight their implications for policy and practice. While the foreign fighter phenomenon is neither new nor constrained to the Middle East, the recent global mobilization of travelers to Syria and Iraq brought forth a myriad of problems for governments around the world. It also reveals that several blindspots across the academic and policy communities remain, slowing efforts at formulating an effective global response. Specifically, we find a dearth of attention paid to gender dynamics, minor travelers and returnees, and foreign fighter families. These blindspots threaten to undermine the effective repatriation, reintegration, and rehabilitation of foreign fighter families.

First, this research emphasizes the **unique gendered aspects** inherent to the foreign fighter problem. When examining the gendered aspects of the foreign traveler lifecycle, in the pre-departure and recruitment phase, certain aspects of men and women’s radicalization experiences while following similar pathways are also affected by social constructs relating to being a man or woman. While past mobilizations of foreign fighters were predominantly men, insurgent groups with state-building ambitions have recruited men, women, and families to join their governance exercise. Indeed, a number of groups highlight idealized gender binary roles to recruit members, playing on ideas of masculinity and femininity to mobilize supporters to travel to conflict zones. Moreover, as individuals move from pre-departure to in-theater, a militant group’s ideology can affect the gender dynamics in-theater, and in turn the experiences of women travelers. For example, when looking at the case of Islamic State, women while in-theater were both victims and perpetrators. While the Islamic State’s gendered system of control limited women’s agency once ‘in-territory’, in order to implement its gender segregated society, some group’s female supporters ended up supporting and taking part in the group’s domestic security apparatuses. The line of agency separating women’s victimhood and culpability was often blurred due once ‘in-territory’.¹⁸⁸ Finally, gendered considerations relating to the structural constraints inhibiting

¹⁸⁸ The recent case and in-depth investigation and successful prosecution of American citizen Samantha Elhassani (aka Sam Sally) has brought to light some of these complex issue, including her agency in traveling to join

women's abilities to return from conflict zones need to be addressed. Specifically, for groups that adhere to violent Islamist ideology, which requires women to have a proper male escort, it is extremely difficult for women to leave in-theater conflict zones. Moreover, once captured, many remain indefinitely held in detention camps. While many governments have systems in place to prosecute male foreign travelers, they do not have the same abilities and/or desire to prosecute women foreign travelers, thus either leaving them in a political limbo in detention camps or releasing them with little recourse.

Second, our report highlights the challenge of **foreign minors and children** associated with these groups. The set of related challenges is immense, and compounded by the issue of agency related to minors who were often forcibly taken from their home communities, including the US, to conflict zones. Research has often focused on adult foreign travelers and their roles within these movements, with little attention to minor travelers. When quantifying the phenomenon, children were often left out of the equation or were codified as adults, thus inhibiting a full understanding of the problem. Relatedly, we emphasize the need for a holistic assessment of the **trauma experienced by minors** in foreign conflict zones and in detention. For example, US minors who were used by terrorist organizations in violent propaganda videos.¹⁸⁹ The lives of the children of foreign travelers are multi-faceted and diverse—some have been perpetrators and survivors of violence, and all cases involve varying levels of coercion, manipulation, and trauma. Their experienced trauma throughout the three stages of the lifecycle need to account for their minor status, both in terms of legal recourse and accountability. Tanya Mehra and Christophe Paulussen, for example, summarize the urgency and sensitivity of this issue, “Rehabilitation and reintegration are going to be vital for returning family members, in particular children. Indeed, children are in the first place victims.”¹⁹⁰

Third, and finally, research and policy efforts tend to ignore the interconnectivity of **the foreign fighter family unit**. The academic and policy communities tend to focus on men, women, and children separately, ignoring the interconnectivity of family radicalization and, conversely, demobilization and reintegration. Moreover, the notion of foreign fighter families has introduced new gendered elements for consideration, including the linking of women and children. The foreign fighter family can take many forms. Some families travel to conflict zones together, with research finding that certain regions had higher rates of travelers arriving in-territory as family

the Islamic State, her role in financing terrorism, the purported removal of her agency once under Islamic State control, her role in purchasing and owning child slaves, and her gendered appeals proclaiming her innocence upon her return to the United States. For more on this case, please see:

<https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/former-elkhart-indiana-resident-sentenced-over-six-years-prison-financing-terrorism>; and Josh Baker. (2021) ‘I’m not a monster’: Finding the truth about Sam Sally

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/extra/ggkz0ug4ff/im-not-a-monster>; While the recent conflict in Iraq and Syria has highlighted this dynamic within transnational violent extremist movements, we also observe a sizable gap in the literature related to foreign fighter women in non-jihadi groups.

¹⁸⁹ BBC News. “It’s ‘Sweet Relief’ to Be Home, Says US Boy Forced to Threaten Trump in IS Video.” BBC News. BBC, November 23, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-54995445>.

¹⁹⁰ Mehra, Tanya and Christophe Paulussen, *The Repatriation of Foreign Fighters and Their Families: Options, Obligations, Morality and Long-Term Thinking*, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, March 6, 2019, <https://icct.nl/publication/the-repatriation-of-foreign-fighters-and-their-families-options-obligations-morality-and-long-term-thinking/>.

units, including Western Europe, Eastern Europe, and Eastern Asia. In other cases, some families are formed in-theater. This creates additional issues, including families made up of citizens of multiple countries, and questions regarding the citizenship of minors born to foreign parents in conflict theaters. Research has found that the extent to which foreign fighters travel with families or establish them in-theater varies across conflicts, groups, and travelers' countries of origin. However, findings show that state-building insurgencies are more likely to recruit families, as they intend to build a society around their ideological goals.

Further complicating the process of repatriation and reintegration, the foreign fighter family can be broken apart by travel, death, and capture. As explored above, while men have often been imprisoned, women and children have often been held together in detention camps usually run by non-governmental organizations. Family units, if they remained intact up to this point, were severed. Foreign fighter families present unique challenges to counter-terrorism professionals seeking to help men, women, and minors disengage from these movements. Their experiences pre-departure, in-theater, and upon their return are affected by a range of issues including age, gender, and state of origin. For those who decided to travel, a range of motivations drove this decision. Some individuals traveled alone, others as complete family units, while still others left partners or children behind, while traveling along with other family members.

The crisis in Syria and Iraq was not the first, nor will it be the last systematic mobilization of foreign fighter families. In the coming years, more conflicts will erupt, instigated by insurgencies with both governance ambitions and aspirations of reconfiguring society. These campaigns are especially careful to cater to the core grievances and narratives that motivate foreign persons to travel. Foreign families are sure to play important practical and symbolic roles in these efforts. In the meantime, efforts to repatriate, reintegrate, and rehabilitate foreign terrorist fighters spouses and children need to be better positioned to overcome the host of corresponding policy challenges with a full consideration of the intertwined dynamics relating to gender, minor travelers, and families.

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