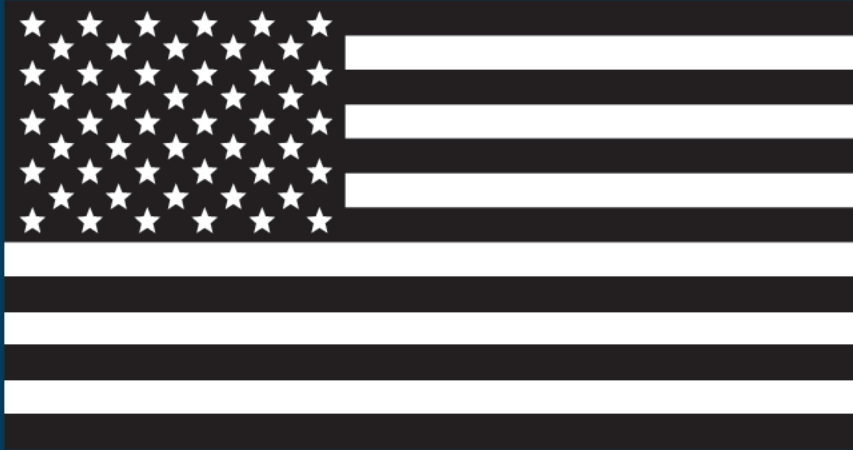


ISIS IN AMERICA



FROM RETWEETS TO RAQQA

Lorenzo Vidino and Seamus Hughes
December 2015

Program on Extremism

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

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Program on Extremism
2000 Pennsylvania Avenue NW, Suite 2210
Washington, DC 20052
www.cchs.gwu.edu/program-extremism

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About the Program on Extremism

The Program on Extremism provides analysis on issues related to violent and non-violent extremism. The Program spearheads innovative and thoughtful academic inquiry, producing empirical work that strengthens extremism research as a distinct field of study. The Program aims to develop pragmatic policy solutions that resonate with policymakers, civic leaders, and the general public. The Program is part of the Center for Cyber and Homeland Security (CCHS) at the George Washington University.

FOREWORD

by Jane Harman

IN 2007, as a Member of Congress, I introduced the Violent Radicalization and Homegrown Terrorism Prevention Act. We were just starting to understand how terrorists could manipulate the Internet—Twitter was one year old—and my bill would have established a national commission to study the issue and advise Congress. After passing the House by an overwhelming bipartisan vote, the proposal was blocked in the Senate over claims it would reestablish J. Edgar Hoover's COINTELPRO—a huge distortion.

Eight years later, the issue couldn't be more urgent. The new radicalization crosses borders. Loners don't have to leave their basements to find extremist messages. Some radical Islamists coordinate complex attacks using PlayStations, while some hatch plots without ever contacting a known terrorist. Paris, Beirut, a Russian jet downed over Sinai: these are just the most recent outbreaks of a terrorist pandemic.

In a democracy like ours, the expression of radical views is protected by the Constitution. Violent action—inspired by those beliefs—is not. Our challenge is to identify the triggers for violence and intervene at just the right moment to prevent it. But as *ISIS in America* makes clear, one size doesn't fit all. Homegrown terrorists don't fit a single profile. Using social media, our enemies can micro-target their audiences, selling a narrative we need to learn to counter.

Efforts like George Washington University's Program on Extremism have a critical role to play. Based on extensive interviews, court records, and media reports, *ISIS in America: From Retweets to Raqqa* is a comprehensive study of known ISIS recruits in the United States. More

than 50 have been arrested this year alone, a new record, and hundreds are the targets of ongoing investigations. What drew them to ISIS's twisted fantasy? How do we pull them away? How can we identify the next lone wolf before he—or she—sets off the next pressure cooker bomb?

This report is a deep, responsible start. It takes a 21st century approach: the Internet overhauled radicalization, and it should also upgrade the way we study it. As I argued this year in *Foreign Affairs*, some of the most important intelligence is no longer secret. Some of the best information is open-source, plastered on message boards or a 19-year-old's Twitter feed. Policymakers have been slow to adapt; spies would still rather squint at satellite photos than scrape Facebook feeds.

As the head of the Wilson Center, chartered by Congress to bridge the worlds of scholarship and policy, I welcome this contribution to our national conversation. It is consistent with our values and our First Amendment principles to ask tough questions. We can't win if we fear the answers. Going forward, *ISIS in America* will be a critical resource for scholars, citizens, and policymakers. It will form common ground for dialogue as we confront a shared challenge: maximizing liberty and security. I look forward to more work from the Program on Extremism, thank them for this effort, and applaud their commitment to knowledge in the public service.

■ ■ ■

Jane Harman is president and chief executive of the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington. She represented California's 36th Congressional District for nine terms.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- WHILE NOT AS LARGE as in many other Western countries, ISIS-related mobilization in the United States has been unprecedented. As of the fall of 2015, U.S. authorities speak of some 250 Americans who have traveled or attempted to travel to Syria/Iraq to join the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and 900 active investigations against ISIS sympathizers in all 50 states.
- Seventy-one individuals have been charged with ISIS-related activities since March 2014. Fifty-six have been arrested in 2015 alone, a record number of terrorism-related arrests for any year since 9/11. Of those charged:
 - The average age is 26.
 - 86% are male.
 - Their activities were located in 21 states.
 - 51% traveled or attempted to travel abroad.
 - 27% were involved in plots to carry out attacks on U.S. soil.
 - 55% were arrested in an operation involving an informant and/or an undercover agent.
- A small number of Americans have been killed in ISIS-related activities: three inside the U.S., at least a dozen abroad.
- The profiles of individuals involved in ISIS-related activities in the U.S. differ widely in race, age, social class, education, and family background. Their motivations are equally diverse and defy easy analysis.
- Social media plays a crucial role in the radicalization and, at times, mobilization of U.S.-based ISIS sympathizers. The Program on Extremism has identified some 300 American and/or U.S.-based ISIS sympathizers active on social media, spreading propaganda, and interacting with like-minded individuals. Some members of this online echo chamber eventually make the leap from keyboard warriors to actual militancy.
- American ISIS sympathizers are particularly active on Twitter, where they spasmodically create accounts that often get suspended in a never-ending cat-and-mouse game. Some accounts (the “nodes”) are the generators of primary content, some (the “amplifiers”) just retweet material, others (the “shout-outs”) promote newly created accounts of suspended users.
- ISIS-related radicalization is by no means limited to social media. While instances of purely web-driven, individual radicalization are numerous, in several cases U.S.-based individuals initially cultivated and later strengthened their interest in ISIS’s narrative through face-to-face relationships. In most cases online and offline dynamics complement one another.
- The spectrum of U.S.-based sympathizers’ actual involvement with ISIS varies significantly, ranging from those who are merely inspired by its message to those few who reached mid-level leadership positions within the group.

INTRODUCTION

LIKE MOST NEWLYWED COUPLES, 22-year-old Mohammad Oda Dakhalla and his 19-year-old wife Jaelyn Delshaun Young were planning for their future. Dakhalla, the son of a local imam, was about to start graduate school at Mississippi State University (MSU). Young, a one-time high school cheerleader and the daughter of a Vicksburg, Mississippi, police officer, was a sophomore chemistry major at MSU.¹ Yet, unbeknownst to nearly all their relatives and acquaintances, the couple had developed a parallel life and conceived a secret honeymoon: traveling to Syria to join the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

In the early months of 2015 the couple's radical musings on Twitter attracted the attention of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). During a four-month investigation, Dakhalla and Young repeatedly expressed their wish to contribute to the growth of ISIS's self-proclaimed caliphate to undercover FBI agents online. Young—who went by “Aaminah al-Amriki” on Twitter—asserted that she was “skilled in math and chemistry and worked at an analytical lab here at my college campus,” and that she wished to “raise little Dawlah [ISIS] cubs.” She claimed Dakhalla wanted to do propaganda work to “assure [Muslims] the US media is all lies when regarding Dawlah” and later, “join the Mujahideen.”²

In another conversation, Young informed an agent that after their Islamic wedding, the couple intended to make the journey to Syria.³ She explained, “Our story will be that we are newlyweds on our honeymoon,” adding, “In sha Allah the planning will land us in Dawlah with the grace of Allah swt [Subhanahu Wa Ta'ala, Arabic for ‘The most glorified, the highest’].”⁴ As their anticipated departure date inched closer, the couple penned farewell letters to their families explaining their actions were both deliberate and voluntary.⁵

The couple's plans never materialized. Just as the pair set out on their journey to Syria, the FBI arrested them at a small regional airport in Mississippi on August 8, 2015. Young and Dakhalla were charged with



FIG. 1 Young (left) and Dakhalla



FIG. 2 Young's Twitter account

1. WAPT News, “2 Mississippi Residents Charged with Trying to Join ISIS: Jaelyn Delshaun Young, Muhammad Oda Dakhalla Arrested,” August 12, 2015.
2. *United States of America v. Jaelyn Delshaun Young and Muhammad Oda Dakhalla*, Criminal Complaint (August 8, 2015).
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.

attempting and conspiring to provide material support and resources to a designated foreign terrorist organization.⁶

The couple's arrest made national news, arriving at the tail end of a summer that saw an unprecedented number of ISIS-related arrests across the country. While the U.S.-based ISIS supporters who have been charged come from a wide range of ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds, many share core characteristics: they were American-born, under age 30, and had no previous history of radical views or activities. How could these seemingly ordinary young American men and, in growing numbers, women, be attracted to the world's most infamous terrorist organization? There is no simple answer to this question, as each individual's radicalization has its own unique dynamics. Still, cases like that of Dakhllalla and Young are increasingly emblematic of the dynamics of radicalization seen throughout America over the last few years.

From Hijackings to Hashtags: The Evolution of Jihadism in America

Violent extremism of the jihadist inspiration is not a new phenomenon in America.⁷ Already in the 1980s, a small number of American citizens and residents traveled to

Afghanistan to join the *mujahideen* seeking to repel the Soviet invasion.⁸ Throughout the 1990s, scattered clusters of American-based militants were involved in other foreign conflicts (e.g. Bosnia and Chechnya) or provided material support to al Qaeda and other Sunni extremist groups. One such cluster based out of New York and New Jersey carried out one of the earliest attacks on U.S. soil, the 1993 World Trade Center bombing.⁹

After the September 11, 2001, attacks, the U.S. counterterrorism community adopted a more aggressive posture, resulting in the discovery of dozens of individuals and cells across the country. American jihadists operating throughout the 2000s and early 2010s varied significantly in terms of their profiles, organizational affiliations, and operational capabilities.¹⁰ While some had deep links to al Qaeda and its affiliates, others were nothing more than sympathizers of jihadist ideology lacking operational connections.

Over time, the greatest threat to the U.S. homeland came to be posed not so much by groups operating overseas (although a number of plots conceived by al Qaeda and its affiliates have been thwarted over the last decade), but from "self-radicalized, homegrown extremists in the United States."¹¹ In fact, in 2010 then-Attorney General Eric Holder indicated that the terrorist threat had "changed

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6. WAPT News, "2 Mississippi Residents Charged with Trying to Join ISIS: Jaelyn Delshaun Young, Muhammad Oda Dakhllalla Arrested," August 12, 2015.
 7. An inherently controversial and arguably improper term, "jihadism" refers to the ideology adopted by groups such as al Qaeda and ISIS. The authors are aware that the term "jihad" has a number of meanings and that most Muslims use the term in ways different than these groups.
 8. J.M. Berger, *Jihad Joe: Americans Who Go to War in the Name of Islam* (Washington DC: Potomac Books, 2011).
 9. See Lorenzo Vidino, "Homegrown Jihadist Terrorism in the United States: A New and Occasional Phenomenon?," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 32, no. 1 (January 2009): 1-17.
 10. For more on jihadist networks in the U.S., see Brian Michael Jenkins, "Stray Dogs and Virtual Armies Radicalization and Recruitment to Jihadist Terrorism in the United States Since 9/11," RAND Corporation, Occasional Paper, 2011.; Risa A. Brooks, "Muslim 'Homegrown' Terrorism in the United States: How Serious Is the Threat?" *International Security* 36, no. 2 (Fall 2011): 7-47.; Charles Kurzman, "Muslim-American Terrorism in the Decade Since 9/11," Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security, February 2012.; Scott Matthew Kleinmann, "Radicalization of Homegrown Sunni Militants in the United States: Comparing Converts and Non-Converts," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 35, no. 4 (2012): 278-297.; Jerome P. Bjelopera, "American Jihadist Terrorism: Combating a Complex Threat," Congressional Research Service, January 23, 2013.; Charles Kurzman, "Muslim-American Terrorism: Declining Further," Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security, February 1, 2013.; Jessica Zuckerman, Steven P. Bucci, and James Jay Carafano, "60 Terrorist Plots Since 9/11: Continued Lessons in Domestic Counterterrorism," The Heritage Foundation, July 2013.; and Lorenzo Vidino, "From KSM's Genius to Sheer Amateurism: The Post-9/11 Evolution of the Terrorist Threat in the United States," in Bruce Hoffman and Fernando Reinares, eds., *The Evolution of the Global Terrorist Threat: From 9/11 to Osama bin Laden's Death* (Columbia University Press, 2014), 3-28.
 11. Testimony of Robert S. Mueller, III, Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, United States Senate, *Annual Worldwide Threat Assessment*, Select Committee on Intelligence, February 5, 2008.
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from simply worrying about foreigners coming here, to worrying about people in the United States, American citizens—raised here, born here, and who for whatever reason, have decided that they are going to become radicalized and take up arms against the nation in which they were born.”¹²

American jihadists have engaged in a broad spectrum of activities, ranging from providing logistical support to several foreign terrorist organizations (mainly al Qaeda and its various affiliates but also the Taliban, Pakistan’s Lashkar-e-Taiba, Indonesia’s Jemaah Islamiyah, etc.) to fighting in foreign conflicts, particularly in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Somalia. In several cases these individuals planned attacks on U.S. soil. Authorities have thwarted most of these plots. In fact, many were conceived partially after prodding from the FBI, which since 9/11 has made abundant use of “sting operations” to prevent aspiring jihadists from committing acts of violence. On other occasions, American militants succeeded, as in the cases of Little Rock (2009), Fort Hood (2009), and Boston (2013).

Between 2001 and 2013, more than 200 U.S. citizens and permanent residents were convicted of terrorism-related activities.¹³ This figure clearly indicates that a small but significant number of American citizens and residents embrace jihadist ideology and are committed to using violence, at times against fellow Americans, to this end.

Of course, when analyzed in comparative terms, these numbers and dynamics can be seen in a different light. Some argue that other forms of extremism constitute an equal, if not larger, threat to American domestic security. A study by the New America Foundation, for example, has calculated that since 9/11 almost twice as many Americans have been killed by white supremacists and other anti-government domestic radicals than by Islamist extremists.¹⁴

Moreover, while the challenge of jihadist radicalization certainly exists in the United States, its intensity and size

are significantly smaller than in most European countries. Due to multiple concurring factors—such as a comparatively more integrated American Muslim community and the sporadic and geographically-limited presence of radicalizing agents (radical mosques, extremist preachers, and recruiting networks)—America has witnessed little of the radicalization dynamics seen in countries such as France, Great Britain, Belgium, and Denmark. The American “jihadist scene,” assuming a coherent one exists, is significantly smaller, more decentralized, and less professional than that of most European countries.

By 2011 the jihadist threat on both sides of the Atlantic appeared to have somewhat plateaued. To be sure, the problem of homegrown radicalization clearly still existed. But the somewhat stagnant level of the threat, better law enforcement and intelligence practices, and the enthusiasm generated in the West by the promise of the Arab Spring suggested that jihadism was a manageable and potentially even subsiding problem.

In the last four years, though, jihadism in the West has received a boost triggered by staggering events on the ground in the Middle East. In particular, the conflict in Syria, the successes achieved on the ground by ISIS and other jihadist groups, and ISIS’s formation of a self-proclaimed caliphate have had a magnetic draw for many young Western Muslims.

The scale of this recent mobilization is unprecedented. In May 2015, the United Nations Security Council estimated more than 25,000 foreign fighters from more than 100 countries have joined ISIS and other jihadist groups in Syria.¹⁵ Even though precise data is virtually impossible to obtain, it is believed that some 5,000 European citizens or residents have become foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq, a number that dwarfs all previous mobilizations (Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chechnya, Iraq, Somalia, and Mali) combined.¹⁶

12. Jack Cloherty and Pierre Thomas, “Attorney General’s Blunt Warning on Terror Attacks,” *ABC News*, December 21, 2010.

13. Charles Kurzman, “Muslim-American Terrorism in 2013,” Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security, February 5, 2014, p. 2.

14. Scott Shane, “Homegrown Extremists Tied to Deadlier Toll than Jihadists in U.S. Since 9/11,” *The New York Times (NYT)*, June 24, 2015.

15. United Nations’ Security Council, “Action Against Threat of Foreign Terrorist Fighters Must be Ramped Up, Security Council Urges in High-Level Meeting,” 7453rd Meeting (AM), May 29, 2015.

16. Peter R. Neumann, “Foreign Fighter Total in Syria/Iraq Now Exceeds 20,000; Surpasses Afghanistan Conflict in the 1980s,” The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR), January 26, 2015.

Particularly alarming are numbers from certain countries, such as the 1,200 estimated to have left France, and the 400 who left Belgium, a country of only 11 million.

The numbers in the U.S., while similarly difficult to measure precisely, are significantly lower than those in most European countries. In June 2015 the FBI stated that “upwards of 200 Americans have traveled or attempted to travel to Syria to participate in the conflict.”¹⁷ A few weeks later, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence estimated that more than 250 individuals from the U.S. had traveled or attempted to travel to the conflict area, a few dozen had joined the ranks of ISIS, and some 20 had died.¹⁸

Moreover, the surge in the number of American foreign fighters is small compared to those who sympathize with and embrace ISIS’s ideology. American authorities have consistently said that the popularity of ISIS’s propaganda, driven largely by its savvy social media tactics, wholly overshadows that of al Qaeda. Tellingly, in May 2015 FBI Director James Comey spoke of “hundreds, maybe thousands” of ISIS sympathizers and potential recruits across the country, disclosing that the Bureau had related investigations running in all 50 states.¹⁹ A few months later, in October 2015, Comey revealed that the FBI had a staggering 900 active investigations against homegrown violent extremists.²⁰

Publicly available information confirms a sharp surge of jihadist activities in the U.S., especially when compared to dynamics seen in the years since the wave of arrests following 9/11. Since March 2014, 71 individuals in one way or another linked to ISIS have been charged in the U.S. for terrorism-related activities. The number of arrests has spiked in recent months, with 56 arrested since January 2015. In the same period, a handful of attacks have occurred across the country.

Searching for Answers

What explains the recent surge in American jihadi recruits? Who are the Americans lured by the siren songs of ISIS’s propaganda? How do they embrace such radical ideology, turning their backs on their country and, in most cases, their families? Do they do so by themselves or in clusters of like-minded individuals? Once radicalized, what do they seek: to join the ISIS caliphate between Syria and Iraq or to carry out attacks in the U.S.?

Answers to these and related questions concerning ISIS mobilization in the U.S. have puzzled authorities and the public alike. To shine new light on them, the staff at the George Washington University’s Program on Extremism engaged in a six-month study of the recent surge in domestic radicalization. The result is this report, which, while unable to examine every aspect of such a complex and fluid phenomenon, provides a comprehensive overview of ISIS-related radicalization and mobilization in the United States.

The report consists of two parts. The first examines all cases of U.S. persons arrested, indicted, or convicted in the United States for ISIS-related activities since the first case in March 2014. A wide array of legal documents related to these cases provides empirical evidence for identifying several demographic factors related to the arrested individuals. This section also looks at the cases of other Americans who, while not in the legal system, are known to have engaged in ISIS-inspired behavior.

The second part of the report examines various aspects of the ISIS-related mobilization in America. Here the report analyzes the individual motivations of ISIS supporters; the role of the Internet and, in particular, social media, in their radicalization and recruitment processes; whether their radicalization took place in isolation or with other, like-minded individuals; and the degree of their tangible links to ISIS.

17. Testimony of Michael B. Steinbach, Assistant Director of the FBI, *Terrorism Gone Viral: The Attack in Garland, Texas and Beyond*, House Homeland Security Committee, June 3, 2015.

18. Barbara Starr, “A Few Dozen Americans’ in ISIS Ranks,” *CNN*, July 15, 2015.

19. Tom Vanden Brook, “ISIL Activity Drives up Pentagon Threat Level,” *USA Today*, May 8, 2015.

20. Kevin Johnson, “Comey: Feds have Roughly 900 Domestic Probes about Islamic State Operatives,” *USA Today*, October 23, 2015.

CHAPTER 1

A Snapshot of ISIS in America

IT IS APPARENT that the U.S. is home to a small but active cadre of individuals infatuated with ISIS's ideology, some of whom have decided to mobilize in its furtherance. This section attempts to provide an overview of this demographic by drawing on research that attempted to reconstruct the lives—both real and virtual—of U.S.-based ISIS supporters. The research effort was based on legal documents, media reports, social media monitoring, and interviews with a variety of individuals, though there were at times limitations to both the amount and reliability of publicly available information.

Individuals our researchers identified were classified into three categories: Legal Cases, "At-Large," and Deceased. The Legal Cases include instances where people have entered the U.S. legal system for ISIS-related activities. As of November 12, 2015, 71 individuals have been charged on ISIS-related charges. Legal documents provide a plethora of verifiable information on these individuals. As such, both the degree and the nature of these individuals' affiliations to ISIS were relatively clear, allowing researchers to draw meaningful statistical conclusions. (All those included in this category are presumed innocent until proven guilty.)

The second (in this case, non-comprehensive) category, "At Large" cases, is composed of all Americans identified by the Program on Extremism as having connections to ISIS but who, for various reasons, have not been arrested. Some of these individuals are identified by name, others only by a pseudonym.

The final (also non-comprehensive) category consists of ISIS-linked individuals who have died. This group encompasses the three people killed in the U.S.; well-identified individuals who have died under various circumstances in Syria and/or Iraq; and less clearly identified persons who are allegedly American who have died fighting in Syria and/or Iraq.

Statistics on ISIS Recruits in the U.S. Legal System

Over the course of six months, our researchers reviewed more than 7,000 pages of legal documents detailing ISIS-related legal proceedings, including criminal complaints, indictments, affidavits, and courtroom transcripts. Supplemented by original research and interviews with prosecutors, reporters, and, in some select cases, families of the charged individuals, the Program developed a snapshot of the 71 individuals who have been charged for various ISIS-related activities.

Defying any cookie-cutter profile of the American ISIS supporter, these 71 individuals constitute an incredibly heterogeneous group. In fact, they come from an array of ethnic groups and a range of socio-economic and educational statuses. A deeper analysis of some of these individuals and their radicalization and/or mobilization trajectories is provided below.

To better understand this group, researchers developed nine data points, each corresponding to a distinct demographic factor or arrest characteristic.

Age

The youngest U.S. person arrested for ISIS-related activities was an unnamed 15-year-old boy. Two others were minors, ages 16 and 17 at the time of their arrests. The oldest was Tairod Pugh, a former Air Force officer who was 47 at the time of his arrest. The average age of the American ISIS supporter at the time of charges is 26.

Mirroring a pattern witnessed in most Western countries, the age of those arrested in connection with ISIS is on average lower than that of individuals arrested on terrorism-related charges in the past. As U.S. Assistant Attorney General John Carlin has noted, "In over 50 percent of the cases the defendants are 25 years or younger,

ISIS RECRUITS IN THE U.S. LEGAL SYSTEM



and in over a third of the cases they are 21 years or younger. . . . That is different than the demographic we saw who went to support core al Qaida in the Afghanistan FATA (Federally Administrated Tribal Areas) region.”²¹

Gender

Sixty-one of the seventy-one individuals (86%) are male. Nonetheless, women are taking an increasingly prominent role in the jihadist world. A handful of studies have attempted to identify the reasons why ISIS’s ideology attracts a growing number of Western women.²² While some of these motivations are identical to that of their male counterparts (i.e. the search for a personal identity and the desire to build a strict Islamic society), others are specific to women. The role of women in ISIS varies from propaganda disseminators and recruiters to those as the “wife of jihadist husband” and “mother to the next generation.”²³

Time Frame

The tempo of ISIS-related arrests has increased markedly in 2015. An overwhelming majority (56 individuals) were arrested for ISIS-related activities this year. This represents the largest number of terrorism arrests in a single year since September 2001.

Location

While the FBI has stated that there are active ISIS-related investigations in all 50 states, to date only 21 states have had at least one arrest within their borders. New York saw the highest number of cases (13), followed closely by Minnesota (11).

Legal Status

The vast majority of individuals charged are U.S. citizens (58) or permanent residents (6), underscoring the home-grown nature of the threat. Researchers were unable to determine the legal status of seven individuals.

Converts

Approximately 40% of those arrested are converts to Islam. Given that an estimated 23% of the American Muslim population are converts, it is evident that converts are overrepresented among American ISIS supporters.²⁴

Use of Informants/Stings

Over half (39) of the individuals were arrested after an investigation involving an informant or undercover law enforcement officer. Since 9/11, the FBI has regularly employed this tactic in terrorism investigations, with a remarkable conviction success rate. At the same time, the use of this tool has caused friction with segments of the American Muslim community.

Travel Abroad

Fifty-one percent of those charged with ISIS-related activities attempted to travel abroad or successfully departed from the U.S. In October 2015, FBI Director Comey revealed that the Bureau had noted a decline in the number of Americans seeking to travel overseas, although he did not elaborate on what elements triggered this shift.²⁵

Domestic Terror Plot

An overwhelming majority of those charged (73%) were not involved in plotting terrorist attacks in the U.S. Most U.S.-based ISIS supporters were arrested for intent to do

21. Department of Justice, “Transcript of Assistant Attorney General John P. Carlin’s Briefing at the Foreign Press Center on the Foreign Terrorist Threat and Other National Security Issues,” September 28, 2015.

22. See, for example, Saltman and Smith, “‘Till Martyrdom Do Us Part’,” ISD and ICSR, May 2015. See also Edwin Bakker and Seran de Leede, “European Female Jihadists in Syria: Exploring an Under-Researched Topic,” International Centre for Counter-Terrorism—The Hague (ICCT), April 2015.

23. Erin Marie Saltman and Melanie Smith, “‘Till Martyrdom Do Us Part’: Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon,” Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) and ICSR, May 2015, p. 70.

24. Pew Research Center, “Converts to Islam,” July 21, 2007.

25. Johnson, “Comey: Feds have Roughly 900 Domestic Probes about Islamic State Operatives,” *USA Today*, October 23, 2015.

harm overseas or for providing material support—namely personnel and funds—to fighters in Syria and Iraq.

Recruits Who Remain “At-Large”

The 71 indictments are merely the tip of the iceberg, as U.S. authorities estimate that the number of individuals linked to ISIS is much larger. Our researchers identified a few dozen individuals with reported ISIS links who have not been charged. Similar to those in the legal system, the “At-Large” cohort have no common profile.

Among them, for example, are three teenage girls from the suburbs of Denver, two Somali-American sisters aged

15 and 17, and their 16-year-old friend of Sudanese descent. The trio lived a normal and comfortable life among their unsuspecting families and peers. Over a number of months, the girls engaged with ISIS supporters online, posting ISIS propaganda and expressing their desire to travel to Syria. One of their online contacts was Umm Waqqas, an influential recruiter within ISIS’s online network. The *nom de guerre* Umm Waqqas, which allegedly belongs to a woman, is one of only three accounts listed as a contact from those seeking to travel to Syria in ISIS’s 2015 guidebook *Hijrah to the Islamic State*.²⁶

One morning in October 2014 the sisters left home under the guise of going to the library while their Sudanese

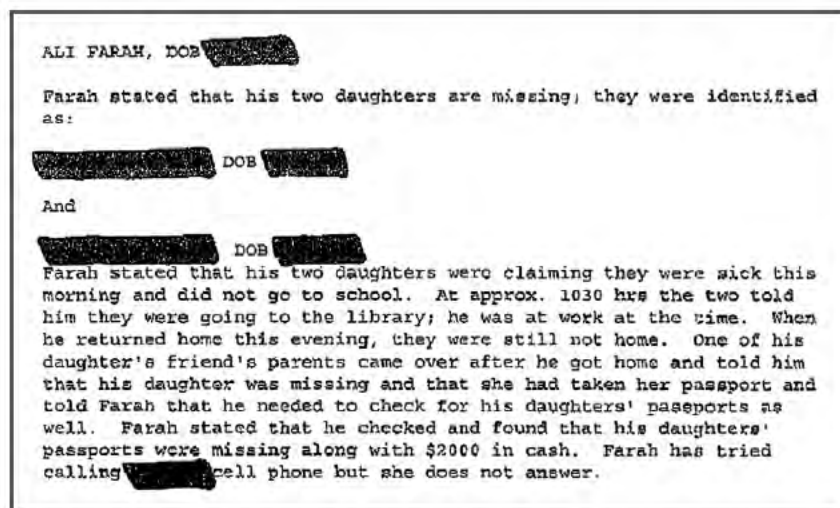


FIG. 4 Excerpt from missing persons report filed by family of the Somali-American teens



FIG. 5 Tweet posted by the 16 year old Denver girl

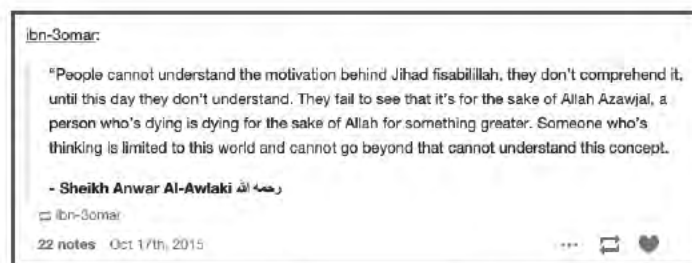


FIG. 6 Reposted by one of the Denver girls on Tumblr on the anniversary of the radical trip

26. Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), "Hijrah to the Islamic State: What to Packup, Who to Contact, Where to Go, Stories & More," 2015.

friend boarded the bus to school. But instead of studying, the minors went to Denver International Airport, where their Syria-bound journey began. “Please make dua for us three,” the 15-year-old tweeted the morning of her departure, “It’s extremely urgent!”²⁷ Their hopes were dissipated by German authorities who—acting on a tip from the FBI that had been passed on by the sisters’ father—detained them at Frankfurt International Airport and placed them on a plane back to Denver. Upon their return, U.S. authorities released the trio to their families without charges.²⁸

The story of the Denver girls resembles that of Hoda Muthana, a young Yemeni-American woman from Hoover, Alabama.²⁹ As profiled in a *BuzzFeed* feature piece, Muthana grew up a modest, quiet girl from a conservative household.³⁰ However, at the age of 17 she began to distance herself from the local Muslim community and immersed herself in Islamic fundamentalist literature accessible online. She created an alter-ego on Twitter, gaining thousands of followers and interacting with like-minded Muslims across the world. One of them was Aqsa Mahmood, a 19-year-old from Scotland who made headlines as one of the first Western females to travel to Syria.³¹ Muthana allegedly communicated extensively with Mahmood, ultimately modeling her own departure on the example of her Scottish friend’s.³² Under the pretense of going to Atlanta for a college field trip, Muthana boarded a flight to Turkey.

Within a month of her arrival in Syria she married an Australian foreign fighter named Suhan al Rahman (a.k.a. Abu Jihad al Australi), who was later killed in an airstrike.³³ From her home in Raqqa, Muthana continues to propagate ISIS’s message online. For example, she uploaded a picture

of four Western passports with the caption, “Bonfire soon, no need for these anymore.”³⁴ On March 19, 2015—months before the Garland shooting—Muthana incited violence, tweeting: “Veterans, Patriot, Memorial etc Day parades . . . go on drive by’s + spill all of their blood or rent a big truck n drive all over them. Kill them.”³⁵

While he also planned his *bijrah* to Syria with the help of ISIS sympathizers online, 24-year-old New Yorker “Samy” (as he is referred to in legal proceedings) traveled a different path. According to his family, Samy started expressing increasingly radical religious views and became a more vocal opponent of American foreign policy in the



FIG. 7 Hoda Muthana’s high school yearbook portrait



FIG. 8 Muthana on Twitter in the caption January 2015

27. Ellie Hall, “Inside The Online World Of Three American Teens Who Allegedly Wanted To Join ISIS,” *BuzzFeed News*, October 27, 2014.

28. Jesse Paul and Bruce Finley, “Parents Reported \$2,000 Missing as Teens Headed to Join Islamic State,” *The Denver Post*, October 21, 2014.

29. Ellie Hall, “Gone Girl: An Interview With An American In ISIS,” *BuzzFeed News*, April 17, 2015. Information in the proceeding article was integrated with interviews conducted by the Program on Extremism’s staff.

30. Jon Anderson, “Hoover Woman Joins ISIS: Meet Hoda Muthana who Fled U.S. to Syria,” *AL.com*, April 20, 2015.

31. Ashley Fantz and Atika Shubert, “From Scottish Teen to ISIS Bride and Recruiter: The Aqsa Mahmood Story,” *CNN*, February 24, 2015.

32. Hall, “Gone Girl,” *BuzzFeed News*, April 17, 2015.

33. *Ibid.*

34. *Ibid.*

35. *Ibid.*

Middle East in 2014.³⁶ He began discussing his views online, where he engaged a fervent Muslim Brotherhood supporter from Arizona, 42-year-old Ahmed Mohammed El Gammal. Within a matter of months, El Gammal visited Samy in New York. Three months later, El Gammal allegedly facilitated the young man's journey to Syria.

Once he joined ISIS in Syria, Samy's phone and computer were temporarily confiscated to prevent contact with the outside world. During a break from his training, he reached out to his brother to apologize for his "sudden disappearance" and to reassure him that "everything is normal and safe."³⁷ After completing three weeks of intense religious training with ISIS, Samy told his brother excitedly that he would begin a month of military training, after which he would become a "regular employee [of ISIS]."³⁸ A Facebook message posted in the spring of 2015 suggests that Samy's experience with ISIS was everything he thought it would be: "I live in bilad al Islam now, the real bilad al Islam, and its [sic] beautiful."³⁹

The Deceased: Uncle Sam's Shaheed

As with the cohorts of legal cases and at-large recruits, American ISIS supporters who have been killed similarly defy a homogenous demographic profile. For clarity purposes, this cohort was organized by where the individual died.

Killed in America

Elton Simpson and **Nadir Hamid Soofi**, both residents of Phoenix, Arizona, were killed on May 4, 2015, in an attempted attack on the American Freedom Defense Initiative's Muhammad Art Exhibit and Cartoon Contest in Garland, Texas.⁴⁰ Simpson, a convert to Islam, previously served three years of probation for lying to the FBI about attempting to travel to Somalia to fight for al Shabaab.⁴¹ Before the attack, Simpson communicated online with various British and American ISIS members, who encouraged him to carry out the operation.⁴²

Usaamah Abdullah Rahim, a resident of Roslindale, Massachusetts, was shot and killed by local police officers in his hometown after charging



FIG. 9 E Gamma December 2013

26. On or about January 16, 2015, approximately eleven days before his scheduled departure from the United States, CC-1, via social media, contacted CC-2. ¹ The following exchange occurred, in substance and relevant part:		
1/16, 17:05	CC-1	As-Salamu Alaikum Ateyya my name is Samy, I'm Gammal's friend. He told me you could help me with a career opportunity in Istanbul. I'll be visiting soon to look for an internship for the summer inshaAllah. I'd really appreciate your help. Please reply whenever you get the chance. BarakAllahu feek [may Allah bless you] [emphasis added]

FIG. 10 Samy dent flies h mse f excerpt from E Gamma s cr m na comp a nt



FIG. 11 Soofi (eft) and S mpson

36. *United States of America v. Ahmed Mohammed El Gammal*, Criminal Complaint, (August 20, 2015).

37. Ibid.

38. Ibid.

39. Ibid.

40. Matt Pearce and Nigel Duara, "Texas Gunman's Mother: 'He Just had a Normal American Upbringing,'" *Los Angeles Times*, May 5, 2015.

41. Eugene Volokh, "Why Elton Simpson, One of the Texas Shooters, had Been Acquitted of an Earlier Terrorism-Related Offense," *The Washington Post*, May 4, 2015.

42. Elliott C. McLaughlin, "ISIS Jihadi Linked to Garland Attack has Long History as Hacker," *CNN*, May 7, 2015.

them with a knife.⁴³ Authorities allege that prior to the incident Rahim conspired with his nephew, David Wright, and Rhode Island resident Nicholas Rovinski, as well as additional unnamed conspirators, to assassinate individuals within the U.S. on behalf of ISIS. On the morning of June 2, 2015, Rahim changed his plans and called Wright to explain that he wanted to act imminently and target the police. Once law enforcement approached him in the parking lot of the CVS drugstore where he worked, he lunged at them with a knife and was shot and killed.⁴⁴

Killed in Syria/Iraq and Clearly Identified

Sixto Ramiro Garcia, a Houston resident, traveled to Syria in March 2014.⁴⁵ Garcia, a convert to Islam, conspired to join ISIS with fellow Houston resident Asher Abid Khan, but was left to cross the Turkey-Syria border alone after Khan returned to Texas.⁴⁶ His family was notified of his death on December 25, 2014, via a Facebook message from Garcia's account.⁴⁷ The circumstances surrounding Garcia's death remain a mystery.

Amir Farouk Ibrahim, a dual U.S.-Egyptian citizen and Pittsburgh resident, traveled to Syria in early 2013.⁴⁸ Ibrahim was reportedly killed in July 2014 in a clash with Kurdish forces. Representatives from the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights found both of his passports among the ruins of a town that had been held by ISIS.⁴⁹

Yusuf Jama, a native of Minneapolis, traveled to Syria in June 2014.⁵⁰ Prior to leaving the U.S., Jama attempted to travel to Syria in May 2014 with fellow Minneapolis

resident Guled Omar—who was later arrested and indicted on material support charges—and another individual. But the trio delayed their plans in light of pushback from Omar's family.⁵¹ Additionally, Jama lived with Mohamed Osman, whom authorities believe traveled to Somalia in July 2012 to join al Shabaab.⁵² Although the circumstances surrounding Jama's death are unknown, his family was notified of his death in December 2014.⁵³



FIG. 12 Usaamah
Abdu ah Rah m



FIG. 13 Amir Farouk Ibrahim's American passport

43. *United States of America v. David Wright and Nicholas Rovinski*, Criminal Complaint, (June 12, 2015). See also Susan Zalkind and Katie Zavadski, "Boston's Wannabe Beheader 'Liked' ISIS Enough to Kill," *The Daily Beast*, June 3, 2015.

44. Ibid.

45. *United States of America v. Asher Abid Khan*, Arraignment/Detention Hearing, (June 1, 2015).

46. Ibid.

47. Ibid.

48. Betsy Hiel and Carl Prine, "Pittsburgh Man Reportedly Dead in Syria," *WPXI.com*, July 26, 2013.

49. Bill Roggio, "American Passport Found at al Qaeda Base in Northern Syria," *The Long War Journal*, July 23, 2013.

50. Laura Yuen, Mukhtar Ibrahim and Sasha Aslanian, "Called to Fight: Minnesota's ISIS Recruits," *Minnesota Public Radio (MPR) News*, March 25, 2015.

51. Ibid.

52. Yuen, Ibrahim and Aslanian, "Called to Fight," *MPR News*, March 25, 2015.

53. Ibid.

Douglas McCain, a convert to Islam raised between Chicago and Minneapolis, left the U.S. for Syria, via Turkey, in or around April 2014.⁵⁴ McCain, whose body was identified by the passport in his pocket, was reportedly killed in August 2014 during a clash between ISIS and the Free Syrian Army in the Aleppo countryside.⁵⁵

Abdirahmaan Muhumed, a dual U.S.-Somali citizen from Minneapolis, traveled to Syria in or around January 2014.⁵⁶ Muhumed's friends and family learned of his presence in Syria when he uploaded a photo of himself with a Quran and a rifle captioned "Sham."⁵⁷ Muhumed was allegedly killed in August 2014 in the same Aleppo-area

clash as McCain, whom he knew from the U.S.⁵⁸

Hanad Abdullahi Mohallim, a native of Apple Valley, Minnesota, was 18 years old when he left the U.S. for Syria on March 9, 2014.⁵⁹ Reports suggest that Mohallim was killed in action in January 2015.⁶⁰

Abdullah Ramo Pazara, a St. Louis resident of Bosnian origin, left the U.S. for Syria in May 2013, shortly after becoming a naturalized U.S. citizen.⁶¹ While in Syria, he allegedly rose to the rank of deputy to top ISIS commander Omar al Shishani and led a brigade of fighters of Balkan origin.⁶² Pazara was reportedly killed in action in the fall of 2014 near Kobane.⁶³



FIG. 14 Douglas McCain as performing rapper turned jihadist



FIG. 15 Hanad Abdullahi Mohallim's Twitter profile



FIG. 16 Abdullah Ramo Pazara (right) in Syria

54. Cassandra Vinograd and Ammar Cheikh Omar, "American Douglas McArthur McCain Dies Fighting for ISIS in Syria," *NBC News*, August 26, 2014.

55. Ibid.

56. Mukhtar Ibrahim, "Jihad in Syria Lures Somalis from Minnesota," *MPR News*, June 12, 2014.

57. Ibid.

58. Michael Walsh, "ISIS Terrorist from Minnesota Worked at Major American Airport: Report," *New York Daily News*, September 3, 2014. See also Mukhtar Ibrahim and Peter Cox, "Douglas McArthur McCain, A Man with Minnesota Ties, Killed in Syria," *MPR News*, August 7, 2014.

59. Laura Yuen, Mukhtar Ibrahim and Sasha Aslanian, "From MN Suburbs, They Set out to Join ISIS," *MPR News*, March 25, 2015.

60. Andrea Huncar, "3 ISIS Recruits from Edmonton Believed Killed," *Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) News*, January 16, 2015.

61. *United States of America v. Hodzic, et al.*, Indictment, (February 5, 2015).

62. Robert Patrick, "Allegations of St. Louis Terrorism Support Rooted Back in Bosnian War," *St. Louis Today.com*, April 11, 2015. See also Radio Sarajevo, "U Siriji Poginuo Ramo Pazara, Komandant Džihadista iz BiH," September 25, 2014.

63. SAFF, "U Siriji Poginuo I Ramo Pazara iz Teslića," September 24, 2014.; Radio Sarajevo, "U Siriji Poginuo Ramo Pazara, Komandant Džihadista iz BiH," September 25, 2014.; *Slobodna Bosna*, "Ramo Abdullah Pazara: Sprski Ratnik i Islamski Fanatik," February 19, 2015.

Killed in Syria/Iraq and Not Clearly Identified

The Program on Extremism uncovered videos and information on individuals identified as Americans in ISIS propaganda who reportedly died either fighting or as suicide bombers. It was not possible to ascertain the real identity of these individuals, nor were researchers able to verify the authenticity of the information provided by ISIS. Yet some appear to have intriguing stories, having allegedly occupied important positions within ISIS or having carried out suicide attacks.

One of these individuals is a man who identified himself with the *kunya* **Abu Muhammad al Amriki** (Abu Muhammad the American) and claimed to have lived in the U.S. for “ten or eleven years” prior to leaving with his family to join Jabhat al Nusra (JN) in Syria (before changing his allegiance to ISIS). Featured in a nine minute video titled *Revealing the Treachery of Jabhat al Nusra* posted on numerous video sharing sites, Abu Muhammad al Amriki recounted how he left the al Qaeda–linked group because he believed it was working with the Free Syrian Army, as it allowed a convoy of arms bound for the outwardly secular and tacitly Western-supported rebel group to enter Syria.⁶⁴ Speaking in English in front of the black ISIS flag, the man recalled how the incident led him to switch his allegiance to ISIS, with which he became a local emir in an area near the border with Turkey. Though details are sparse, in early 2015 news of his death began circulating on ISIS-linked websites.⁶⁵

Another American to have reportedly died in Syria is **Abu Khalid al Amriki**. A known personality in the ISIS English-language social media scene, Abu Khalid al Amriki used at least five distinct Twitter accounts to spread his views. The little that is known about his offline persona comes from an interview he gave to an Australian paper, in which he revealed that his wife, whom he left behind in the U.S., was arrested on terrorism charges shortly after



FIG. 17 Abu Muhammad al Amriki explains his defection to ISIS



FIG. 18 One of Abu Khalid al Amriki's final tweets



FIG. 19 News of Abu Khalid al Amriki's death circulates on Twitter

64. YouTube, “Revealing the Treachery of Jabhat al Nusra,” February 10, 2014.

65. Alastair Jamieson, “Alleged American ISIS Commander Abu Muhammad Al-Amriki Killed: Reports,” *NBC News*, January 28, 2015.

his departure.⁶⁶ In late April 2015, Abu Khalid appeared in a video produced by one of ISIS's official media outlets, Al Hayat Media Center. Abu Khalid is dressed in camouflage and a bandana and holding an AK-47 rifle while standing next to Neil Prakash (a.k.a. Abu Khalid al Cambodi), a prominent Australian foreign fighter and ISIS propagandist.⁶⁷ Reports of Abu Khalid's death at the hands of a coalition airstrike surfaced on social media in late September 2015. In an ironic twist of fate, one of his last tweets using the Twitter handle @AK47_Backup stated, "You fly a remote control plane halfway across the world to kill an enemy that you are to [sic] coward to meet face to face."

Two unidentified individuals who used *kunyas* ending in "al Amriki" were heralded as ISIS suicide attackers by the group in 2015. One, **Abu Dawoud al Amriki**, reportedly rammed a truck packed with explosives into a gathering of soldiers in Iraq's Salahuddin province.⁶⁸ ISIS posted an image of Abu Dawoud on the Twitter page of one of its official media outlets, Al Bayan Radio, in March.⁶⁹ The other, **Abu Abdullah al Amriki**, allegedly drove an SUV laden with explosives into Iraqi army barracks near Beiji in August 2015.⁷⁰



FIG. 20 Abu Abdulah al Amriki



FIG. 21 Al Jazeera announces Abu Abdulah al Amriki's death

66. Lauren Williams, "Meeting a Daesh jihadist in Syria," *The Saturday Paper*, July 18, 2015. Our research team attempted to identify Abu Khalid's alleged American wife but was unsuccessful. According to court records, he did at some point communicate with Keonna Thomas, an American arrested in the U.S., but there is no indication that their relationship was anything more than an online friendship.

67. Aaron Y. Zelin, "al-Hayāta Media Center Presents a New Video Message from The Islamic State: 'Stories From the Land of the Living: Abū Khalid al-Kambūdī,'" *Jihadology.net*, April 21 2015.

68. Assabah.com, "American Suicide Bomber Abu Dawoud in the Ranks of 'Daesh: The Iraqi Army Takes on the Battle to Retake Tikrit," March 4, 2015.

69. Ibid.

70. "ISIS says American suicide bomber carried out Iraq attack," *Al Arabiya*, August 19, 2015.

CHAPTER 2

From Keyboard Warriors to Battlefield Commanders: Understanding the Spectrum of ISIS in America

AS THE DATA AND ANALYSIS provided in the previous section show, the profiles of American ISIS sympathizers—from those who merely tout the group’s ideology online to those intimately involved in ISIS recruitment, financing, or fighting—are extremely diverse. Ranging from grown men who had flirted with jihadist militancy for over a decade to teenagers who have only recently converted to Islam, from the son of a Boston area police officer to a single mother of two young children, these individuals differ widely in race, age, social class, education, and family background.

Individuals with such diverse backgrounds are unlikely to be motivated by the same factors. Policymakers and academics around the world have formulated a number of explanatory theories about the underlying factors driving people to radicalize. Some focus on structural factors such as political tensions and cultural cleavages, the so-called “root causes” of radicalization. Others stress personal factors such as the shock of a life-changing event. Matt Venhaus captures the diversity of the individuals attracted to jihadist ideology, categorizing them as revenge seekers, status seekers, identity seekers, and thrill seekers.⁷¹ But it is clear that these categories are not exhaustive and that, in many cases, an individual exhibits the characteristics of more than one category. In substance, most experts agree that radicalization is a highly complex and individualized process, often shaped by a poorly understood interaction of structural and personal factors.

In many cases examined by our research team, an underlying sense of sympathy and compassion appeared to play an important role in initially motivating young Americans to become interested and invested in the Syrian conflict. Many were outraged by the appalling violence Bashar al Assad’s regime used to suppress the Syrian rebellion and the subsequent inaction on the part of the international community. Pictures and videos capturing the aftermath of civilian massacres perpetrated by the regime, displayed widely in both social and mainstream media, rocked the consciences of many—from those with an existing strong Sunni identity to those who were not Muslim—and led some to take the first steps to militancy.

A major shift began as the anti-regime rebellion in Syria came to be increasingly dominated by militant groups. By the time ISIS formally declared its caliphate in June 2014, the motivations of recruits appeared to revolve more around fulfilling perceived religious obligations, such as performing *hijrah* (migration from a non-Muslim society to a Muslim one, as per the prophet Mohammad’s migration from Mecca to Medina) and the opportunity to participate in the creation of a utopian Islamic society.

But ideological motivations are deeply intertwined with, and impossible to separate from, personal motives. The National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) observes that those who embrace ISIS’s ideology tend to be “disenfranchised individuals seeking ideological, religious

71. Colonel John M. “Matt” Venhaus, U.S. Army, “Why Youth Join al-Qaeda,” *United States Institute of Peace*, May 2010.



FIG. 22 Moner Abu Salha aka Abu Hurayra aka Amerik

and personal fulfillment.⁷² 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.

This search for meaning was perfectly encapsulated in the words of Moner Abu Salha, the 22-year-old Floridian who is the first American known to have died in a suicide mission in Syria on behalf of Jabhat al Nusra. "I lived in America," stated Abu Salha in a 2014 video. "I know how it is. You have all the fancy amusement parks and the restaurants and the food and all this crap and the cars. You think you're happy. You're not happy. You're never happy. I was never happy. I was always sad and depressed. Life sucked."⁷³ In contrast, he described life fighting in Syria as "the best I've ever lived."⁷⁴

Despite coming from a quite different background, a fellow American who made the journey to Syria has reportedly displayed a similar malaise. Ariel Bradley was born in an underprivileged family in the Chattanooga suburb of Hixson (the same suburb where the perpetrator of the July 2015 Chattanooga shooting Mohammad Abdulazez lived). Bradley was homeschooled by her evangelical

Christian mother until she rebelled and left home as a teenager. According to friends interviewed for her extensive profile in *BuzzFeed News*, Bradley spent the following years wandering in search of something.⁷⁵

"She was definitely always looking for love," said a former roommate "always looking for that sense of belonging." Another friend recalled Bradley's "clearly segmented life": "When I first met her she was a Christian, and then she was a socialist, and then she was an atheist, and then a Muslim. As far as I could tell it was always in relation to whatever guy she was interested in, so if she meets a guy that's an atheist then she's an atheist, falls into that for a year. Then the guy leaves and she meets somebody new, and it starts all over again. . . . It seemed like whatever guy she was with, she would just crawl into his skin and kind of become him."⁷⁶

At one point Bradley fell in love with a Muslim patron of the pizza parlor where she used to work. To get close to him, she converted to Islam. While things never worked out with the original love interest, Bradley began frequenting Muslim marriage websites where, in August 2011, she met an Iraqi man living in Sweden. Shortly thereafter the two married and had a child. Likely under the influence of her husband, Bradley's faith became increasingly conservative and militant. In early 2014 the couple left for Syria, where they have reportedly been living in ISIS-controlled territory. Bradley is active online, particularly on Twitter and

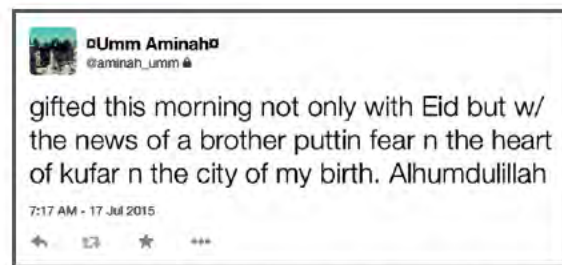


FIG. 23 Ariel Bradley celebrates the Chattanooga shooting

72. Testimony of Nicholas J. Rasmussen, Director, National Counterterrorism Center, *Countering Violent Extremism: The Urgent Threat of Foreign Fighters and Homegrown Terror*, House Homeland Security Committee, February 11, 2015.

73. Mona El-Naggar and Quynhanh Do, "Video Released of U.S. Bomber in Syria," *New York Times*, July 31, 2014.

74. Ibid.

75. Ellie Hall, "How One Young Woman Went From Fundamentalist Christian to ISIS Bride," *BuzzFeed News*, July 20, 2015.

76. Ibid.

Instagram, where she discusses her life and praises ISIS. In the immediate aftermath of the Chattanooga attacks, which killed five military personnel in her hometown, she tweeted: “*in sha Allah* [God willing] this will make the camps of *Emaan* [believers] and *Kuffr* [non-believers] known within Chattanooga.”⁷⁷

It is tempting to caricature Bradley as a naïve girl with personal problems whose jihadist trajectory is the outcome of an unfortunate childhood. It is also easy to assume that her actions were driven by a quest for a romantic partner. But, even in the most extreme cases, multiple factors contribute to an individual’s decision. Her friend’s analysis highlights this dynamic: “Be it religion, be it a man, be it a marriage, be it a child, be it ISIS, Ariel was always looking for something to define herself, an identity to cling to.”⁷⁸ Given her particular pattern of behavior, it is likely that Bradley might have accepted other extremist ideologies, if circumstances allowed, so long as they satiated her hunger for community, love, and identity.

Still, it is difficult to fully comprehend the complex mental processes that led Bradley, like other young Americans, to embark on such an extreme journey to the ISIS caliphate. What is apparent is that ISIS and its propaganda machine have been particularly adept at exploiting the emotions, needs, and weaknesses of young Americans, irrespective of their demographic backgrounds. What follows is an examination of the online and physical world dynamics that influence U.S.-based ISIS sympathizers.

The Role of Social Media

Extremist groups inspired by a range of ideologies have embraced the Internet for a variety of purposes. As a 2009 report by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation at King’s College London observes:

The Internet can be used by extremists to illustrate and reinforce ideological messages and/or narratives. Through the Internet, potential recruits can



FIG. 24 Snapshot of life in the caliphate image from Ariel Bradley's Instagram account

77. Hall, “How One Young Woman Went From Fundamentalist Christian to ISIS Bride,” *BuzzFeed News*, July 20, 2015.

78. Ibid.

gain near-instantaneous access to visually powerful video and imagery which appear to substantiate the extremists' political claims. . . . The Internet makes it easier to join and integrate into more formal organizations. It provides a comparatively risk-free way for potential recruits to find like-minded individuals and network amongst them, enabling them to reach beyond an isolated core group of conspirators. . . . It creates a new social environment in which otherwise unacceptable views and behaviour are normalised. Surrounded by other radicals, the Internet becomes a virtual 'echo chamber' in which the most extreme ideas and suggestions receive the most encouragement and support.⁷⁹

Western governments tend to agree on the importance of the Internet in radicalization processes. The dynamic has been described with clarity by the Netherlands' domestic intelligence agency (AIVD) in an extensive report that calls the Internet "the turbocharger of the jihadi movement." The report argues:

There is a large group of Muslims, mostly young people, in non-Muslim Western countries, who feel isolated within the societies in which they live. Because these youngsters see their future in the West, unlike their parents, while at the same time experiencing a strong element of distrust for Western society, they are looking for their own identity and for a position to adopt in Western society. . . . When hunting for answers to these questions, they may end up in an environment with which they are familiar and which is easily accessible, namely the Internet. Not only can they find a great deal of information there, but

they can also become part of a virtual (Muslim) community, exchanging ideas and blowing off steam by expressing their frustration with other like-minded individuals who share their fate.⁸⁰

Officials in the U.S. have expressed similar concerns. The 2007 National Intelligence Estimate, titled *The Terrorist Threat to the US Homeland*, observes:

The spread of radical—especially Salafi—Internet sites, increasingly aggressive anti-U.S. rhetoric and actions, and the growing number of radical, self-generating cells in Western countries indicate that the radical and violent segment of the West's Muslim population is expanding, including in the United States. The arrest and prosecution by law enforcement of a small number of violent Islamic extremists inside the U.S.—who are becoming more connected ideologically, virtually, and/or in a physical sense to the global extremist movement—points to the possibility that others may become sufficiently radicalized that they will view the use of violence here as legitimate.⁸¹

In May 2008, the U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs published a report titled *Violent Islamist Extremism, the Internet, and the Homegrown Terrorist Threat* in which the committee warns about the increased frequency with which U.S.-based militants are active online.⁸² A 2010 report by NCTC contends that "the Internet and related information technologies—such as Web forums, blogs, social networking sites, and e-mail—that serve as platforms for extremist propaganda and discourse can enable and advance the radicalization process and help mobilize

79. Tim Stevens and Peter R. Neumann, "Countering Online Radicalisation: A Strategy for Action," ICSR, March 16, 2009, p. 12.

80. Netherlands' Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties (Ministry of International Affairs and Kingdom Relations), "Jihadis and the Internet," Netherlands' National Coordinator for Counterterrorism, February 2007, p. 91.

81. United States Office of the Director of National Intelligence, National Intelligence Council, "The Terrorist Threat to the US Homeland," *National Intelligence Estimate*, July 2007.

82. U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs (HSGAC), "Violent Islamist Extremism, the Internet, and the Homegrown Terrorist Threat," May 8, 2008.

individuals who may not be geographically near key extremist figures or significant events.”⁸³

U.S. officials have repeatedly highlighted how ISIS uses social media to reach a significantly wider audience much faster than any group in the past. “ISIL blends traditional media platforms, glossy photos, in-depth articles, and social media campaigns that can go viral in a matter of seconds,” argued FBI Director Comey in a July 2015 testimony before the U.S. Senate. “No matter the format, the message of radicalization spreads faster than we imagined just a few years ago.”⁸⁴ He continued, “Social media has allowed groups, such as ISIL, to use the Internet to spot and assess potential recruits. With the widespread horizontal distribution of social media, terrorists can identify vulnerable individuals of all ages in the United States—spot, assess, recruit, and radicalize—either to travel or to conduct a homeland attack. The foreign terrorist now has direct access into the United States like never before.”⁸⁵ Comey further elaborated on the novelty of ISIS social media use:

Your grandfather’s al Qaeda, if you wanted to get propaganda, you had to go find it. Find where *Inspire* magazine was and read it. If you want to talk to a terrorist, you had to send an email into *Inspire* magazine and hope that Anwar al Awlaki would email you back. Now all that’s in your pocket. All that propaganda is in your pocket, and the terrorist is in your pocket. You can have direct communication with a terrorist in Syria all day and night, and so the effect of that—especially on troubled minds and kids—it works! It’s buzz,

buzz, buzz, buzz, buzz. It’s the constant feed, the constant touching, so it’s very, very different and much more effective at radicalizing than your grandfather’s al Qaeda model.⁸⁶

Indeed, ISIS’s ability to directly and constantly reach Americans through social media has manifested itself in a number of ways: 1) triggering or advancing their radicalization process; 2) helping them mobilize to leave for Syria to join the group; and 3) inciting them to carry out attacks in America. The following examples illustrate this three-fold manifestation.

Grooming from Afar

An archetypal case of ISIS’s online radicalization and recruitment campaign was chronicled in an illuminating *New York Times* story on “Alex,” a 23-year-old girl from rural Washington state.⁸⁷ Alex lived with her grandparents from an early age, after her mother lost custody due to drug addiction. A college dropout who, in her own words, lived “in the middle of nowhere” and had no connection to Islam, Alex was motivated by a “horrified curiosity” to seek out ISIS supporters after reading news of the execution of American journalist James Foley.⁸⁸

Within several months, she was exchanging messages and conversing over Skype with various ISIS-linked recruiters.⁸⁹ Over time, Alex, who had previously expressed a desire to “live a faith more fully,” was meticulously groomed online, her new friends showering her with money, books, gift cards, and chocolate. She soon converted to Islam and slowly embraced ISIS’s ideology. Her new friends offered Alex a previously lacking sense of

83. Similar findings were reached in this report. See also National Counterterrorism Center, “Radicalization Dynamics: A Primer,” September 2010, p. 18; HSGAC, “Zachary Chesser: A Case Study in Online Islamist Radicalization and Its Meaning for the Threat of Homegrown Terrorism,” February 16, 2012.

84. Testimony of James B. Comey, Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, *Counterterrorism, Counterintelligence, and the Challenges of “Going Dark,”* July 8, 2015.

85. Ibid.

86. Ryan J. Reilly, “If You’re Trying To Join ISIS Through Twitter, The FBI Probably Knows About It,” *Huffington Post*, July 9, 2015.

87. Rukmini Callimachi, “ISIS and the Lonely Young American,” *NYT*, July 27, 2015.

88. Ibid.

89. Ibid.



FIG. 25 Mohammed Hamzah Khan on Twitter

belonging: hours after declaring her conversion online, the number of individuals following her on Twitter doubled, prompting her to tweet, “I actually have brothers and sisters. I am crying.”⁹⁰ Alex began to live what the *Times* categorizes as a double life. In public, she continued teaching Sunday school classes at her grandparents’ church. But, behind closed doors, she was a full-fledged believer in ISIS’s ideology.

An ISIS supporter from the U.K.—who turned out to be a married middle-aged father with a criminal record of multiple arrests—spent hours each day grooming Alex. He eventually told her that it is a sin for Muslims to live among non-believers, and extended an invitation for her to travel to Austria, marry a 45-year-old ISIS supporter, and then move to Syria.

Realizing that Alex was spending an inordinate amount of time on her computer, her grandmother confiscated her electronics and confronted her online contacts via Skype. With her double life exposed, Alex promised to stop communications with ISIS sympathizers and allowed her grandmother

to change her Twitter and email passwords. But the companionship her like-minded friends provided was apparently too good to give up. The *Times* claims that, despite her promise, Alex has continued to be active in the online ISIS scene.⁹¹

Travel Agents

In addition to helping radicalize individuals, online ISIS supporters have been instrumental in providing both advice and logistical support to Americans attempting to travel to Syria. This dynamic played out in October 2014 when three siblings from Chicago were stopped at O’Hare International Airport on their way to Syria.

The journey had been meticulously planned by the eldest sibling, 19-year-old engineering student Mohammed Hamzah Khan. Khan, a graduate of an Islamic school in the Chicago suburbs, had been active online and met a man known as Abu Qaqa on Twitter, whom he soon communicated with using personal messaging platforms such as Kik and WhatsApp.⁹² According to authorities, it was Abu Qaqa who provided Khan with the phone number of an individual to call upon landing in Turkey. Khan’s 17-year-old sister had also been active online, trying to find ways to travel to Syria. Using the Twitter name “Umm Bara,” she communicated with an English-speaking ISIS fighter who went by the name Abu Hud—known on Twitter as the “Paladin of Jihad”—and popular as result of his Tumblr series *#DustyFeet*, a de facto travel guide for would-be recruits.⁹³ A search of the siblings’ home found a step-by-step guide to crossing the Turkish border, contact information for four individuals involved in smuggling ISIS volunteers, including Abu Qaqa, and handwritten farewell letters addressed to their parents.⁹⁴

Another aspect of the Khans’ story is noteworthy. While “Alex” and many other ISIS sympathizers are individuals with limited or no knowledge of Islam, the Khan siblings grew up steeped in religious studies. All three attended

90. Rukmini Callimachi, “ISIS and the Lonely Young American,” *NYT*, July 27, 2015.

91. *Ibid.*

92. Janet Reitman, “The Children of ISIS,” *The Rolling Stone*, March 25, 2015.

93. *Ibid.*

94. *United States of America v. Mohammed Hamzah Khan*, Criminal Complaint (October 6, 2014).

Islamic schools and had become *hafiz* or *hafiza*, a term given to those who have memorized the entire Quran.⁹⁵ The eldest even taught youth at a local mosque.⁹⁶

Devil on the Shoulder

While the case dynamics remain somewhat murky, ISIS social media appears to have played a role in pushing Americans Elton Simpson and Nadir Soofi to attack the Muhammad Art Exhibit and Cartoon Contest in Garland, Texas. A few months before the attack Simpson, who had been involved in jihadist activities for over a decade, became an active participant in the community of U.S.-based ISIS sympathizers on social media. Simpson also made contact with a well-known British foreign fighter, Abu Hussain al Britani, and Mohamed Abdullahi Hassan (a.k.a. Mujahid Miski), a prominent Somali-American English-speaking propagandist.⁹⁷ Ten days before the attack, Miski posted about the Garland event with a clear exhortation: “The brothers from the Charlie Hebdo attack did their part. It’s time for the brothers in the #US to do their part.”⁹⁸

Simpson, via a Twitter account with the username “Shariah is Light” and an avatar of the late al Qaeda propagandist Anwar al Awlaki, responded to Miski’s call to arms, publicly asking his friend in Somalia to “dm” (Direct Message, a private message on Twitter) him.⁹⁹ Simpson and Soofi then drove from Arizona to Garland in a vehicle loaded with assault rifles, body armor, and hundreds of rounds of ammunition. Prior to the attack, Simpson tweeted a final time, using a hashtag #texasattack. The hashtag was quickly picked up by Abu Hussain al Britani and circulated throughout the

pro-ISIS community on Twitter in an effort to encourage others to commit similar acts.¹⁰⁰

The Echo Chamber

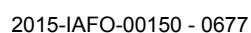
U.S. authorities estimate that several thousand Americans consume ISIS propaganda online creating what has been described as a “radicalization echo chamber.”¹⁰¹ American ISIS activists and sympathizers are active on a variety of platforms, from open forums like Facebook, Google+, and Tumblr to more discrete messaging applications such as Kik, Telegram, surespot, and the dark web. But Twitter is by far the platform of choice of this informal echo chamber. For this reason, our researchers focused on the Twitter activities of approximately 300 individuals identified as American supporters of ISIS.

Identifying the 300 individuals was challenging because most online ISIS sympathizers seek anonymity. Individuals were coded as Americans if they self-identified as such; if Twitter’s geo-location software placed them within the U.S.; or if they used a variation of the *kunya* “al



FIG. 26 Elton Simpson pledges allegiance to ISIS before his attack

95. Kevin Sullivan, “Three American Teens, Recruited Online, Are Caught Trying to Join the Islamic State,” *The Washington Post*, December 8, 2014.
96. Jethro Mullens and Ted Rowland, “Who is Mohammed Hamzah Khan?,” *CNN*, October 7, 2014.
97. Scott Shane, “Texas Attacker Left Trail of Extremist Ideas on Twitter,” *NYT*, May 5, 2015.
98. Jim Sciutto, Pamela Brown, Paul Cruickshank and Paul Murphy, Texas attacker tweeted with overseas terrorists, *CNN*, May 5, 2015.
99. Rita Katz, “The Power of a Tweet: Elton Simpson and the #TexasAttack,” *SITE Intelligence Group (SITE)*, May 5, 2015.
100. Katz, “The Power of a Tweet” *SITE*, May 5, 2015.
101. Pierre Thomas, Mike Levine, Jack Date and Jack Cloherty, “ISIS: Potentially ‘Thousands’ of Online Followers Inside US Homeland, FBI Chief Warns,” *ABC News*, May 7, 2015. The term has also been used by Assistant Attorney General John Carlin: United States Department of Justice, “Assistant Attorney General John P. Carlin Delivers Remarks on Domestic Terrorism at an Event Co-Sponsored by the Southern Poverty Law Center and the George Washington University Center for Cyber and Homeland Security’s Program on Extremism,” October 14, 2015.



Amriki” in their Twitter username or handle. Additionally, researchers analyzed the content of English-speaking ISIS sympathizers for syntax, spelling, word selection, and cultural context and cross-referenced lists of followers to isolate Americans from the much larger English-speaking ISIS community on Twitter. The categorization of an account as belonging to an American was reaffirmed on a few occasions, most frequently when an individual’s criminal complaint and/or indictment made reference to social media accounts. In at least one case—that of Terrence McNeil—a technical mistake by an ISIS supporter on social media revealed their identity as an American.¹⁰²

While American ISIS supporters tend to be male, nearly one third of the accounts examined are purportedly operated by women. Additionally, supporters broadly divided into two sets: those who locate themselves in Syria and Iraq and those still in America but aspiring to assist ISIS in a number of ways. Those in the former group often maintain their network of friends in the U.S. after arriving in ISIS territory. They post near real-time updates of ISIS-led attacks and life in the caliphate, encouraging their fellow Americans to make the trek and, at times, scolding their real-world and online friends for their lack of commitment to the cause.

A significant number of American ISIS supporters use avatars of black flags, lions, and green birds.¹⁰³ A particularly clever account uses a picture of the Detroit Lions, combining a distinctly American pride in an NFL team and the popular Islamic symbol of bravery very frequently used by ISIS supporters. Images, quotes, and links to lectures of the deceased radical cleric Anwar al Awlaki are favorites of the American ISIS scene. Increasingly photos of other Americans who have been arrested on terrorism charges, killed waging *jihad* abroad, or were responsible for homegrown terrorist attacks are used as avatars.

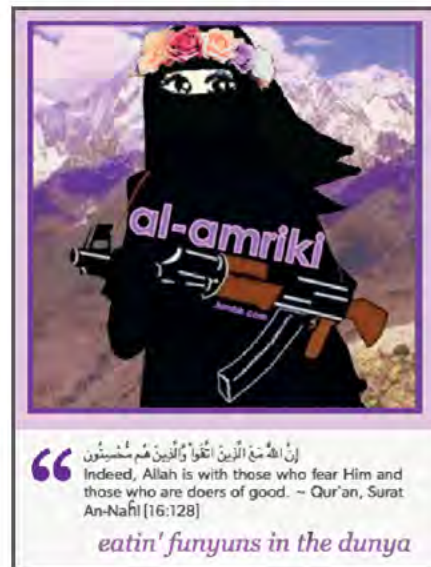


FIG. 28 Examples of ISIS supporters' imagery on social media

102. McNeil tweeted a screenshot of his Twitter suspension (at the time, his 14th suspension). He neglected to remove a small part of his Google ID, which led to a number of Google+ pages. After reviewing the videos on each page, a link was found to a video posted on YouTube, which was subsequently linked to a Facebook profile with his real name and location. One of his Facebook status updates from last year matched with materials from his 10th Twitter account prior to suspension.

103. The term “green bird” indicates a status one reaches when he or she dies (becomes a *shaheed*, or martyr) and reaches *jannah*, or heaven. It is a scriptural reference from a *hadith*, or reported saying from the prophet Mohammad, that celebrates the virtues of martyrdom. Jihadists term fallen comrades “green birds” to eulogize them as pious, faithful Muslims.

As with many online communities, participants in the American ISIS Twitter scene exhibit distinct styles, roles, personalities, and degrees of commitment, which often fluctuate over time. Reflecting these dynamics, their accounts can be divided into three categories: nodes, amplifiers, and shout-outs.

The **nodes** are the leading voices that enjoy a prominent status within the larger community and are the primary content creators for the network. A group of two or three clustered users will often swap comedic memes, news articles, and official ISIS tweets, allowing them to pool followers and more easily spread content both to new audiences and throughout their network.

Amplifiers largely do not generate new content but rather retweet and “favorite” material from popular users. Ultimately, because they post little, if any, original content, it is often unclear whether these accounts correspond to real-life ISIS sympathizers or are programmed to post automatically.

Finally, **shout-out** accounts are a unique innovation and vital to the survival of the ISIS online scene. They

primarily introduce new, pro-ISIS accounts to the community and promote newly created accounts of previously suspended users, allowing them to quickly regain their pre-suspension status. Although they tweet little substantive content, shout-out accounts tend to have the largest followings in the Twitter landscape and therefore play a pivotal role in the resilience of ISIS’s Twitter community.

While American ISIS accounts are suspended with some frequency, these suspensions have become a badge of honor and a means by which an aspirant can bolster his or her legitimacy. In most suspension cases, a new (and often more than one) account with a variation of the previous username is created within hours. As American ISIS supporters are continuously suspended from Twitter, creating a new account becomes increasingly difficult, leading some to turn to others for assistance. The user’s first tweet is often an image of the Twitter notification of suspension, proving that they are the owner of the previous account, along with a request for shout-outs. The new accounts are then retweeted by others, allowing the user to regain his or her previous online following.

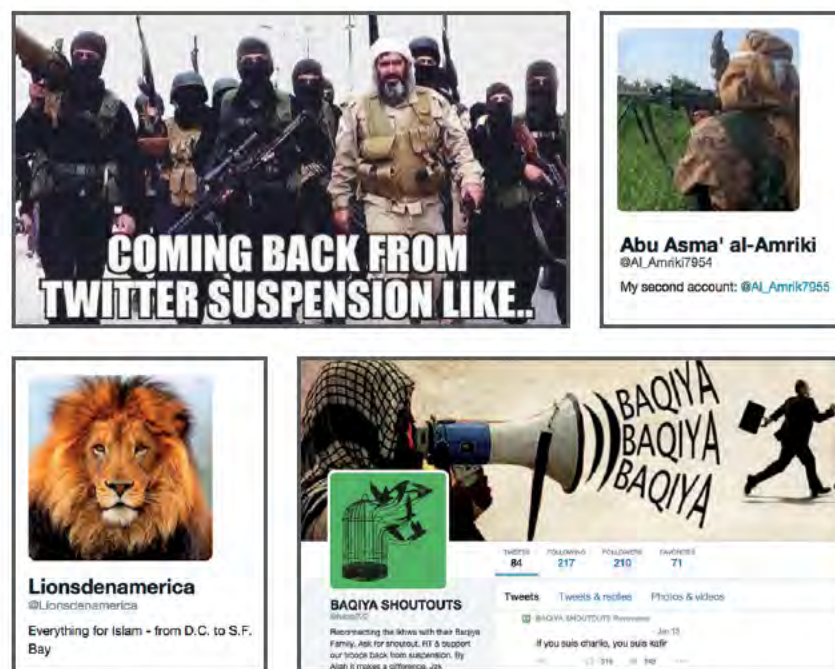


FIG. 29 Clockwise from top left: A user announces a new account; examples of node, shout-out, and amplifier accounts.

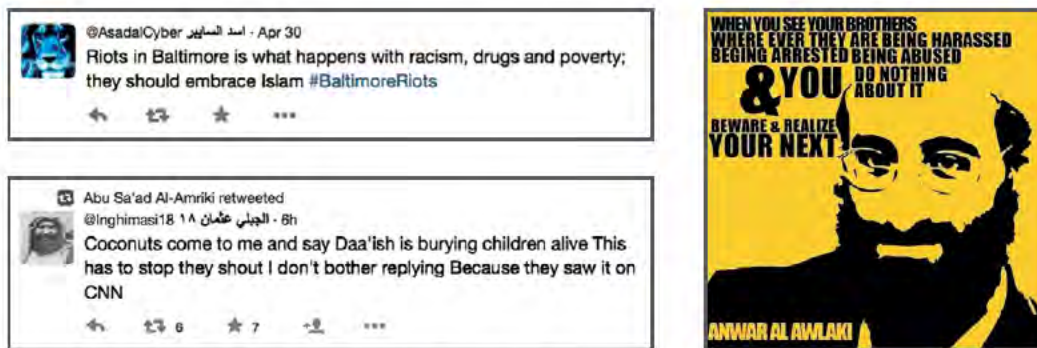


FIG. 30 Cockw se interject ng n the #B ack vesMatter conversat on shar ng a quote from Anwar a Aw ak d sm ss ng S S cr t cs as "coconuts"

Shout-out accounts have further bolstered connectivity by employing Twitter's List function, which allows users to view all tweets by list members on a single page, gain access to full member lists, and weed out suspicious or contrarian accounts. American ISIS supporters have begun sharing ever-expansive lists of individuals to block through the website Block Together, a task that was previously un-delegated and decentralized. In the past individual accounts would collect a handful of accounts to block and share the list with peers via a series of tweets of posts from the website JustPaste.it. While it is unclear who is curating these lists, American ISIS supporters constantly capitalize on new tools to extend the tenure of their accounts.

Communicating primarily in English, American ISIS supporters discuss a wide range of topics, from open support for gruesome acts of terror to boringly benign banter.¹⁰⁴ When ISIS releases propaganda materials in foreign languages (namely Arabic), members of the American community often ask the larger online ISIS echo chamber for translation assistance. Popular content for American ISIS supporters' posts include photos, videos, and discussion of human rights abuses committed by the Syrian, American, Israeli, and various Arab governments; news of ISIS's military victories and provision of social services; photos of deceased ISIS militants

commemorating their status as martyrs; and mocking of Western (and now also Russian) leaders' perceived weakness and ignorance.

On occasion, American ISIS supporters exploit hashtags related to U.S. policies and political movements. For example, some tried interjecting in the #BlackLivesMatter conversation in an attempt to bolster their support among African American Muslims and spread their propaganda to unsuspecting Americans of all backgrounds. Using Black Lives Matter–related hashtags, American ISIS supporters and globally based ISIS recruiters alike have sought to capitalize on unrest in Ferguson, Missouri, and Baltimore, trying to tailor their U.S.-targeted propaganda to resonate with segments of the African American community.¹⁰⁵

American accounts, like the larger ISIS echo chamber, tend not to tolerate dissent and silence attempts at nuance. Muslim religious leaders, particularly those living in the West, who condemn ISIS are routinely dismissed as "coconuts," a derogatory term used to insult those accused of denying their Muslim identity. Many U.S.-based Muslim scholars and activists, even those from conservative backgrounds, are subject to routine death threats.

American ISIS supporters also act as "spotters" for future recruits. Our researchers observed real-time cases of

104. Our researchers include a number of Arabic speakers who reviewed Arabic-language accounts for individual who self-identified as American and found a small contingent of Americans using Arabic as their primary language.

105. Justine Drennan, "Islamic State Supporters Urge Baltimore Rioters to Join Extremist Cause," *Foreign Policy*, April 28, 2015.

recently converted Americans pulled into the ISIS echo chamber. In one case the seemingly naïve individual posted general questions about religion, to which ISIS supporters quickly responded in a calm and authoritative manner. After a few weeks, the accounts of hardened ISIS supporters slowly introduced increasingly ardent views into the conversation. The new recruit was then invited to continue the conversion privately, often via Twitter's Direct Message feature or on other private messaging platforms such as surespot.

Real-World Clusters: ISIS's Den in America

The role of social media in recent developments in the jihadist scene in America, as elsewhere, is central. Yet, it would be incorrect to overemphasize the impact of social media by considering it the sole medium of radicalization and mobilization for American ISIS supporters. A close examination of the individuals analyzed for this study reveals a significantly more nuanced reality in which the importance of social media, while present in virtually all cases, differs substantially from case to case.

To be sure, cases of web-driven, individual radicalization have increased in frequency with the rise of ISIS. Individuals like Shannon Conley and Christopher Cornell (discussed below) are quintessential examples of individuals whose radicalization was confined to the virtual space, completely devoid of contact with like-minded individuals in the physical world.

Yet, in other cases the role of the Internet is not as all-encompassing, but rather complementary to equally, if not more, important dynamics in the physical world. In these cases, individual ISIS sympathizers did not begin their radicalization trajectories alone in front of a computer screen, but rather via face-to-face interactions through preexisting social contacts who already embraced jihadist ideology. Over time, these individuals tend to form a cluster: a small informal group of like-minded individuals whose internal dynamics reinforce the beliefs of its members. Just as the virtual community of ISIS supporters acts

as an echo chamber, these real-life connections reinforce and strengthen individual commitment to ISIS.

Individuals who belong to these informal clusters typically become consumers of jihadist propaganda on the Internet. While the online echo chamber undoubtedly contributes to the individual's and thus the cluster's radicalization, the one-on-one and group dynamics cultivated in the physical world sometimes play a greater role. In these scenarios, online and offline dynamics complement one another, both contributing to and accelerating the cluster's members' radicalization.

These group dynamics are also common in several European countries, where informal clusters often form at the margins of radical mosques, Salafist organizations, or student groups, or simply through the interaction of like-minded acquaintances in the neighborhoods of many European cities and towns. As with other radicalization-related dynamics, this phenomenon, typical of the European reality, occurs on a significantly smaller scale and less frequently than in the U.S. Yet, our analysis revealed that while some individuals fit the profile of the "lone actor," others were part of a cluster of individuals of varying sophistication who radicalized and mobilized together.

The U.S. case that most closely resembles these European dynamics is that of the Minneapolis cluster. Americans traveling to fight in conflict zones is not a new phenomenon for the Minneapolis–St. Paul area. From 2007 to approximately 2009, nearly two dozen individuals, mostly ethnic Somalis, absconded from the U.S. to join the terrorist group al Shabaab.¹⁰⁶ The departing left in small groups, the first wave providing moral and logistical support to those who followed. In response, the FBI began a massive investigation, dubbed Operation Rhino, in an attempt to stem travel to conflict areas.

At the time, some analysts argued that the wave from Minneapolis was unique to the Somali conflict. This contention was challenged in 2014, when a number of Somali Americans shifted their focus from Somalia to Syria. Since

106. B. Todd Jones, "Operation Rhino," *Office of the United States Attorneys*, July 8, 2015.

then, at least 15 individuals have traveled or attempted to travel to join ISIS.¹⁰⁷ They relied on a well-worn recruiting apparatus that leveraged deep personal, familial, and community relations. Chief among that recruiting network was Mohamed Abdullahi Hassan, one of the first to leave Minneapolis to join al Shabaab, becoming a linchpin who recruited others to follow his example. A similar dynamic occurred with Abdi Nur who, after joining ISIS in 2014, sent messages back to his friends in Minneapolis offering contact information and fake passports.¹⁰⁸ Many of the Somali-American ISIS recruits grew up in the same community, attended the same schools, and worshiped at the same mosque. Several of these individuals inherited connections to al Shabaab, including one individual whose older brother joined the group and another who lived with a friend who later departed for Somalia to join the fight.¹⁰⁹

While the Minneapolis cohort has received significant media attention, a less known but equally revealing case unfolded in St. Louis, Missouri. At the center of the cluster is a charismatic Bosnian immigrant, Abdullah Ramo Pazara. A veteran of the Bosnian civil war, Pazara came to America in the second half of the 1990s and lived a seemingly unremarkable life. He married, worked as a truck driver and developed a passion for motorcycles. But in 2011, after both his marriage and trucking business unraveled, he developed an interest in a literalist interpretation of Islam.¹¹⁰ In 2013, just days after obtaining U.S. citizenship, Pazara left for Syria, where he quickly rose to the rank of *emir* (commander) of a Balkan-dominated battalion working under well-known top ISIS commander Omar al Shishani.¹¹¹

Pazara's actions were supported by the efforts of a small group of Bosnian Americans. The men and women lived in St. Louis (home to America's largest Bosnian population) and suburban Illinois towns, but a handful originally hailed from the Bosnian town of Teslic. The group collected almost eight thousand dollars, which they sent to Pazara and families of ISIS fighters in the Balkans.¹¹² Coordinating their activities through Facebook and



FIG. 31 From the U.S. to Syria: Abdullah Ramo Pazara

107. Paul McEnroe, Abby Simons and Libor Jany, "From the Heartland to Jihad: How a Group of Young Men from Minnesota Were Drawn Into ISIL's Campaign of Terror," *Minnesota Star Tribune*, September 20, 2015.

108. McEnroe, Simons and Jany, "From the Heartland to Jihad," *Minnesota Star Tribune*, September 20, 2015.

109. Yuen, Ibrahim and Aslanian, "Called to Fight," *MPR*, March 25, 2015.

110. Robert Patrick, "Allegations of St. Louis Terrorism Support Rooted Back in Bosnian War," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, April 11, 2015.

111. Patrick, "Allegations of St. Louis Terrorism Support Rooted Back in Bosnian War," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, April 11, 2015. See also Radio Sarajevo, "U Siriji Poginuo Ramo Pazara, Komandant Džihadista iz BiH," September 25, 2014.

112. Robert Patrick, "Woman Pleads Guilty in Terror Funding Case with St. Louis Ties," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, September 28, 2015.

email, the group also purchased “United States military uniforms, tactical combat boots, surplus military goods, tactical gear and clothing, firearms accessories, optical equipment and range finders, rifle scopes, equipment, and supplies” for Pazara’s battalion in Syria.¹¹³ Authorities dismantled the ring in February 2015, arresting six individuals (three men and three women) on terrorism-related charges. Pazara was reported killed while fighting against Kurdish forces in Kobane in the fall of 2014.¹¹⁴

While the Minneapolis and St. Louis clusters each revolved around an ethnic bond, a separate cluster in the greater New York City area came together in a different

way and had a more heterogeneous makeup. The group initially connected as early as November 2012, when the then-teenage Nader Saadeh, a New Jersey resident of Jordanian/Palestinian descent, shared his jihadist sympathies with the like-minded Munther Omar Saleh, a teenager from Queens.¹¹⁵ In late 2014, Nader involved his older brother Alaa Saadeh and Samuel Topaz, a high school friend of mixed Jewish/Dominican descent from Fort Lee who had converted to Islam. In addition, Saleh soon incorporated Staten Island’s Fareed Mumuni into the group. The five spent their days absorbing, discussing, and sharing ISIS propaganda—both online and in the physical world. The FBI, which had the group under surveillance for months, listened in as the young men discussed building a “small army” and traveling to the Middle East.¹¹⁶

By the spring of 2015 the group had cemented their plans to join ISIS. Despite Nader’s initially successful travel to Amman, he was arrested by Jordanian authorities in the days following his arrival. In the wake of Nader’s arrest, the FBI swooped in, arresting the four remaining members of the cluster in the New York area. The arrest of Mumuni escalated, as the native of Ghana used a kitchen knife to attack FBI agents attempting to execute a search warrant of his home.

The Program on Extremism’s research has uncovered the presence of other small groups of apparent ISIS sympathizers in various American cities.¹¹⁷ One of them, located in Texas, revolves around a few charismatic individuals and an Islamic studies group. Another, based in the suburbs of a large Midwestern city, appears to be composed of former high school friends and a handful of their



FIG. 32 Nader Saadeh



FIG. 33 Alaa Saadeh



FIG. 34 Samuel Topaz on Facebook

113. *United States of America v. Ramiz Zijad Hodzic, et. al.*, Indictment (February 5, 2015).

114. Associated Press (AP), “Bosnian Immigrants Plead Not Guilty in Terror Financing Case,” *Yahoo! News*, February 11, 2015; Radio Sarajevo, “U Siriji Poginuo Ramo Pazara, Komandant Džihadista iz BiH,” September 25, 2014.; SAFE, “U Siriji Poginuo i Ramo Pazara iz Teslića,” September 24, 2015.; Slobodna Bosna, “Ramo Abdullah Pazara: Srpski Ratnik i Islamski Fanatik,” February 18, 2015.

115. *United States of America v. Alaa Saadeh*, Criminal Complaint (June 26, 2015).

116. *Ibid.*

117. The Program on Extremism has decided not to disclose details about these cases so as not to compromise any potential investigation.

acquaintances. As in most small clusters throughout the U.S., members of both come from diverse ethnic backgrounds and reinforce an active online life with regular interactions in the physical space.

Wide Spectrum of Support Roles

The diversity of American ISIS recruits also extends to the roles they take on in support of the cause. At one end of the spectrum is a small yet alarming number of Americans who have managed to establish deep, real world connections to ISIS. In addition to the aforementioned example of Abdullah Ramo Pazara, researchers identified a number of cases in which Americans traveled to Syria and Iraq and developed important connections to the organization.

One such case that received relatively little media attention is that of the Kodaimati clan, a Syrian-American father and his two sons who became enmeshed in shifting dynamics of two terrorist organizations. One of the sons, Mohamed Saeed Kodaimati, moved to the U.S. in 2001 where he lived for years and became an American citizen.¹¹⁸ In December 2012, Saeed (as he is referred to in the criminal complaint) traveled from San Diego to Istanbul.¹¹⁹ After three months in Turkey, Saeed was arrested by authorities and spent 35 days in prison, where he

met and interacted with a bevy of Syrian rebels, criminals, and jihadists.¹²⁰

Following his release, he travelled to Syria and began working in the JN-run Sharia Authority of Hanano district in the Aleppo governorate. In his own words, Saeed became their “media person,” posting updates on the Authority’s work on various Facebook pages.¹²¹ Sometime later, his association with JN took a much more operational role. Saeed, his father, and his younger brother—whom he refers to as “Rahmo”—began participating in combat operations with JN against the Syrian army.¹²² Saeed’s father was injured on a return trip from the frontlines, apparently by a rocket attack resulting in “shrapnel that went through his side and out through his back.”¹²³ After ISIS seized control of parts of his neighborhood from JN, Saeed became an interlocutor between the two terrorist organizations. He told a friend via Facebook that his “role is more of reconciliatory one . . . I am a mediator for those who have a problem with Da’ish [ISIL].”¹²⁴ He was allowed

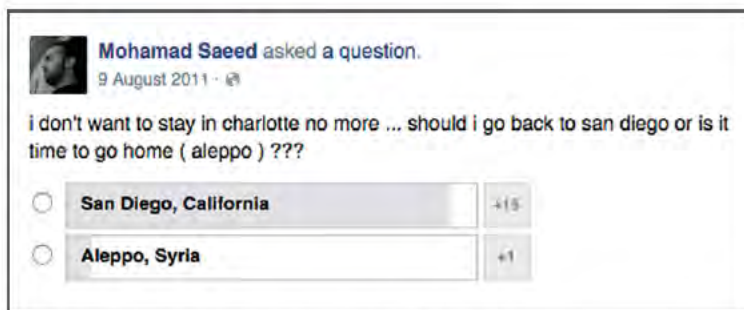


FIG. 35 facebook post by Mohamed Saeed Kodaimati



FIG. 36 Mohamed Saeed Kodaimati

118. *United States of America v. Mohamad Saeed Kodaimati*, Criminal Complaint (April 23, 2015).

119. Kristina Davis, “San Diegan Accused of Hiding ISIS Links,” *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, April 23, 2015.

120. *United States of America v. Mohamad Saeed Kodaimati*, Criminal Complaint (April 23, 2015).

121. *Ibid.*

122. *Ibid.*

123. *Ibid.*

124. *Ibid.*

to keep his weapons and, while stating to the FBI he never swore allegiance to ISIS, he claimed that “they know me, who I am, and I don’t have any problems with them.”¹²⁵

After three years in Syria, Saeed attempted to return to the U.S. but was prevented from boarding his flight in Turkey.¹²⁶ Local authorities sent him to the U.S. embassy, where law enforcement and diplomatic security questioned him regarding his activities in Syria.¹²⁷ Over the course of several discussions, he grossly mischaracterized his time in Syria, contending that he did not participate in any violent activity.¹²⁸ Confronted with his Facebook messages and photos corroborating authorities’ belief that he served in the ranks of terrorist groups, Saeed returned to the U.S. and pled guilty to providing false statements to the FBI.¹²⁹

On the opposite end of the mobilization spectrum, a more common typology is those whose contributions to ISIS fail to exceed online declarations of support and personal fantasies of joining the group. These are the cases of people, most often indicted for attempting to provide material support to ISIS, whose links to ISIS are largely limited to the virtual realm.

A prime example of the disturbed wannabe ISIS recruit is Shannon Conley, a Colorado native who first appeared on the radar of the FBI Denver Field Office following a confrontation with a local church.¹³⁰ During the several months she attended the church, Conley complained she was being treated unfairly due to her Muslim views and dress, making her feel like a “terrorist.”¹³¹



FIG. 37 Shannon Maureen Conley

Conley showed up one day and began sketching the layout of the church’s campus, causing church officials to ban her from the premises.¹³²

In one of her many interviews with law enforcement, Conley stated she wanted to wage jihad against “kafir” in order to protect Muslim lands.¹³³ A certified nurse, she expressed the desire to become a “housewife and camp nurse” for ISIS militants in Syria.¹³⁴ Obsessed with guerrilla warfare, she became a U.S. Army Explorer to learn American combat tactics that she could then teach to ISIS fighters and admitted to owning *Al Qaida’s Doctrine for Insurgency: Abd Al-Aziz Al-Muqrin’s A Practical Course for Guerilla War*.¹³⁵ She began communicating with a Tunisian ISIS fighter on Skype, who pushed her to join him in Syria as his wife.¹³⁶ The invitation prompted the FBI to contact

125. *United States of America v. Mohamad Saeed Kodaimati*, Criminal Complaint (April 23, 2015).

126. Ibid.

127. Ibid.

128. Ibid.

129. Ibid.

130. *United States of America v. Shannon Maureen Conley*, Criminal Complaint (April 9, 2014).

131. Ibid.

132. Ibid.

133. Ibid.

134. Ibid.

135. Ibid.

136. Ibid.



FIG. 38 Christopher Lee Cornell

Conley's parents, who joined authorities in an effort to keep Conley in the U.S. Despite their efforts, Conley's father discovered a one-way plane ticket to Turkey and contacted the FBI. The following day, his daughter was arrested while attempting to board a flight to Germany at Denver International Airport.¹³⁷

A similar case is that of Christopher Lee Cornell. Born in a Cincinnati suburb, Cornell wrestled in high school and is remembered by teachers as a "typical student."¹³⁸ After graduating in 2012, Cornell, described by his father as a "big mama's boy" whose best friend was a cat, lived with his parents and was unemployed.¹³⁹ In the summer of 2014 Cornell converted to Islam, growing his beard

and donning traditional Muslim clothing.¹⁴⁰ He became increasingly angry, isolated, and withdrawn, often attracting harassment from neighbors.¹⁴¹ Cornell developed an online persona as Raheel Mahrus Ubaydah and a network of contacts—among them an FBI undercover operative.¹⁴² Cornell informed the operative of his plans to attack the U.S. Capitol and set off a series of pipe bombs.¹⁴³ He was arrested in January 2015 after purchasing several semi-automatic rifles and approximately 600 rounds of ammunition as part of an FBI sting.¹⁴⁴

Determining a link to ISIS has proven challenging in a few recent cases. The most prominent is that of Mohammad Abdulazeer, the shooter whose attacks on two military installations in Chattanooga in July 2015 left five dead. Following the incident, investigators discovered Abdulazeer operated a blog focusing on Islamist themes, and downloaded copies of Anwar al Awlaki's sermons. Yet authorities were unable to determine a link to or a demonstrated interest in ISIS.¹⁴⁵ Suggesting additional or concurrent potential explanations for his actions, before the attack Abdulazeer allegedly stopped taking his anti-depression medication and regularly consumed illegal narcotics.¹⁴⁶

A second incident that escapes easy categorizations took place in Oklahoma in September 2014, when 31-year-old convert Alton Nolen beheaded a former coworker. Nolen carried out the gruesome act shortly after having been suspended from his job, potentially indicating that he was motivated by personal reasons.¹⁴⁷ On the other hand,

137. Michael Martinez, Ana Cabrera and Sara Weisfeldt, "Colorado Woman Gets 4 Years for Wanting to Join ISIS," *CNN*, January 24, 2015.

138. AP, "Teachers: Ohio Man Accused in Terror Plot a Typical Student," *WHSV.com*, January 15, 2015.

139. Ben Brumfield, Pamela Brown and Dana Ford, "FBI Says Plot to Attack U.S. Capitol was Ready to Go," *CNN*, January 15, 2015.

140. Brumfield, Brown and Ford, "FBI Says Plot to Attack U.S. Capitol was Ready to Go," *CNN*, January 15, 2015.

141. Kimball Perry and Patrick Brennan, "Father: Terror Plot Suspect was a 'Momma's Boy,'" *Cincinnati.com*, January 23, 2015.

142. *United States of America v. Christopher Lee Cornell*, Criminal Complaint (January 14, 2015).

143. *Ibid.*

144. *Ibid.*

145. Jonathan Dienst and Miguel Almaguer, "Mohammad Youssef Abdulazeer Downloaded Recordings from Radical Cleric, Officials Say," *NBC News*, July 21, 2015.

146. Greg Jaffe, Cari Wade Gervin and Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "Tenn. Gunman Used Drugs, Struggled with Clash of Faith," *The Washington Post*, July 18, 2015.

147. Abby Ohlheiser, "What we Know about Alton Nolen, Who as been Charged with Murder in the Oklahoma Beheading Case," *The Washington Post*, September 30, 2014.

the act's modalities and the fact that Nolen, while having no known contact with ISIS, was an avid consumer of jihadist propaganda online, suggest that the case could be more than an ordinary incident of workplace violence.¹⁴⁸

Similarly unclear is the case of Zale Thompson, who attacked four New York Police Department officers with a hatchet in October 2014.¹⁴⁹ His online search history shows an interest in jihadist videos, some of which included ISIS material.¹⁵⁰ However, Thompson, who was described by law enforcement as a loner with possible mental problems, also consumed black nationalist and other anti-government propaganda online, making an

even inspirational link to ISIS uncertain at best.

Perhaps the most puzzling is the case of Joshua Ryne Goldberg, a 20-year-old Jewish Floridian who was arrested in September 2015 for distributing information relating to a bomb plot targeting a 9/11 memorial ceremony in Kansas City.¹⁵¹ Goldberg had multiple online personas: an ISIS-affiliated Australian jihadist, a white supremacist, a feminist, and a free-speech radical.¹⁵² Regardless of his life as a virtual troll, Goldberg did nonetheless provide an individual, who unbeknownst to Goldberg was an FBI informant, with instructions for constructing a bomb from a pressure cooker filled with nails.¹⁵³

148. Michael Pearson, "Who is Oklahoma Beheading Suspect Alton Nolen?," *CNN*, September 30, 2014.

149. Agence France-Presse, "New York Police Brand Hatchet Attack 'Terrorist' Act," *Yahoo News!*, October 24, 2015.

150. Caitlin Nolan, Kerry Burke, Rocco Parascandola, Joseph Stepansky and Thomas Tracy, "Hatchet-wielding Man Shot Dead by NYPD Cops in Queens; Police Eye Possible Terrorism Motive," *New York Daily News*, October 24, 2014.

151. Garrett Pelican, "Orange Park Man, 20, Indicted in 9/11 Memorial Bomb Plot," *First Coast News*, September 15, 2015.

152. Katie Zavadski, "'Terrorist' Troll Pretended to be ISIS, White Supremacist, and Jewish Lawyer," *The Daily Beast*, September 11, 2015.

153. *United States of America v. Joshua Ryne Goldberg*, Criminal Complaint (September 10, 2015).

CONCLUSION

Countering ISIS's American Recruits

THIS REPORT has provided a look inside the bubble of American ISIS sympathizers, a diverse and diffuse scene that the FBI estimates include hundreds, if not thousands, of individuals. To be sure, most of the participants in this counter-culture will never make the leap from talk to action, from being keyboard warriors to actual militancy. Some will mature out of what is just an awkward adolescent phase. Others simply lack the personality traits necessary for committing terror attacks or setting out for ISIS territory. On a more mundane level, others find themselves restrained by the practical commitments of their daily lives.

Nonetheless, a subset of the Americans inside the domestic ISIS bubble, whether they operate individually or in small clusters, will at some point move from chatter to action. For some that will mean boarding a flight to the Middle East. For others, it will entail gathering the equipment needed to carry out an attack inside the United States. The decision to attack the home front may follow unsuccessful attempts to link up with recruiters overseas. In other cases, the attacker's horizon remains focused on targeting the "infidels" inside America.

The diversity of ISIS's American recruits and the wide range of ways they demonstrate their support requires careful consideration prior to any potential policy response. Because there is no standard recruit profile, there is also no silver bullet that will blunt ISIS's allure. Recognizing this complexity is a vital initial step for policymakers, law enforcement officials, civic leaders, teachers, and parents when crafting effective solutions.

Stepping back to consider the implications of the demographic data and personality profiles surveyed in this report, several essential policy recommendations emerge:

First, the number of ISIS recruits in America and the

complex scene they comprise poses a challenge that cannot be solved solely by arrests. Law enforcement vigilance is vital but insufficient on its own. Moreover, many early-stage ISIS sympathizers have not necessarily broken any laws. A comprehensive preventive approach to radicalization is necessary. Unfortunately, the resources devoted to countering violent extremism (CVE) by the U.S. government remain woefully inadequate for the task at hand.¹⁵⁴ Robust funding and dynamic programs are needed immediately.

Second, an effective alternative to arrest is intervention to help sway individuals from the path of radicalization. Our research identified 71 ISIS recruits in the U.S. legal system—a figure far short of the 250-plus Americans who, according to government officials, have attempted to or actually traveled to Syria and Iraq. Why those 180 individuals are not in the legal system has several explanations, including the fact that many cases fail to meet the legal threshold for arrest. This factor reinforces the need for the government to create a framework for targeted interventions with radicalized individuals by non-law enforcement groups, as well as legal parameters so that interveners are not at risk of civil and criminal liability if their efforts fail.

Third, while interventions are a potential solution for Americans already on the path to radicalization, it would be even more effective to prevent citizens from even starting that perilous journey. Researchers and civic leaders should empirically analyze which messaging resonates best with audiences commonly targeted by ISIS, recognizing that a range of narratives deployed for unique audiences will likely be necessary.

Fourth, there are individuals and organizations that would like to implement counter-ISIS messaging online, yet worry that their activities might inadvertently attract the attention of law enforcement. For instance, several

154. Lorenzo Vidino and Seamus Hughes, "Countering Violent Extremism in America," Program on Extremism, June 2015.

American Muslims consulted for this report expressed willingness to engage ISIS supporters online yet hesitated to do so for fear of falling onto the FBI's radar by engaging in dialogue with radicals. The government should provide legal guidance and recommend best practices so that potential counter-messengers can make informed decisions on whether and how to engage.

Finally, there is a largely untapped opportunity to leverage American ISIS recruits who have become disillusioned with the cause. These individuals have dropped out for a variety of reasons, whether experiencing the brutality of life under ISIS firsthand or finding a more positive outlet for the quest that led them to ISIS in the first place. U.S. officials would do well to provide avenues for their stories to be amplified to help dissuade would-be recruits.

The government should consider, within reason, limited immunity for some returning foreign fighters, as their messages are more likely to resonate than those delivered by most other counter-messaging programs.

While jihadist causes have lured American recruits for several decades, the surge spurred by the rise of ISIS and its sophisticated marketing of its counter-culture to impressionable Americans is unprecedented. The data and vignettes provided in this report illuminate the complexity of the threat and caution against simple solutions. In their response to this challenge, American political and civic leaders will need to be bold, experimental, and receptive to novel policies and initiatives in order to defeat ISIS and protect some of our fellow citizens from falling into its clutches.

APPENDIX

The 71 individuals charged for ISIS-related activities (as of November 12, 2015)

Abdi Nur	John T Booker
Abdirahman Yasin Daud	Jonas 'Yunus' Edmonds
Abdul Malik Abdul Kareem	Joshua Ray Van Haften
Abdullahi Mohamud Yusuf	Justin Nojan Sullivan
Abdurasul Hasanovich Juraboev	Keonna Thomas
Abror Habibov	Leon Nathan Davis III
Adam Dandach	Mediha Medy Salkicevic
Adnan Abdihamad Farah	Michael Todd Wolfe
Ahmed Mohammed El Gammal	Miguel Moran Diaz
Akba Jihad Jordan	Mohamad Saeed Kodaimati
Akhror Saidakhmetov	Mohamed Abdihamid Farah
Akmal Zakirov	Mohamed Abdullahi Hassan
Alaa Saadeh	Mohammad Hamza Khan
Alexander Ciccolo	Mufid Elfgeeh
Alexander E Blair	Muhammad Oda Dakhlalla
Ali Saleh	Muhanad Badawi
Ali Shukri Amin	Munther Omar Saleh
Arafat Nagi	Nader Elhuzayel
Armin Harcevic	Nader Saadeh
Asher Abid Khan	Nicholas Rovinski
Asia Siddiqui	Nicholas Teausant
Avin Marsalis Brown	Nihad Rosic
Bilal Abood	Noelle Velentzas
Christopher Lee Cornell	Ramiz Zijad Hodzic
David Wright	Reza Niknejad
Dilkhayot Kasmiov	Robert C. McCollum
Donald Ray Morgan	Samuel Rahamin Topaz
Fareed Mumini	Sedina Unkic Hodzic
Guled Ali Omar	Shannon Maureen Conley
Hamza Naj Ahmed	Tairod Nathan Webster Pugh
Hanad Mustafe Musse	Terrence McNeil
Harlem Suarez	Unnamed minor (PA)
Hasan Edmonds	Unnamed minor (SC)
Heather Elizabeth Coffman	Yusra Ismail
Jaelyn Delshaun	Zacharia Yusuf Abdurahman
Jasminka Ramic	

What explains the recent surge in American jihadi recruits? Who are the Americans lured by the siren songs of ISIS's propaganda? How do they embrace such radical ideology? What do they seek?

This report provides a comprehensive overview of ISIS-related radicalization and mobilization in the United States.

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