



The Islamic State in America: After the Caliphate

Lorenzo Vidino, Seamus Hughes, & Bennett Clifford
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Program on Extremism
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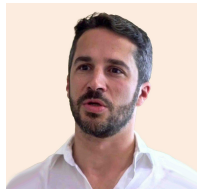
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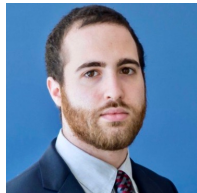
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About The Program on Extremism and *Nexus*

The Program on Extremism at George Washington University 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 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 views and conclusions contained in this document are those of the authors and should not be interpreted as necessarily representing the official policies, either expressed or implied, of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security or The George Washington University. This material is based upon work supported by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security under Grant Award Number 20STTPC00001-01.

This report is released as part of The Global-Local Jihadist Nexus project (*Nexus*). *Nexus* draws on a global network of subject matter experts and locally-based researchers to monitor Islamic State and al-Qaida affiliates across the Middle East, Africa, and Asia, as well as their support and enabling networks in the West.

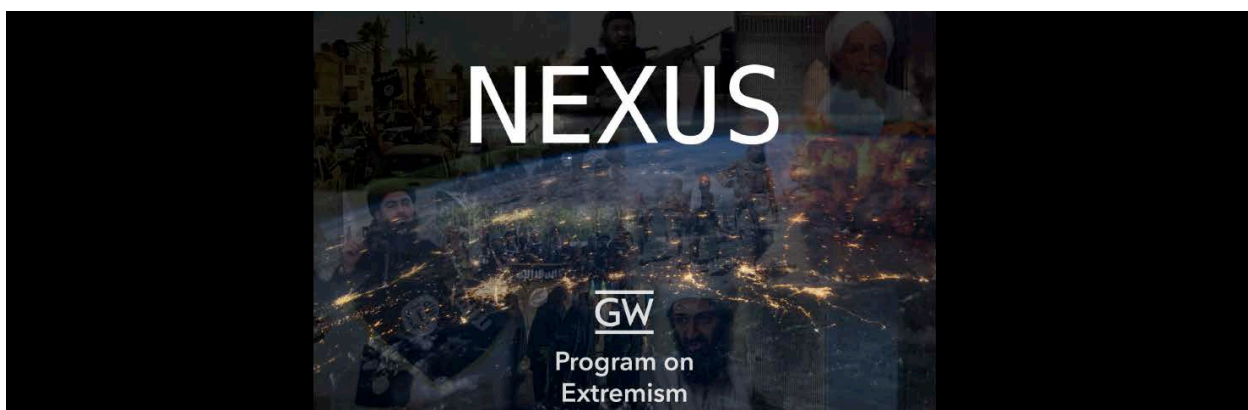


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Introduction

The time period in which the Islamic State (IS) controlled territory in Syria and Iraq between 2014 and 2019 coincided with the [largest groundswell of homegrown jihadist activity](#) in United States history. This unprecedented wave of jihadist activism, which hit its peak between 2014 and 2016, could be measured through several indicators. Senior officials in the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) testified that the Bureau managed, at any given time between 2014 and 2019, [1,000 active investigations](#) into IS supporters throughout the U.S.; at least [239 alleged supporters](#) were charged in U.S. courts. Meanwhile, more than 80 Americans [traveled to Syria and Iraq](#) to join IS, and 16 IS sympathizers that remained in the U.S. [conducted terrorist attacks](#) that were inspired by or directed by the group. Others provided resources for IS' global project in different ways, most notably by supporting IS' [online propaganda dissemination and social media recruitment](#) campaigns.

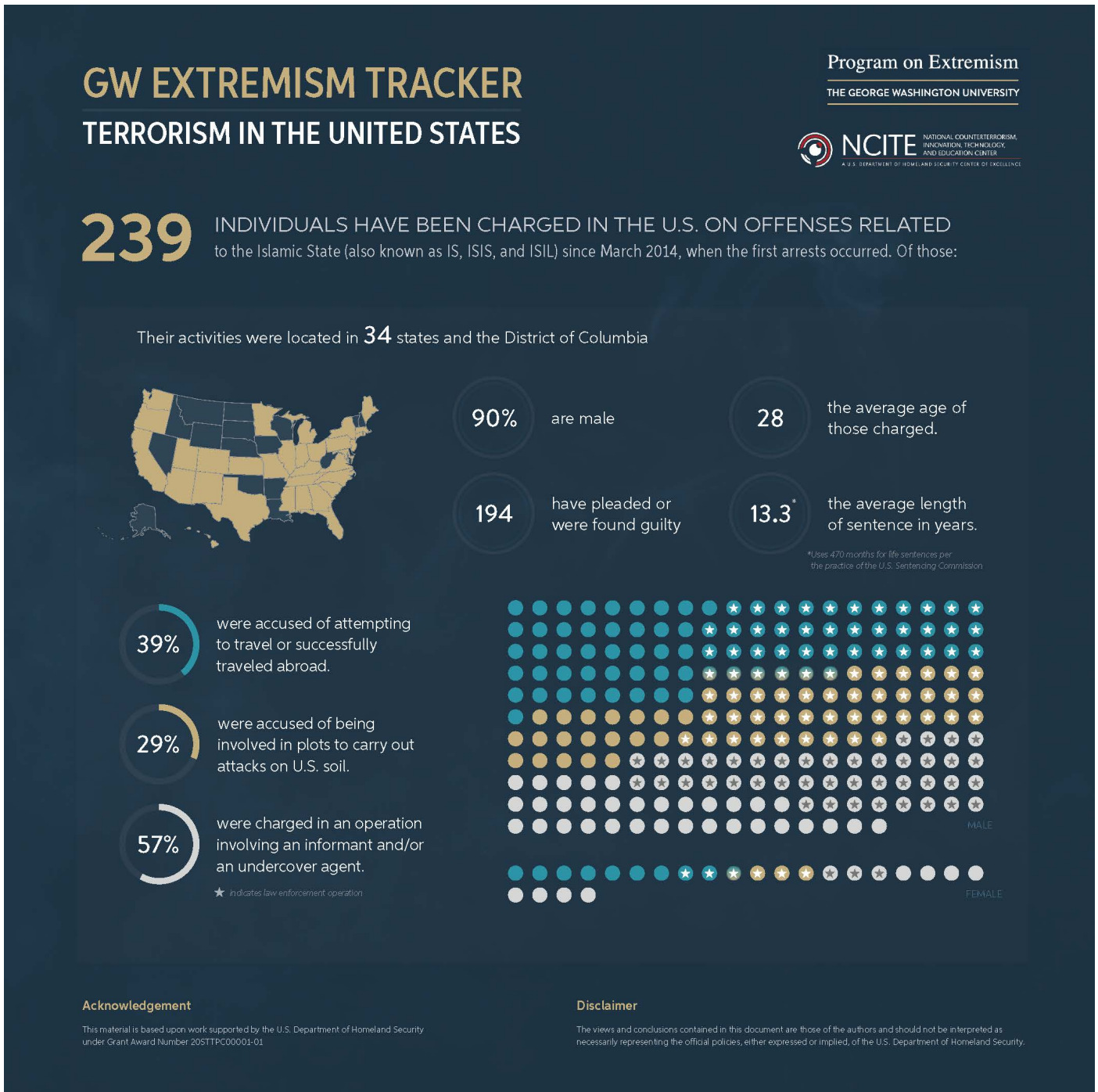
At its peak, IS' perceived ideological credibility and authority, its predilection for extreme acts of violence, and its ability to direct its on-the-ground resources in Syria and Iraq towards information operations designed to incite terrorism in the West, drove its successes in recruiting Americans. However, as the organization began to hemorrhage territory, leadership, and key personnel, it became less and less able to reach its target audiences around the world, including in the U.S. The loss of the [last vestiges of its territory](#) in Syria and Iraq, the [targeted killings of key English-speaking IS facilitators](#) and ["virtual entrepreneurs,"](#) and eventually, the [death of IS' first "caliph" Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi](#) were all harbingers for the decline in IS-related activity in the U.S.

Nevertheless, even in a post-caliphate environment, IS continues to inspire American jihadists to conduct activities on its behalf. According to the FBI, the organization remains the [predominant homegrown violent extremist \(HVE\) threat to the U.S.](#), and although the group's capabilities to recruit and mobilize Americans have significantly degraded, no other jihadist organization has made a significant effort to fill the breach and take IS' place. While the number of IS-related cases in the American legal system in 2020, 2021, and 2022 have steadily declined from their peak in 2015, the alleged activities of supporters in these cases are more diffuse.

In this paper, we evaluate 29 cases of Americans charged in the U.S. with IS-related offenses since January 2020. By comparing and contrasting them with the larger corpus of cases of American IS sympathizers in the U.S. legal system since 2014—when the first IS-related criminal case

occurred—this brief report documents emerging trends in the nature of American support for IS and the U.S. counterterrorism response in the world after the collapse of IS’ physical caliphate. Furthermore, it attempts to ascertain what these trends portend for the future of the jihadist movement in America.

Figure 1: GW Extremism Tracker, September 2022



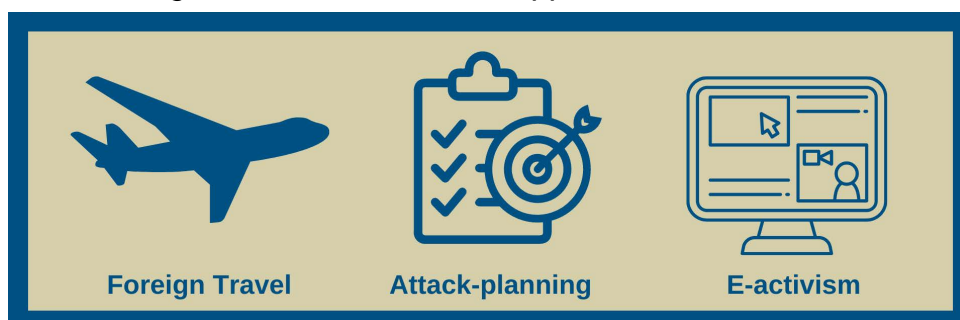
Islamic State-Related Legal Cases Since 2020

Overall, the 29 post-2020 IS cases tend to follow the [general demographic outlines](#) of American IS supporters charged in U.S. courts. They are overwhelmingly male (93%), have a mean age of 28, and hail from 15 different states (and the District of Columbia). The following subsections document the peculiarities of post-2020 cases related to [three core methods](#) of IS support: foreign terrorist travel, attack-planning, and participation in IS-inspired “e-activism” online.

As the case studies show, each of these methods and the way in which they are employed in the American context have been profoundly impacted by the physical setbacks that IS experienced over the last few years. In some categories, the effect of these hindrances on IS’ success in recruiting Americans has been unconditionally negative. For instance, there has yet to be an IS-related terrorist attack in the U.S. resulting in death (despite several plots) during the 2020s. Meanwhile, those interested in foreign terrorist travel appear to be at a loss in determining where they should travel to support IS. Moreover, as this report examines, the net outflow of IS-affiliated travelers after 2020 significantly favors U.S. counterterrorism authorities: between 2020 and September 2022, IS travelers brought back in custody from Syria and Iraq to face justice outnumbered known cases of Americans attempting to travel overseas to join the group by a 2:1 margin.

On the other hand, IS’ physical misfortunes appear to have broadened the scope and innovation of American IS e-activists, who are pursuing a broader range of media and online platforms while developing an increased level of sophistication and operational security in their efforts. In conjunction, these developments paint a picture of a [fractured American jihadist movement](#) whose decentralization affords, in equal measure, a slightly lowered operational tempo and risk of high-profile attacks alongside an increased risk of its operators slipping “[under the radar](#)” and conducting small scale plots.

Figure 2: Three Main Categories of Islamic State Support in the U.S.



Jihadist Travelers

Since 2020, five Americans charged with IS-related activity have allegedly attempted to travel overseas to join IS. Unimaginable during the core years of IS' territorial control in Syria and Iraq, only one case in this time period involved an individual who attempted to travel to the Levant. [Muhammad Masood](#), a medical researcher who lived in Minnesota, made two attempts in early 2020 to travel to Syria, first attempting to transit through Jordan, and later, after Jordan closed its borders during the COVID-19 pandemic, by way of a convoluted cargo ship journey. Masood [pleaded guilty](#) to attempting to provide material support to IS in August 2022.

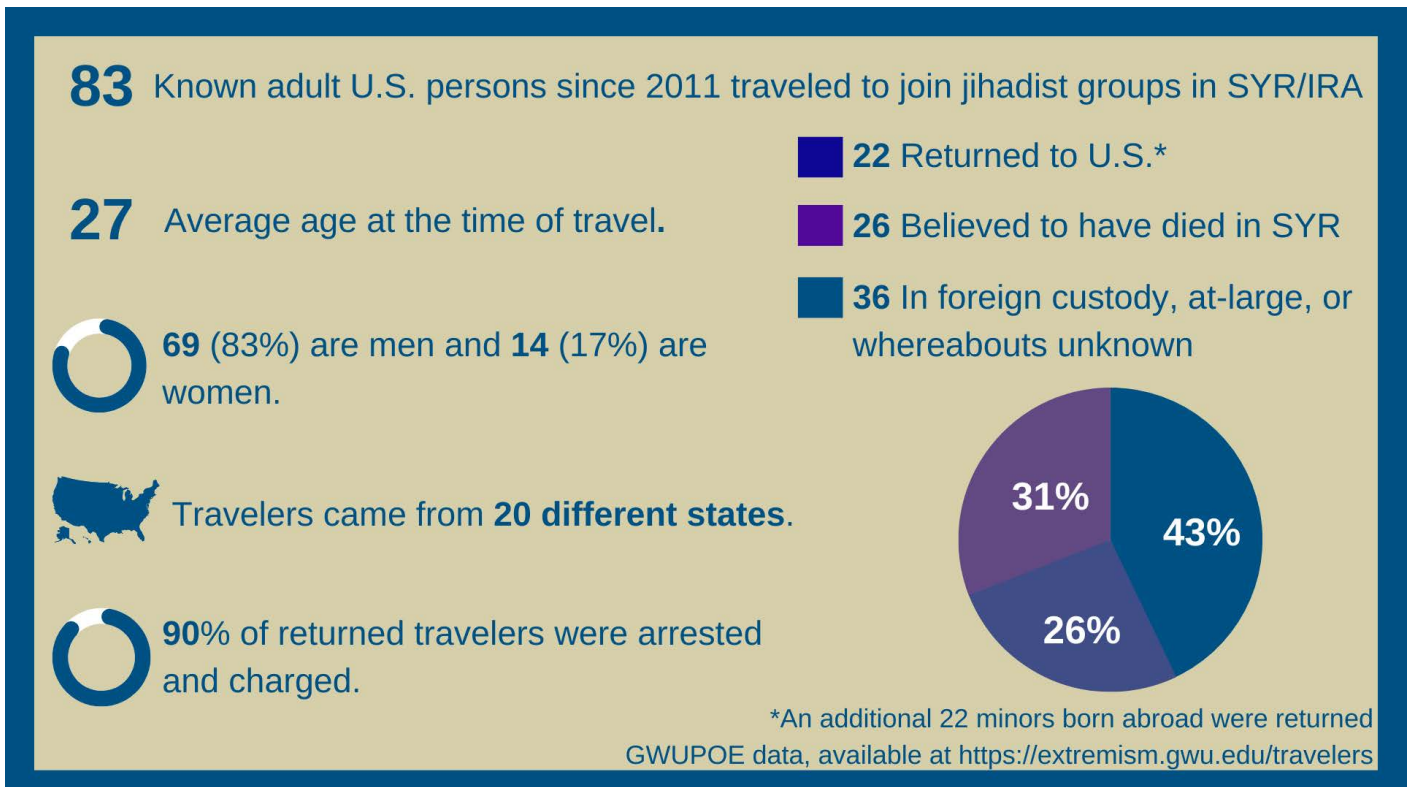
The relative lack of Syria and Iraq-related travel plans for American attempted travelers may demonstrate that despite its ideological allure and the strength of IS remnants still in operation, U.S. supporters no longer view the region as a tenable destination for foreign fighter travel—an assessment that is common also among [European jihadists](#). But this decision also poses a conundrum for supporters, because IS territorial control and successes in other locales are [highly transitory](#) and the organization [lacks the capacity to intake foreigners](#) in many of its external provinces. The remainder of the post-2020 American attempted travel cases display that U.S. jihadist sympathizers are considering multiple destinations, various means of travel, and are highly reactive to current events and the state of pro-IS propaganda in considering destinations for *hijrah*. Prominent within the current events that influenced travelers was the [COVID-19 pandemic](#), which made foreign terrorist travel and navigating borders an even more complicated affair.

In the four cases beside Masood's, these issues led to unsystematic approaches for determining travel destinations. Oftentimes, the would-be travelers in question listed several IS affiliates that they knew of around the world to their contacts and co-conspirators, and settled on their eventual preferred destination because they perceived it to be the path of least resistance. [James Bradley and Arwa Muthana](#)—the sister of successful IS traveler [Hoda Muthana](#)—reportedly told an FBI undercover employee posing as a fixer for a cargo ship that they wanted to travel to join IS affiliates in Libya, Somalia, Afghanistan, and the Sinai Peninsula before eventually settling on their final plan of traveling to Yemen. [Elvin Hunter Bgorn Williams](#), an IS supporter from Washington State, first developed a plan to travel to Myanmar to join a militant group affiliated with IS before scrapping the plan, telling a contact whom he believed was an IS recruiter that he preferred the Sinai Peninsula but “if I cannot go to Sinai I will make a decision between Ethiopia, Somalia, or Indonesia.” Williams

was [arrested at Sea-Tac International Airport](#) in Seattle as he attempted to board a flight to Cairo, Egypt.

While the efforts of American IS supporters to travel overseas faltered over the past three years, U.S. counterterrorism authorities had banner years in [repatriating and prosecuting Americans](#) and other Westerners who had successfully traveled to Syria and Iraq to join IS. Between 2020 and 2022, the Department of Justice charged six of these travelers and repatriated four more who were charged in sealed complaints before 2020 from Syria and Iraq to face trial. Among the successful travelers charged since 2020 are two Americans ([Lirim Sylejmani](#) and [Abdelhamid al-Madioum](#)) who fought for IS and were detained by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) before being transferred into U.S. custody; one American ([Mohamed Fathy Suliman](#)) held by the Turkish government for attempting to illegally cross the Syrian border to join IS; and, perhaps most notably, three foreigners prosecuted by the U.S. for their roles in IS' hostage-taking and execution of American, British, and Japanese citizens. After their home countries deferred prosecution to the U.S., two British foreign fighters ([El Shafee Elsheikh](#) and [Alexanda Kotey](#)) that were [part of the IS cell known as "the Beatles"](#) and the Canadian narrator of major IS media productions [Mohammed Khalifa](#) were each [sentenced to life in prison](#).

Figure 3: Status of American Travelers to Syria and Iraq



Attack Plotters

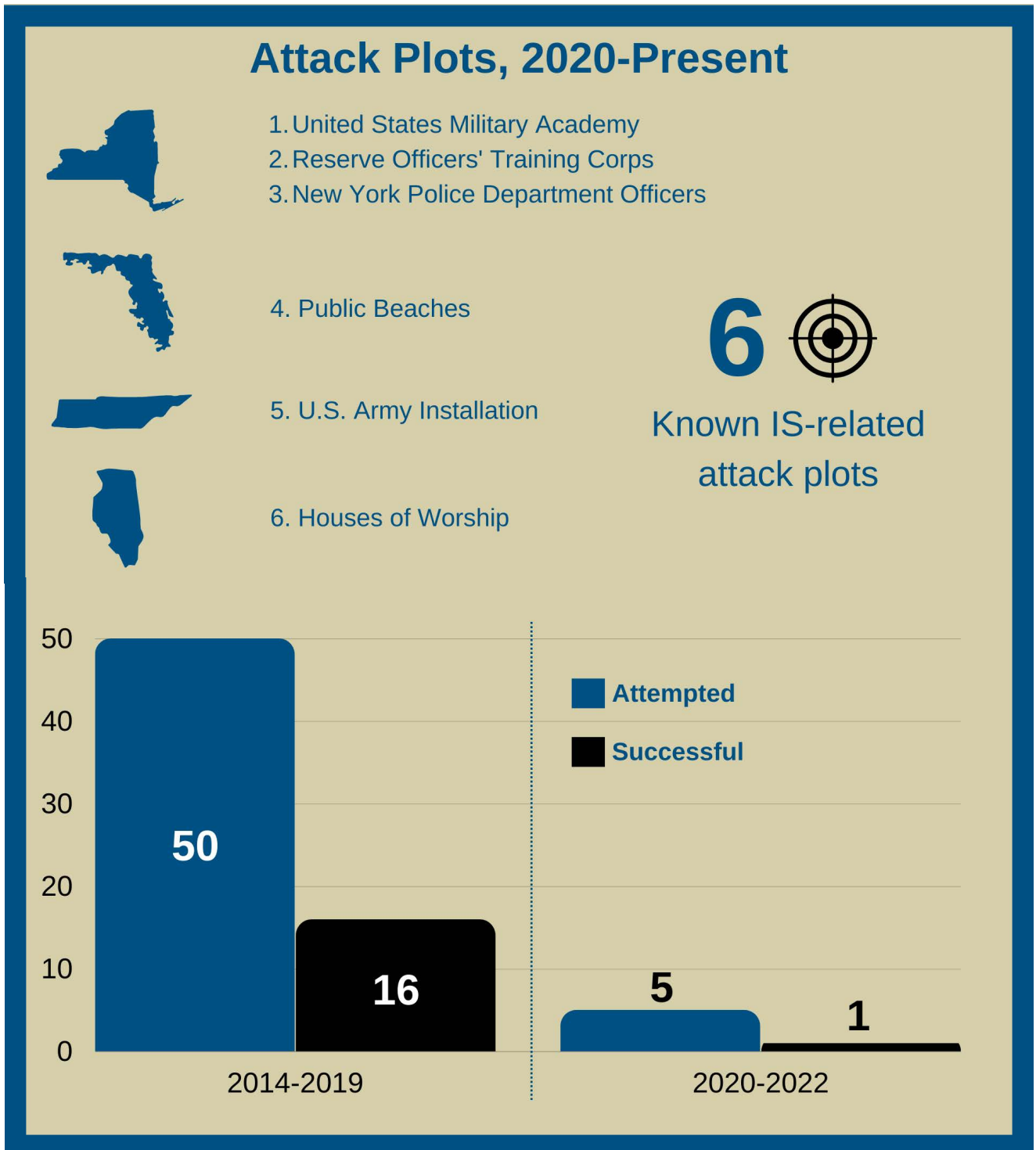
Along with the steady decline in cases of disrupted IS travelers, the second decade of IS-related arrests and charges in the U.S. also witnessed a drop in the number of both successful and disrupted attack plots carried out on behalf of the organization. IS supporters in America successfully executed one attack in the U.S. since 2020. On June 3, 2020 [Dzenan Camovic](#)—a Bosnian national living illegally in the U.S.—stabbed one New York Police Department officer, wrestled control of his service firearm, and fired several shots at another officer before being subdued and arrested. A [post-arrest search](#) of Camovic’s apartment, mobile phone, and thumb drive yielded a significant amount of IS and other jihadist propaganda, and he reportedly told investigators that “[his] religion made [him] do it.” Despite Camovic’s efforts, neither of the officers he wounded succumbed to their injuries.

The other five attack plots between 2020 and 2022 were even less successful. James Bradley and Arwa Muthana, the aforementioned couple who attempted to travel to join IS’ affiliate in Yemen on a cargo ship, [also considered conducting attacks](#) on the United States Military Academy at West Point and a Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) detachment at a university before abandoning the plot in favor of traveling overseas. Two attempted plotters, [Muhammed Momtaz al-Azhari](#) and [Jason Stokes](#), were independently interested in conducting mass shootings on behalf of the group at beaches in Florida and a U.S. Army installation in Tennessee, respectively. However, they both attempted to purchase firearms from FBI undercover employees to do so, leading to their arrests. Finally, a teenage IS supporter in Maine named [Xavier Pelkey](#) was arrested and charged after a search of his house uncovered explosive devices that he allegedly constructed. The FBI claims that Pelkey and two minors in Illinois and Kentucky [devised a plan](#) to bomb a Shi’a mosque or a Jewish synagogue in the Chicago area.

These figures constitute a significant drop from the 2014-2019 period, in which the FBI disrupted [over 50 individuals](#) who were attempting to plan IS-related attacks in the U.S. and a further 16 [successfully conducted attacks](#). The decline in operational tempo and success rate of IS-affiliated attack plotters is perhaps attributable to several factors, including the inability of the organization to [remotely guide attack plots](#) in the U.S. due to the deaths of several of its English-speaking external operations specialists; the [decline in output of official English-language propaganda](#) encouraging attacks in the West; and [adaptations by American counterterrorism authorities](#) to respond to low-sophistication or low-budget terrorist attack planning. Initially, analysts [hypothesized](#) that the ongoing decline in IS’ fortunes on the battlefields of Syria and Iraq from 2015-2017 would lead to an

increase in attacks in the West, because jihadists who could no longer travel to join the organization would turn inwards and conduct attacks in their countries of origin. While this dynamic appears to have taken place in the U.S. context in the first few years after the tides began to turn against IS, initial data from after 2019 shows that it did not survive the organization's collapse of territorial control.

Figure 4: Islamic State-related Attack Plots



E-Activists

IS' misfortunes in Syria and Iraq had a profound, deleterious impact on the overt efforts of its American supporters, including foreign terrorist travel and attack planning. However, the decline appears to have supercharged its online cadre of IS enthusiasts around the world, including in the U.S. The data from the U.S. context show that collapse of IS' self-declared caliphate does not appear to have caused IS' online supporters to [“ruminate over their losses”](#); rather, adherents have attempted to rebuild IS' propaganda and information operations capabilities by experimenting with new digital tools, forming online replacements for physical infrastructure, and crowdsourcing solutions. The [disintegration of most of IS' official outfits](#) (especially its legacy media outlets) has opened up space for its American supporters to take a more active role in IS' online operations, which is evident in many post-2020 cases.

Several Americans, especially those with unique language or technological skills, have offered their services to the expanding range of unofficial, pro-IS media sources that proliferated during IS' decline. [Benjamin Alan Carpenter](#), a resident of Knoxville, Tennessee, was charged in the spring of 2021 with founding one of these unofficial media sources, an international group called [Ahlut-Tawhid Publications](#). The group was dedicated to the publication of pro-IS propaganda and the translation of IS official media into several languages— Carpenter [allegedly led English translation efforts](#). [Jonathan Guerra Blanco](#), a Floridian charged in September 2020, was an operative of another pro-IS media network that tasked him with producing his own English-language content encouraging Americans to conduct attacks in the U.S., translating other productions into Spanish, and attempting to recruit others with different language skills to join the group. Investigators noted that Guerra had a [“substantial knowledge of advanced techniques and methods to remain anonymous online,”](#) including the use of virtual private networks (VPN) and several communications platforms with encryption.

The most recent IS-related case at the time of publication highlights efforts by American IS supporters to traverse the divide between online e-activism and real-world efforts to create cells of support for the organization in the U.S. In late August 2022, a New Mexico man was arrested for [allegedly administering an online platform](#) dedicated to his attempt to establish an “Islamic State Center” in New Mexico. According to the FBI, Herman Leyvouné Wilson's [vision for his Islamic State Center](#) was a physical compound that would train adherents in IS ideology and prepare them for activities like foreign fighter travel and conducting attacks in the U.S. through martial arts and tactical

maneuvering courses. Among the IS supporters throughout the country who allegedly supported Wilson in his efforts to establish the center were [Jaylyn Christopher Molina](#) and [Kristopher Sean Matthews](#), from Texas and South Carolina respectively, who [previously pleaded guilty](#) to a conspiracy to disseminate IS propaganda and instructional material online.

Figure 5: E-Activists



Analysis and Conclusion

On the surface, pro-IS jihadist networks in the U.S. are reeling from the reverberating effects of the collapse of the organization in Syria and Iraq and other developments, both intrinsic and extrinsic to IS' current position and strength. In the former category, after ISIS' collapse, none of its affiliates or provinces have managed to consolidate territorial gains and construct an external operations capability to the extent of IS between 2014 and 2016. The well-worn pathways that funneled so many Americans towards the group during its apex, such as foreign fighter travel, external support for homegrown attack planning, and a massive official media and propaganda operation, have either been significantly degraded or are non-existent. External to IS' territorial collapse are other factors that dampen the ability for IS to reestablish its foothold in the American *jihadisphere*, such as the consistent pressure of U.S. law enforcement on homegrown violent extremists and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on foreign fighter travel.

Impressions from the post-2020 cases of jihadists in the U.S. legal system, however, show that American IS supporters seem to be biding their time for a major development that could put the ball back in their court. They are willing to seize the initiative, and despite some failures, have experimented with a wide range of potential travel destinations and methods for reaching them, as well as with new digital communications tools that allow them to personally rebuild some of what was lost during the collapse of the caliphate. Overall, the period seems reminiscent of other times in the history of jihadism in America when lulls in jihadist activity followed major outbreaks of concentrated support for a particular group or travel destination. In the early 2010s, numbers of jihadism-related cases in the U.S. legal system plummeted after an interval where [dozens of Americans left for Somalia](#) to join al-Shabaab, which at the time was considered the major locus of the movement. Just as U.S. policymakers were about to [shelve their plans](#) for countering homegrown jihadism in 2012 and 2013, the wave of American support for IS kicked off.

Thus, while many of the post-caliphate IS cases in the U.S. seem to be describing “rebels without a cause,” they signal that American jihadists have not given up on the organization and its dream. Even after its decline, neither its historical jihadist competitors (e.g., al-Qaeda) nor any newcomer has managed to fill the gap in the Western jihadist imaginary. Over the next several years, IS is therefore likely to continue inspiring a small handful of Americans to conduct small-footprint attacks

in the U.S. If the past is any guide, most will be unsuccessful, although monitoring these cases will require continued constant vigilance on behalf of U.S. law enforcement. In the current environment, IS is unlikely to reach the levels of American support that it did in the mid-2010s. This could change, however, if the [tides turn internationally](#), and one of the organization's affiliates is able to cobble together a significant offensive that results in the reestablishment of territorial control and most importantly, a rededication of resources towards external operations.

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