

Executive Summary

This study reflects the most comprehensive, publicly available accounting of Americans who traveled to join jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq since 2011. It identifies 64 travelers, the largest available sample to date. These individuals, and their stories, were uncovered during a multi-year investigation. Authors interviewed law enforcement officials, prosecutors, and defense attorneys, and attended relevant court proceedings. Additionally, they reviewed thousands of pages of legal documents, filing information requests and federal court motions to unseal records where necessary. Finally, the authors conducted several interviews with American travelers who returned from the territories held by the Islamic State (IS).

Travel or attempted travel to jihadist-held territory in Syria and Iraq is one of the most popular forms of mobilization for American jihadist sympathizers. In addition to successful travelers, at least 50 Americans attempted to travel but were prevented from doing so by law enforcement. These cases constitute approximately one-third of the 153 Americans who have been arrested on Islamic State–related charges from 2011 to 2017. Cases of travel or attempted travel to Syria or Iraq have steadily decreased since 2015.

The study finds that there is no single profile of an American traveler, although some demographic trends reflect the broader population of jihadist supporters in the United States. Travelers tend to be male, with an average age of 27. They generally affiliated with IS upon arrival in Syria or Iraq. The three states with the highest proportional rates of recruitment are Minnesota, Virginia, and Ohio.

Based on the underlying factors behind their travel, how they made their journey, and what role they took in jihadist groups, American travelers can broadly be classified using the following three categories. Using case studies, this report contains analyses of each category of traveler.

- **Pioneers** arrived early in Syria and Iraq and ascended to some level of leadership in their respective jihadist organizations. They are distinguished from other travelers due to previous experience with critical skills relevant to their organization—such as military training, past participation in jihadist movements, proficiency in religious doctrine or producing ideological material, and technical skills (bomb-making, computer skills, etc.). Due to these abilities, pioneers attain coveted positions within jihadist groups. They often use their roles to reach out to individuals within their network and encourage them to provide support to jihadist groups. However, only a select few individuals have the skills and abilities necessary to become pioneers. Four travelers (6.3%) in the sample are coded as pioneers, making it the smallest category in number, but far larger if assessed in terms of their impact on the jihadist movement.
- **Networked travelers** use personal contacts with like-minded supporters of jihadist groups in the U.S. to facilitate their travel. In some of these cases, a group of individuals, usually connected by kinship, friendship, or community ties, travel together to Syria or Iraq. Others, while traveling by themselves, had contact with individuals in the U.S. who supported their journey by providing financial or logistical support, or with individuals who were involved in supporting jihadist groups in other ways (e.g. through committing or planning attacks). These groups can be as small as two, and in one case, at least a dozen individuals, all from the same community and/or social network. Eighty seven percent of the travelers for whom information is available had some form of personal connection to other travelers or jihadist supporters.
- **Loners** are exceptions to the norm regarding the recognized importance of networks in facilitating travel. In contrast to networked travelers, loners travel seemingly without the assistance of anyone

whom they know personally. Yet, despite apparently lacking these facilitative links, they manage to reach Syria and Iraq without being apprehended. To make up for the lack of personal connections, loners often turn to the internet, reaching out to virtual connections who assist them in making the decision to travel and completing the journey. Six cases (9.4%) in the sample were coded as loners. Loners' stories counter common assumptions regarding jihadist mobilization and travel facilitation. Due to the complex, individualized factors that drive their personal decisions, developing responses to loners is an exceptional challenge.

The U.S. faces differing threats from each category. Of significant concern to U.S. law enforcement is the specter of American travelers returning to the U.S. from Syria and Iraq. American returned travelers may bolster domestic jihadist networks by sharing expertise, radicalizing others, or committing attacks.

This study finds that to date, the phenomenon of returning travelers has been limited in the U.S. context. From the 64 travelers identified by name, 12 returned to the U.S. Nine of those returnees were arrested and charged with terrorism-related offenses. The remaining three have, so far, not faced public criminal charges related to their participation in jihadist groups in Syria or Iraq.

As of January 1, 2018, no returned travelers from Syria and Iraq have successfully committed a terrorist attack in the U.S. following their re-entry. Only one of the 12 returnees identified in this study returned with the intent to carry out an attack on behalf of a jihadist group in Syria. This individual was apprehended in the early planning stages of their plot.

Therefore, the risk of returned travelers being engaged in terrorist attacks has, to date, been limited. There have been 22 jihadist attacks from 2011 to 2017; none of them were committed by a perpetrator who was known to have traveled to Syria and Iraq to join jihadist groups. Thus, "homegrown" extremists currently appear to be more likely to commit domestic jihadist attacks than returning travelers.

Yet, returning travelers pose other threats. If left unaddressed, returnees can augment jihadist networks in the U.S., provide others with knowledge about how to travel and conduct attacks, and serve as nodes in future jihadist recruitment. Throughout the history of American jihadist travelers, several individuals who were formative to future mobilizations had returned to the U.S. from fighting with jihadist groups overseas.

To address this threat, the U.S. may consider broadening its options to counter jihadist travel and respond to the risk from returnees.

- The American traveler contingent defies a single profile, and approaches should account for their diverse nature. The categories of travelers presented in this study can assist in developing a basis for classification and review of the threat posed by individual travelers.
- The roles of travelers who hold non-combatant roles in jihadist groups should be considered. Of note are women travelers, who traditionally assume auxiliary roles in jihadist groups. They function in logistical and financial capacities, as well as more communal, day-to-day operations. The U.S. should also develop a comprehensive process for returning children, who cannot be prosecuted and should be re-integrated into society.
- Unlike many other countries, American laws criminalizing jihadist travel were in place well before the mobilization to Syria and Iraq. The statutory law offers law enforcement flexibility and leeway in charging travelers. However, in some cases, prosecution is infeasible. At times, it is difficult to garner evidence about a traveler's activities in Syria and Iraq that is admissible in a court of law. As a result, prosecutors are often forced to charge returned travelers with lesser offenses. While the average prison sentence for individuals who attempted (but failed) to travel to Syria and Iraq is approximately 14 years, the seven successful travelers that have been convicted from 2011–2017 received an average sentence of ten years in prison.

- Considering that many convicted American travelers will be released within the next five to ten years, prison deradicalization programs should be regarded as a priority. There are no deradicalization or rehabilitation programs for jihadist inmates in the U.S. federal prison system. Without these programs, incarcerated travelers have few incentives to renege on their beliefs, and may attempt to build networks in prison or radicalize other prisoners.
- Programs designed to prevent future radicalization also require sustained official attention. Disillusioned American returnees may have some role to play in these programs as effective providers of interventions. If national-level targeted intervention programming is developed, efforts can be informed by the successes and failures of local initiatives, as well as similar projects developed in other countries.
- Digital communications technologies are useful tools for facilitating jihadist travel. Yet, regulation (e.g. censorship, content and account deletion, regulating or banning privacy-maximizing tools) of

online platforms favored by jihadists may have little effect on travel facilitation networks. While the availability of jihadist propaganda has undoubtedly diminished on open platforms due to content removal, American travelers tend to access such material on lesser-known online repositories. Travelers also migrated to alternative social media platforms and use a range of privacy-maximizing services—including virtual private networks, anonymous browsers, and encrypted messengers—to access content, communicate with recruiters, and mask their locations.

If the previous mobilizations of American jihadists to Afghanistan, Bosnia, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, or elsewhere are any guide, individuals and dynamics from one mobilization often play outsized roles in future recruitment networks. Therefore, it is incumbent upon the U.S. government, American civil society organizations, and scholars of jihadism to use the lessons from the Syria- and Iraq-related mobilizations to develop proactive and comprehensive policies to address American jihadist travel.