

## *Introduction: American Jihadist Travelers*

---

Since the outbreak of the Syrian conflict in 2011, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) has reported that 300 Americans attempted to leave or have left the U.S. with the intention of fighting in Iraq and Syria.<sup>1</sup> While the details of many of these cases remain either unknown or obscure, this study is among the first to offer an overview and analysis of America's jihadist travelers. Drawing on an array of primary sources, including interviews with returnees, court documents, and the online footprints of known travelers, it sheds light on why and how they joined jihadist groups, and what threat they currently pose to the U.S.

After an introductory discussion of the current literature on the topic, including the history of American involvement in foreign jihadist conflicts, the study provides the most comprehensive publicly available statistical breakdown of this phenomenon. This approach helped inform the creation of a new typology of jihadist travelers: pioneers, networked travelers, and loners. These sections will also include select in-depth analyses of some of the more revealing case studies that best exemplify each category. Next, the report documents cases of American travelers who returned to the U.S., assessing their threat and the current U.S. response. The study concludes with a set of recommendations for both government and civil society.

### **Foreign Fighters and Travelers to Transnational Conflicts: Incentives, Motivations, and Destinations**

In absolute terms, the current mobilization of foreign fighters and jihadist travelers to Syria and Iraq outnumbers all other mobilizations to jihadist conflicts during the past 40 years.<sup>2</sup> Estimates of the total number of foreigners who have traveled to Syria and Iraq broadly range between 27,000 and 31,000, the majority of whom originate from North Africa and the Middle East.<sup>3</sup> At its peak, an estimated 2,000 jihadist travelers were crossing the Turkish border into Syria weekly; since 2016, this

number has decreased to around 50 crossings due to the declining territorial holdings of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (IS) and increased border enforcement by the Turkish government.<sup>4</sup>

### **Foreign Fighters vs. Travelers**

David Malet defines the term "foreign fighters" as "non-citizens of conflict states who join insurgencies during civil conflicts."<sup>5</sup> According to this definition, "foreign fighters" would comprise a significant percentage of the individuals in the sample. However, it is worth noting that this terminology does not account for individuals who joined the Syrian and Iraqi jihadist insurgencies with different motives, roles, and backgrounds. Instead, this study uses the term "travelers" to refer to the U.S. persons who have traveled to Syria or Iraq since 2011 to participate in jihadist formations.

The term "foreign fighter" presumes an individual's motivations, and their role in the organization in question. While most of the individuals in the sample left their homes for Syria and Iraq specifically to participate in conflict and served in combat roles upon arrival, some did not. The rise of IS, whose mission was framed not only in terms of attacks and military campaigns but also addressed legitimate, religio-political governance, drew individuals who (albeit misguidedly) traveled to join the group in the hopes of living peacefully in the new, self-declared Caliphate while avoiding combat. It is also important to point to the roles of women in these jihadist organizations; while most groups prohibit women from combat, they hold active and essential positions in day-to-day operations and management.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the term "traveler" more closely encapsulates not only those who travel to fight in jihadist groups, but also those with different intentions.

### **Motivations**

Currently, the Syrian conflict has the lion's share of the global base of jihadist recruits.<sup>7</sup> Yet, it is a mistake to assume that all travelers were drawn to Syria for

the same reasons. Many travelers who left for Syria in the years directly after 2011 did so in reaction to perceived injustices committed by the Syrian regime. Some were not attracted to a specific jihadist group prior to traveling, but later made networked connections that dictated their choice of organization. A number of these individuals likely went abroad rather than staying home to plot attacks largely because of the opportunity and “social desirability” of waging jihad.<sup>8</sup> However, with the emergence of specific organizations like IS and Jabhat al-Nusra (JN), an increasing number of travelers had decided which group to join prior to leaving.

Before 2011, data on travelers were largely incomplete. The overall number provided small sample sizes unsuitable for generalization. Scholars are still at an impasse in determining the factors that have led to jihadist travel over the years; however, new data establish some macro-level trends.<sup>9</sup> The recent Syria and Iraq-based mobilizations generated a more extensive dataset of jihadist travelers for study. When analyzed, they disprove some common explanations of why individuals travel abroad to participate in jihadist organizations.

The overarching assessment of scholars of jihadist radicalization and mobilization is that sweeping, unidimensional theories of why individuals fight overseas lack methodological rigor, are driven by political or personal biases, or both.<sup>10</sup> The most comprehensive studies utilize a multitude of methods from across social and political sciences to explain what is, in essence, a highly personalized and individual decision. They also admit that a theory which is useful in one test case may not be helpful in another.

Some theories of mobilization focus on socio-economic barriers (unemployment, poverty, “marginalization”/lack of societal integration) as motivators for individuals to fight abroad. At face value, some of these factors may appear to be reasonable or logical explanations for mobilization. At best, however, studies have demonstrated a weak correlation between economic variables and jihadist travel.<sup>11</sup> On one hand, some studies find that a substantial number of individual jihadist travelers from a specific country had financial problems, were unemployed, or

living on social welfare.<sup>12</sup> However, when applied to the American context, these trends appear to be less illustrative. The sample of American IS supporters cut across economic boundaries, and American Muslims as a population tend to experience greater levels of economic success and integration than their counterparts in other Western countries.<sup>13</sup> Simultaneously, a near-consensus of studies also show that there is no correlation between a country’s economic performance indicators and the number of travelers in Syria and Iraq from that country.<sup>14</sup>

Another single-factor theory that merits discussion is the argument that jihadist traveler mobilization stems from increased access to digital communications technology, and the strategies that jihadist organizations use to recruit and mobilize followers online. Undeniably, the internet has become foundational to how jihadist organizations recruit, network, and communicate within their ranks; a number of cases within this dataset reflect these dynamics. That notwithstanding, there are very few cases wherein a traveler radicalized, decided to travel, traveled, and reached their destination without any offline connections.<sup>15</sup> At some point in this process, travelers must make the jump from the online world into real-life interactions.<sup>16</sup>

### **American Jihadist Travelers: 1980–2011**

Some estimates place the number of U.S. persons involved in overseas jihadist movements from 1980 to 2011 at more than a thousand.<sup>17</sup> During this 30-year period, the destinations chosen by Americans fighting overseas varied geographically and temporally. The conflicts and areas that drew in the most American jihadist travelers included the conflict in Afghanistan during the 1980s, the 1990s civil war in Bosnia, and the mid-2000s campaigns waged by *al-Shabaab* in Somalia and al-Qaeda and Taliban affiliates on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.<sup>18</sup> There is additional evidence of American jihadist participation in other conflicts, including in Yemen and the North Caucasus.

The major networks of jihadist traveler recruitment in the U.S. mainly began during the Soviet occupation of

Afghanistan.<sup>19</sup> Several individuals linked to the initial iteration of al-Qaeda, including the “father of jihad” Abdullah Azzam, were active in recruiting Americans to join the *mujahideen* (jihadist fighters) fighting against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan.<sup>20</sup> Under the front of charity or relief organizations, these recruiters set up shop in several American cities and drew from the base of individuals who attended their lectures and speeches to recruit foreign fighters.<sup>21</sup> Sources vary on how many Americans were active in Afghanistan in the 1980s. J.M. Berger has identified at least thirty cases of Americans participating in the Afghan jihad, some of whom continued onwards to other conflicts, and others who returned to the U.S.<sup>22</sup>

Some individuals from this first mobilization in Afghanistan simply moved onwards to the next set of jihadist conflicts, in particular to the civil war in 1990s Bosnia. One example is Christopher Paul, a Muslim convert from the Columbus, Ohio, area who participated in al-Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan during the late 1980s and early 1990s, and later joined the foreign fighter brigades active on the Bosnian Muslim side of the civil war.<sup>23</sup> At the conclusion of the conflict in Bosnia, Paul traveled through Europe and made a number of connections with al-Qaeda cells. He subsequently returned to the U.S. and attempted to recruit his own network of jihadist supporters in Columbus.<sup>24</sup> After almost two decades of participating in jihadist movements in numerous countries, Paul was arrested by the FBI in 2007.<sup>25</sup>

A 2014 RAND study identified 124 Americans who traveled or attempted to travel overseas to join jihadist groups after September 11, 2001.<sup>26</sup> Almost one-third were arrested before reaching their destinations, and approximately 20% were reportedly killed overseas.<sup>27</sup> The most popular destination for jihadist travelers was Pakistan (37 cases), followed closely by Somalia (34 cases); al-Qaeda and *al-Shabaab* were the two most popular jihadist groups.<sup>28</sup>

Pakistan became the preferred destination for jihadist travelers seeking to join al-Qaeda’s main corpus of fighters in South Asia. The 2001 U.S. military engagement in Afghanistan forced al-Qaeda to relocate its infrastructure to Pakistan.<sup>29</sup> From 2007 onward, Somalia outpaced Pakistan as the primary destination for travelers.<sup>30</sup> One other conflict zone of note is Yemen, where two powerhouses of the American jihadist scene made their mark on anglophone jihadist recruitment networks. The New Mexico-born cleric Anwar al Awlaki, already well-known for preaching jihad on both sides of the Atlantic, traveled to Yemen in 2004 and joined al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).<sup>31</sup> Together with another American, Samir Khan, the two created the AQAP magazine *Inspire*, which became formative

in radicalizing future decades of English-speaking jihadists.<sup>32</sup>

Three phenomena from these pre-Syria mobilizations of American travelers may help shed light on the dynamics characterizing the current wave of travelers. First, as is the case now, a significant proportion of jihadist travelers to Afghanistan, Bosnia, Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen appeared to have done so in connection

with networks—close communities, friendship and acquaintance groups, and families.<sup>33</sup> Cases of attacks in the U.S. perpetrated by individuals who returned from jihad overseas are very rare. The RAND study found that 90% of the jihadists in the survey were either arrested in the U.S. prior to traveling, killed or arrested overseas, or arrested directly after returning home.<sup>34</sup> In their sample, 9 of the 124 travelers returned to the U.S. and planned attacks—none of these plots came to fruition or resulted in any deaths.<sup>35</sup>

These two factors point to the third and likely most important phenomenon: the individuals who have been most influential in recruiting American jihadists are those who act as “links” between the various mobilizations. These are the individuals who, upon conclusion or dispersal of a conflict, move onwards to the next battlefield and form connections between

**“Some estimates place the number of U.S. persons involved in overseas jihadist movements from 1980 to 2011 at more than a thousand.”**

their old networks and new networks. Ideologues like AQAP cleric Anwar al-Awlaki, whose work on “lone actor jihad” survived his death, have their works re-purposed to recruit individuals during later mobilizations. Operatives like Christopher Paul use skills that they learn in their previous experience with jihad to facilitate plots worldwide. Recently, “virtual entrepreneurs” like the Somalia-based *al-Shabaab* member Mohamed Abdullahi Hassan (aka Mujahid Miski), use the internet to actively facilitate the travel of U.S. persons to multiple battlefields across the globe. These transitional figures often act as nodes for recruitment of their fellow Americans back home either for the purpose of conducting attacks or traveling to the latest jihadist hotspot.

### How Do American Jihadist Travelers Compare to Other Western Counterparts?

American and European jihadist travelers tend to differ in numbers, demographic profiles, and means of recruitment. The American contingent is far smaller than those of most European countries. It is estimated, for example, that more than 900 jihadist travelers have left from France, 750 each from Germany and the UK, and over 500 from Belgium.<sup>36</sup> Although the proportion of travelers to total population and Muslim population are different, in sheer numbers the mobilization from the U.S. more closely compares to the phenomena in countries like Spain (around 200) and the Netherlands (220).<sup>37</sup>

Three major factors explain the smaller American mobilization. Geographic distance between the U.S. and the Syrian/Iraqi battlefields plays a role. The increased length of the journey that would-be American travelers must take to reach Syria allows opportunities for law enforcement to interdict jihadists.

Secondly, the U.S. legal system has multiple tools at its disposal to prosecute jihadist travelers. At the outset of the Syria-related mobilization of jihadist travelers, many European countries did not have laws criminalizing travel. In the U.S., traveling to a foreign country in pursuit of joining a designated foreign terrorist organization (FTO) has constituted a federal criminal

offense under the material support statute (18 USC § 2339A and 2339B) since its adoption in the mid-1990s.<sup>38</sup> Historically, this law has been interpreted broadly (e.g., providing one’s self, in the form of travel, to a designated FTO is classified as material support). Prosecutors are given substantial leeway, and those tried under the statute are almost always convicted.<sup>39</sup> Currently, IS-related material support prosecutions in the U.S. have a 100% conviction rate.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, those convicted of material support in the U.S. can face prison sentences of up to 20 years and a lifetime of post-release supervision. In Europe, a much smaller percentage of travelers have been prosecuted. Even in cases where prosecution is successful, convicted travelers face shorter sentences.<sup>41</sup>

Finally, wide-reaching jihadist recruitment networks were far more established in the European context prior to the conflicts in Syria and Iraq. Militant Salafist groups, including *al-Muhajiroun* in the UK, *Sharia4* in several European countries, *Profetens Ummah* (PU) in Norway, and *Millatu Ibrahim* in Germany, were all active in several European cities before 2011. When the Syrian conflict began, these groups began to mobilize their supporters to engage in networked travel to the Middle Eastern theater to participate in jihadist movements.<sup>42</sup> In assessing the stories of European jihadist travelers from these countries, many were active members of these groups prior to leaving. Similar initiatives existed in the U.S. (for example, Revolution Muslim), but they were not organized on the same scale as their European counterparts.<sup>43</sup>

The impact of geographic distance, the legal landscape, and organized Salafi-jihadist networks before the Syrian conflict not only manifested in the increased numbers of travelers from Europe, but also affected a difference in how and from where travelers were recruited. In the American context, a significant percentage of individuals travel in small numbers—at most, two or three from a specific city or neighborhood. Some do so by themselves without any network or connections prior to their departure. In contrast, many of the major hubs of European recruitment, including cities, towns, and even small neighborhoods, are home to dozens of foreign fighters

---

apiece.<sup>44</sup> In the U.S, particular areas may exhibit similar clustering (Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota, may be a rudimentary case), but none exist on the scale of their European counterparts.

This relative lack of face-to-face contact with jihadist recruitment networks helps explain both the lower numbers of American IS travelers and the role of the internet in inducing Americans to travel. Case studies of many of the individuals included in this dataset reveal that in lieu of personal ties to fellow jihadist supporters in the U.S., travelers used online platforms to make connections throughout the world.<sup>45</sup> There are a few notable caveats.

First, this is not to suggest that online recruitment was the only factor motivating American jihadists. In many cases, however, access to online networks exacerbated the impact of personal circumstances and connections. The upper echelon of American travelers—those who traveled to Syria, established themselves in the operations of jihadist groups, and then turned homeward to recruit other Americans—usually relied on previous personal networks to facilitate their travel. While these individuals used the internet to communicate with friends, family, and potential supporters in the U.S., there is little evidence to suggest that online propaganda played as large of a role as it did in motivating loners.