

Category 3: Loners

Of the cases analyzed in this report, loners are the least common. The term describes travelers whose motivation to join does not appear to have come from any face-to-face interactions, and whose journey was seemingly undertaken in isolation.

According to publicly available evidence, these individuals only became known to authorities after successfully joining the group and either turning themselves in, appearing in publicly released propaganda, or having their deaths on the battlefield announced or reported by the organization to the media or their families.

This section will analyze the cases of two American loners. The first, who will be referred to only as “Mo,” traveled to IS territory in June 2014, before turning himself in at a U.S. consulate in Turkey in November of the same year. Much of the data from this case was gathered during an interview between the authors and “Mo.”¹

The second case is that of Mohamad Jamal Khweis. In December 2015, he left his home in North Virginia to join IS, stayed with the group for almost three months, and eventually turned himself in to Kurdish forces in March 2016. Here, the authors rely on court documents from the case, the prosecution’s exhibits used for evidence, and notes taken by the authors during his trial.²

“Mo”

Mo was one of the first Americans to travel to Syria, leaving his home on the East Coast in June 2014. In a lengthy interview with the authors, he laid out some of the factors which motivated him to join IS, while also providing insight into how he made the journey and what he saw while with the group.

While his story helps to explain why some young Western Muslims are captivated by IS’ cause, those hoping for a simple explanation will be disappointed. When asked why he joined IS, Mo rejected the premise of the question, responding, “You should ask me why did I go there

[to Syria].” To him, joining IS was an afterthought—he had no strong ideological affinity specifically to the group. He was, however, drawn to its wider project: “I went because I wanted to live in a sharia environment.”

Motivations

Mo traces the roots of his decision to what he describes as a “catalyzing moment” in 2013 when, while studying at a major American university, one of his professors screened a video of *Submission*. Released in 2004, the provocative film by the late Dutch director Theo van Gogh depicted a woman wearing a see-through *burqa* with Quranic verses tattooed on her body. The film represented a touchstone moment in the story of Islam in the West after 9/11.³ It gained even more notoriety after van Gogh was murdered in the streets of Amsterdam in 2004 by Mohammed Bouyeri, who supposedly acted to avenge and preserve the honor of Islam.⁴

Mo was shocked and angered by what he saw, explaining that “the burqa is the ultimate symbol of virtue and purity, members of my own family wore it. I didn’t see it as purely offensive, but a desecration.” He began to see the concept of freedom of speech in a different light: “This idea of freedom of speech was being used to desecrate.”

He was also shocked and disappointed at the reaction of his fellow students: “I looked around the classroom and everyone was just watching like it was nothing.” He took this as a tacit approval of the themes of the film, and began to see his peers in a different light. While he wanted to stand up and express his anger, Mo stayed quiet, explaining, “I was not intellectually equipped to properly criticize this, I didn’t know how to make sense of it or explain it.” This feeling spurred him on to further educate himself. He soon took to the internet in an effort to learn how, as a Muslim living in America, he should respond to the attitudes expressed in the film.

While it would be simplistic and incongruous to draw a direct link between this film and Mo’s journey to IS, it

appears to have started him on a path which resulted in a significant transformation in his identity and beliefs. Religious but not very observant at the time, Mo now began to seek out a clearer understanding of his religion and what answers it had to the issues brought up in the film. This made him vulnerable to the type of propaganda being produced by IS at the time, which specifically targeted Western Muslims who were dealing with crises of identity and struggling to figure out where they fit in their home countries.⁵

However, this was a formulation which Mo did not entirely accept when put to him, rejecting what he saw as an attempt to “put me in this box and explain my decisions ... it’s not that simple.” Radicalization cannot be explained using any single “moment” or root cause.⁶ However, for researchers, it is important to identify patterns that may contribute to a more informed understanding of this phenomenon, while also acknowledging the layers of unquantifiable complexity involved in influencing personal decisions to join extremist groups.

Alongside this possible religio-political awakening, Mo also mentioned an experience of personal trauma. Years earlier, his pregnant sister and her unborn child died in tragic circumstances. Here, too, it is tempting to turn yet again to academic theory: perhaps a traumatic moment that could be seen as a so-called “push factor” in his radicalization process. Mo rejected this too, noting that the deaths occurred almost eight years before he joined IS. Nonetheless, it was telling that Mo found this story relevant enough to bring up in a discussion framed around his radicalization. Even more interesting was his claim that the woman in the *burqa* which so offended him in *Submission* reminded him of his sister. Without proper evaluation, one can only wonder about the kind of psychological impact this might have had on him.

From the moment he had watched the film, Mo claims that his “main source of learning was online.” He spent hours researching Islam and politics, and began developing a stronger sense of his religious duties as a result of his online consumption. The work of American-Yemeni al-Qaeda ideologue and recruiter Anwar al-Awlaki was particularly impactful.⁷ Mo came to see him as a

legitimate source on Islam due to the multitude of sermons he gave while preaching in the U.S. He started becoming much more aware of the fact that, as he saw it, “Muslims have political woes” and as a result, “became more interested in groups out there that were defending Muslims and also in living in a place where Islam was being properly implemented.”

Mo soon concluded that the U.S., and the West in general, was not a place any “real” Muslim could live. Countries where films like *Submission* were created and screened could not be the right environment for a Muslim wishing to observe their religion properly. He also became more aware of his wider social and moral environment. He grew squeamish at the depictions of scantily clad Victoria’s Secret models outside of its store in New York, particularly when thinking about how he would react to such images in the presence of his young female family members: “How can I explain that to my young cousin or niece looking at that? That is objectifying women, no doubt.”

Relatedly, among the concepts he became acquainted with through his online research was *hijrah*, or migration for the sake of Islam. The term *hijrah* has multiple interpretations depending on the brand of Islam one ascribes to, and for many Muslims, it is a largely irrelevant concept for the modern world.⁸ For some, *hijrah* refers to leaving one city, or even a specific neighborhood, deemed to be harmful to one’s faith for a more conducive environment. At its most extreme, *hijrah* has a militant expression. Jihadists describe *hijrah* as not only leaving Western nations deemed to be part of the war on Islam, but also traveling to an area to fight in defense of Muslims who are perceived to be “under attack.”⁹ IS propaganda outreach to Westerners has placed great emphasis on *hijrah* to the battlefields of Syria and Iraq as a duty for Western Muslims.¹⁰

Mo’s understanding of *hijrah* fell somewhere in between these two interpretations: “For me, *hijrah* was about leaving a place where *haram* (things forbidden in Islam) was easy and *halal* (things that are permissible, or even encouraged, in Islam) was difficult.” He began to feel that this was precisely his situation in America:

“Some Muslims are fine living here, and find ways to live a proper Islamic life, but at that time I was not one of them.”

Not only did he begin to see those Victoria’s Secret models in a new light, but he also became aware of the “sins” of the Western financial system. For instance, Mo believed he “could not take part in” loans with interest rates, which constituted *riba* (usury), considered a sin in Islam. Previously, he was happy to take interest-heavy student loans to pay for his tuition. Now, he was so vehemently opposed to *riba* that he dropped out of college rather than accepting money tinged with sin.

Thus, what began as a perception of increased scrutiny and criticism of Islam in the West rapidly evolved into a drastic personal transformation. Influenced by Islamist propaganda, Mo resolved that he had to depart his country of birth. He also described being inspired by the Arab uprisings: “After the Arab Spring, Muslims were finally getting rid of the dictators.” For him, this meant that there was now more scope for states to govern according to sharia law.

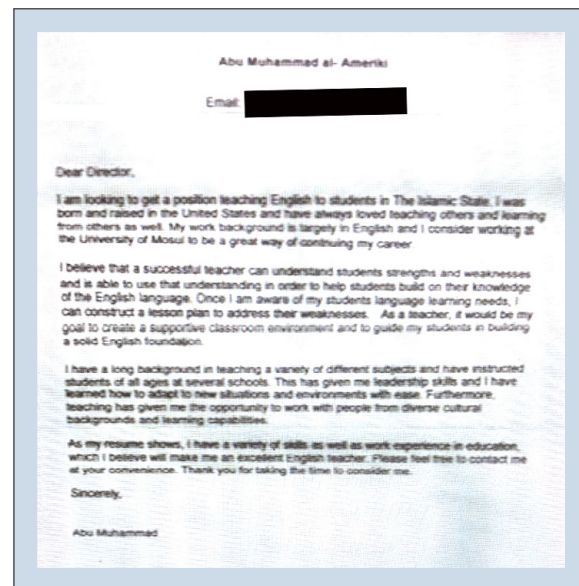
It is also revealing that, once he decided to make *hijrah* and leave America, Mo claimed that IS territory was not his first destination of choice: “that was, of course, Saudi Arabia.” He believed that the Kingdom offered the purest version of Islamic life, and planned on enrolling in the University of Medina. However, his knowledge was not advanced enough. Besides lacking other basic requirements to matriculate in the university, Mo was not able to recite a sufficient number of Quranic verses.

His dreams of living in Saudi Arabia dashed, Mo began considering other options. Many associate IS propaganda with the graphic and violent depictions of the group’s punishments of its enemies. Yet, at the time, a substantial amount of its media output focused on the depiction of its territory as the only true Islamic utopia, where sharia law was properly implemented, and Muslims were thriving.¹¹ “There were all these videos showing the public works IS was taking part in, it looked like a good Islamic community to raise a family.” At the time that he was researching the group, the first wave of the most infamous videos, such as the brutal beheadings of the American journalists

James Foley or Steven Sotloff, had yet to be released. “The effort of IS as I saw it was Islamic government, and that’s what I wanted.”

At best, Mo’s idealized depiction of IS certainly displays a level of naïveté. At worst, he was fully cognizant of IS’ violent nature. Most discerning observers at the time had already identified IS as a jihadist group with its roots in AQ franchises in Iraq. Nonetheless, Mo’s outright rejection of Western media and any non-Muslim analysis of the Syrian conflict convinced him to turn a blind eye to IS’ flaws, while taking their propaganda at face value.

Mo claims he was not aware that IS was a group that was “like al-Qaeda,” and notes that he had already rejected al-Qaeda because he was against the group’s use of suicide bombings after learning online that this tactic contradicts sharia law. The justifications put forth by jihadists for suicide bombing, which draw upon analogies from a handful of Quranic verses and stories from the Hadith, did not convince him. In fact, in a display of some level of Islamic knowledge, he described these



Mo is not the only American who sought a non-combat role in IS. This is a copy of a cover letter from Warren Clark (Abu Muhammad al-Ameriki), attached as part of his application to become an English teacher for IS. The application was retrieved from a house in Mosul, Iraq, and exclusively obtained by the authors.

justifications as *qiyas maal fariq* (analogy with discrepancy). This is a term used by Islamic scholars who reject the religious rationale for suicide bombing used by jihadists.

Suicide bombing and its permissibility is, at its core, an issue of Islamic jurisprudence, or *fiqh*. Through a process of deductive analogy (*qiyas*) in which the primary texts of Islam are studied, compared and contrasted, Sunni Islamic scholars of *fiqh* create injunctions on how Muslims should deal with new circumstances.¹² The *fiqh* of suicide bombing encouraged and spread by jihadists is rejected along these lines and seen as merely a way of trying to take attention away from the fact that it is an act of suicide, which is a major sin in Islam.¹³

It was on this basis that Mo claimed to reject al-Qaeda in favor of IS. “Al-Qaeda put me off, I was always against terrorism and especially suicide bombing.” In spite of the numerous reports detailing IS’ use of suicide attacks, he appears to have thought IS was different. “As far as I could see at the time, IS was not the same as AQ, the effort of IS was Islamic government and that’s what I wanted. It felt legit, and the clue was even in their name!”

Journey

Once he had begun to embrace IS, Mo started to follow influential members and supporters of the group on Twitter, a platform he found particularly useful as it allowed him to receive news of the group’s activities “straight from the source.” As he followed and read about the experiences of fellow Americans and other English-speakers in Europe who joined IS, the prospect of traveling to Syria soon began to feel more realistic. It was not as hard as it first seemed: “I knew from following these guys that the border [between Syria and Turkey] was porous, and that Urfa [Şanlıurfa, a Turkish town near the Syrian border] was the place to go.”

His online activities quickly caught the attention of the authorities. Concerned that he was preparing to travel to Syria, FBI agents from the Joint Terrorism Taskforce interviewed him in early June 2014. “When they came to visit me, all of a sudden it became real. It wasn’t just something on my computer anymore.” During a consensual interview, Mo claimed that he supported rebel

groups in Syria, but did not have the means, knowledge, or wherewithal to travel. In truth, however, the FBI visit simply added more urgency to his plans: “The train now felt like it was leaving the station, I had to either go soon after that or not at all.” Just a week after the interview, on June 12, 2014, he booked a flight from New York to Italy. This journey included a stopover in Istanbul in the hope that it would mask his intentions to remain in Turkey and go on to Syria. As an illustration of his commitment to join, at the time of his trip he was recovering from an ankle injury and needed crutches to walk. Yet he was still willing to brave the rough terrain of southern Turkey and northern Syria.

Upon arrival in Istanbul, Mo immediately made his way to Şanlıurfa. Surprisingly, prior to his arrival, he had not made contacts or connections with members of IS or the smugglers who would help him cross the border and join the group. He relied instead on finding the right people once he was in the town or, if all else failed, “even just go there and cross by myself.” By then, he had also come across a famous pro-IS Twitter user who went by the handle @Shamiwitness—at the time, this was the group’s leading online “fanboy.” Authorities in India later connected this account to Mehdi Biswas who, tweeting from Bangalore, was eventually arrested in December 2014 in India for glorifying IS.¹⁴

While analysis of @Shamiwitness’ activities to date paint him merely as a propaganda disseminator for IS, it seems that his role may have in fact also been one of direct facilitation for would-be Western travelers. While in Şanlıurfa, Mo used Twitter to reach out to @Shamiwitness, who put him in touch with three local IS facilitators, including a British IS member called Abu Rahman al-Britani. Using Kik, the encrypted messenger of choice for IS travelers at the time, he reached out to al-Britani. Mo was then given a number for an IS smuggler and told by al-Britani that he could use him for *tazkiya*, a vetting process whereby a known fighter vouches for a new member to other IS members.¹⁵

He eventually agreed with the smuggler on where and when to meet. That night, he was picked up outside of his hotel and taken to a safe house which held other

travelers including what he claimed was a Russian former neo-Nazi convert to Islam.¹⁶ After a few hours, they were taken in a car across the border into Syria and dropped off—“he [the smuggler] pointed to Orion’s Belt and told us to follow it until we came to a village.” Mo was still limping in his surgical boot from his ankle injury (he had left his crutches behind) as they trekked over rough terrain to reach the village. In the process he and his fellow travelers were arrested by Turkish border guards, beaten up, and briefly detained before being released for reasons that remain unclear. Post-release, the group eventually arrived at the village. From there, they were picked up by men claiming to be with IS and moved to another safe house in Suluk, a Syrian town about seven miles south of the border with Turkey.

Mo in Syria

During his two-week stay in Suluk, dozens of travelers from a variety of countries joined Mo. While staying in the safe house, Mo claims that he began to harbor serious doubts about the choice he had made to travel to Syria. Hoping to find a welcoming group of “brothers” he could join, he was quickly disappointed: “They weren’t the type of Muslims I grew up with.” Mo referred to them as lacking in *akhlaq*, which translates directly from Arabic to “disposition,” and refers to the strong moral and virtuous character of a person. The fraternal bonds and camaraderie among travelers, so often highlighted as motivating factors for those who join jihadist groups, did not exist in the way he expected: “They prayed differently, they had a bad attitude towards sharing food, they weren’t doing *wudu* (ritual ablution before prayer) properly, and the bathrooms were kept terribly.”

Mo also claims that he never traveled to IS territory with the intention of fighting. Instead, he hoped to start a new life in the sharia environment he had come to yearn for: “I wanted to maybe start a business and eventually raise a family.” When, during his time in Suluk, an IS member brought a suicide vest for the new members to become familiar with, he began to see the group in a different light. He also became concerned for his safety. After evening prayers, the man also gave a speech to the group about suicide bombing, claiming IS supported it despite being *qiyas maal fariq*. Mo, having already explained his

rejection of the practice on these terms, was shocked: “They know it is legally weak, but they still accepted it, and he told us that ‘we gain benefit from it, so we do it.’”

As time went on, Mo claimed to grow increasingly despondent about his new home. After losing his glasses during the scuffle with the Turkish border guards, he was unable to get a good view of his wider surroundings until a fellow recruit lent him his pair. “That was the first time I got a full view of where I was—just this desolate desert—I felt hopeless and thought ‘how the hell do I get back home from here?!’” He was also able to speak to his parents using a burner cell phone which was passed around by the recruits, only increasing his feelings of regret and homesickness.

Other English speakers in Suluk were a mix of people, both those having second thoughts, like Mo, and more committed, hardcore jihadists. In the former category was someone he knew as Abu Salman al-Hindi. This was the *kunya* of Talmeezur Rahman, an Indian national raised in Kuwait who attended a university in Texas between 2012 and 2014.¹⁷ His story has been reported in the media, though his current whereabouts are unknown. A trained computer scientist, Rahman hoped to offer his technical expertise to IS, but soon found out he would have to fight; like Mo, he was intent on avoiding the battlefield. Mo and Abu Salman bonded over their shared fate and became friends: “Salman was one of the only guys there I could relate to.”

Mo claimed that other American recruits were more fervent in their beliefs and their desire to fight. After Mo spoke to his parents, a Somali-American from Minneapolis named “Omar” accosted him.¹⁸ “He asked me how strong my parents’ Islam was, and if I had made *takfir* on [excommunicated] them.” An uncompromising hardcore jihadist ideologue committed wholeheartedly to jihad, Omar represented the other end of the spectrum of the Western IS recruits in Suluk at the time. Indeed, according to Mo, “most of the Americans I met during my time in Syria were very ideological and ready for fighting.”

It was also during Mo’s time in Suluk that IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced the establishment of the

Caliphate, and he recalls the celebrations among the IS members. One thing that disturbed him was IS members cheering and calling themselves *irhabeen* (Arabic for “terrorists”) a term often used by jihadists to describe themselves and celebrate their acts of violence. This, he claims, was further confirmation that he had grossly misunderstood the group he joined.

Among the most valuable pieces of information provided by Mo in the interview was his explanation of how new recruits were processed and trained. After waiting in Suluk for two weeks, he and dozens of others were taken to a camp named Farooq, which he described as a “sharia camp” focused on ideological indoctrination. Home to around 300 recruits, it was under the control of a senior IS member with the title of Emir of Sharia and Teaching, whom Mo only knew by his first name, “Amari.” The camp’s exact location was unclear to him, other than it was south of Raqqa, in north-central Syria. The area between Suluk and Raqqa spans about 50 miles, and during the time Mo was there, it was either under direct IS control or contained corridors through which the group could safely pass. Upon arrival, recruits were separated by native language and put through various forms of sharia training, including classes on creed (*aqidah*), methodology (*manhaj*), Quranic study, and some basic tactical training. “They were basically teaching us Wahhabi stuff,” he said, referring to the form of conservative Islam taught in Saudi Arabia.

During his time in Camp Farooq, Mo again found himself again being questioned by more ideologically committed Americans. When an IS commander asked his group who among them wanted to go and fight in Deir ez-Zor, a town to the southeast of where they were, Mo recalls how he hesitated to volunteer: “I sort of half-raised my hand but then quickly put it back down.” He was now desperate to avoid a fight, but some of his fellow Americans took notice, including “this one guy from Harlem [who] saw what I did and criticized me in front of everyone.”

Mo soon let his mask slip again during a class at the camp, when he expressed doubts about his commitment to his teacher. “I told him I was experiencing *waswas*,” an

Arabic term used in Islam to refer to the evil whispers of *shaytan* (the Devil) which sow doubt in one’s mind. He immediately regretted this action, however: “After expressing doubts about Deir ez-Zor, I was stupid to put attention on myself again.” He was right to worry. Later that day a sheikh at the camp warned his pupils to “watch out for those who make doubt, they have question marks on their heads.” This terrified Mo, who saw the remark as a direct threat to his life.

After three weeks in Camp Farooq, they were moved to Camp Abdullah Azzam (known colloquially as Camp AA). Here, the focus was much more on military training, and the facility’s previous use as a Syrian army camp made it fit for purpose. During drills, recruits who were identified as the toughest and most able to fight were transferred to what Mo said was called “commando training,” something he was not cut out for, neither mentally nor physically.

At each camp Mo attended, he was required to fill in a Microsoft Access form with details of his age, experience, and what he felt he could offer IS. The electronic form for Camp AA also asked what role he wanted to take on. He was offered the choice of a being a fighter, a suicide bomber, or an *inghimasi*, which refers to someone who fights on the front line while wearing a suicide vest.

According to Mo, none of these options were appealing. Instead, he tried to offer his services as a “researcher” to avoid fighting: “I didn’t want to fight, so I told them I went to a very good school, and my value to them was my mind.” In a desperate bid to sway his commanders, he pitched an idea involving the construction of a device that could emit an electro-magnetic pulse (EMP), which he claimed could help them down enemy fighter jets. It was a truly last-ditch effort and, as he admitted, “I didn’t know [expletive] about making an EMP, but I figured this could buy me some time.”

To his relief, Mo was not pressed any further about his EMP idea. His scheme to avoid the battlefield worked. His commanders decided to send him to Manbij in north-western Syria to work with an IS emir who was handling the group’s local transport logistics and designing

bunkers and underground tunnels. Interestingly, Mo claims that IS was using Palestinians who had become experts in tunnel building for Hamas to dig routes for IS between Syria and Turkey. Unable to read or write Arabic, though, he was only of limited use and was eventually tasked with teaching less tech-savvy members how to use various computer programs.

By this time, however, Mo committed to leaving IS territory and the group. Since his time in Camp AA and in Manbij, he was trying to devise a plan for how he could escape. Through some online research at an internet café, he learned that people were leaving Syria for Turkey via several border crossings. Reaching Turkey seemed a realistic prospect, but he was going to need some help, and a lot of luck.

First, Mo needed a viable excuse to be allowed to leave. He decided to exploit the traditional instincts of his commander by telling him that he had met a girl online whom he wanted to marry but needed to visit first. After getting permission to leave, he took a minibus to Raqqa, followed by a taxi to Tal Abyad on Syria's northern border with Turkey. He hoped to cross the border there, but as he approached, he noticed IS members guarding the checkpoint. He could not risk being recognized and was forced to turn back, taking a taxi to Manbij where his commander was waiting for him. The disappointment, however, was etched on his face and, recognizing the situation his passenger was in, Mo's driver took pity on him. As with many taxi drivers in the area, he was also a smuggler. He told Mo he could help him cross into Turkey, but he was going to have to wait a few days.

In the meantime, he had to explain to his commander why he was returning without his new wife in tow. Although his excuse was that she had refused his proposal, "they didn't believe me and got suspicious." He began noticing that he was treated differently, and "people got cold towards me very quickly."

The shift increased his paranoia about being executed by a group whose leadership had already demonstrated a "better safe than sorry" approach towards Western members with questionable loyalties. On top of this, Mo had also noticed that a higher percentage of the

English-speaking members he knew were being sent to the front lines and dying in battle.

Realizing that his escape was now or never, Mo began to take more significant risks. On October 31, 2014, just five months after traveling to join IS, Mo bought a SIM card which allowed him to send emails—something he claimed was against the rules—and sent a message to the FBI. Having already been interviewed by FBI agents while in America, he hoped they would be able to verify his identity and pick him up once he crossed the border. "Please help," he wrote, claiming that "my window is closing," and "I'm fed up with this evil." Rather fancifully, he also asked for "complete exoneration" and to "have everything back to normal with me and my family." The FBI's response was only mildly reassuring. Mo was told that U.S. authorities could do nothing to help him while he was still in Syria and that he would first have to make his way to a U.S. consulate in Turkey.

I'm an American who's trying to get back home from Syria. The FBI has a file on me and I can verify who I am with random information you ask me. . . . I've coordinated a way to get to the border . . . in Turkey and near . . . Syria . . . by use of civilian smugglers. My problem is that I need a pickup from trusted sources because I'm without passport. It was taken, and they won't give it back. . . . If someone can pick me up safely from across the border before [Kurdish forces] get to me, then I'll be 100% in the right hands. . . . Please help. I had a week [sic] thought out letter, but it's too risky to have it saved on my device. I'll try to write to you soon in full explanation. But right now my window is closing.

I just want to get back home. All I want is this extraction, complete exoneration thereafter, and have everything back to normal with me and my family. . . . Please help me get home. . . .

I'm fed up with this evil. But please first coordinate our extraction as soon as possible.

Redacted version of Mo's message to the FBI, October 2014.

Mo's only hope was the smuggler from Raqqa who had taken pity on him, but he would still have to escape the IS headquarters on the outskirts of Manbij. On the day Mo had agreed to meet him in Raqqa, he had another stroke of luck. Fighting around the area had been particularly intense, and guards were not manning the gates of the camp: "I just walked out of the front gate and got a ride into town." After leaving the camp, he went to Raqqa and met the smuggler. Once Mo reached Raqqa, he was taken

to the border crossing where, for the final leg of his journey, he was guided into Turkey on foot by a young boy.

On November 4, four days after he had contacted the FBI, Mo arrived at a U.S. Consulate in Turkey and announced himself. During his discussions with U.S. officials, he recounted his experiences over the last five months with IS. He also willingly provided all the intelligence he could offer, including smuggling routes, locations of the IS camps he had visited, and the names of the Western members of the group whom he had encountered.

Mo was eventually sent back to the U.S. and charged with providing material support to a foreign terrorist organization and receiving military training from a foreign terrorist organization. He pled guilty to both charges in late November 2014. Today, he continues to fully cooperate with investigators.¹⁹

Most aspects of Mo's story, including his claims to have not actually "fought" for IS, have been corroborated by U.S. authorities. Of these assertions, the most naturally questionable statement is that he was unaware of how violent IS was. Unsurprisingly, it is a claim made by numerous Americans and other Westerners who traveled to Syria or Iraq before returning home or being captured on the battlefield by Western forces or their allies. Of course, these claims can be dismissed as attempts to avoid the harsh penalties that come with terrorism convictions. However, this also highlights how many Westerners who are legally treated as "foreign fighters" after traveling to join IS and other jihadist groups may never have seen any actual combat.

Mo's expressed desire to "live under Islam" is shared by many others who travel to IS territory. The utopian and religious appeal of this message must not be ignored. Not all members are violent psychopaths out for a cheap thrill; some are committed to IS' religio-political ideal and see it as the most effective vehicle for the Islamist vision (and, of course, some members likely fit both categories).

Mo now appears to have rejected the zealous idealism that drove him to leave his home in the first place: "All the [expletive] I've been through, I don't care anymore. America is my home." His view of the U.S. has also been

influenced by his treatment from U.S. authorities since his surrender. Prosecutors have given him significant leeway and assistance in return for his cooperation. Some may believe, in fact, that the U.S. judicial system's treatment of Mo has been too lenient. In any event, his experiences after returning to his native country have led him to question his previously held notions of America's supposed war on Muslims.

In the future, Mo may also be useful to those hoping to sway radicalized Americans seeking to join or act on behalf of the group. Having been part of IS, he will have the credibility that few others do. His message to them is simple: "Don't be impulsive, think and sit still before you do something stupid."

Mohamad Jamal Khweis

On February 3, 2017, just days after taking part in the military operation that removed IS from Mosul, Colonel Arkan of the Kurdish Peshmerga forces was sifting through a haul of documents on the first floor of a house IS had converted into an office building. As he looked through each sheet of paper, one piece of information caught his eye. It was a document containing details of an IS recruit named Abu Omar al-Amriki. Having worked alongside the U.S. military on various counter-terrorism operations, the Colonel had a keen eye for information that American intelligence would find useful, and any IS member bearing a *kunya* that ended in al-Amriki certainly fit the bill. Taking a closer look at the spreadsheet detailing the recruit's personal information, he also found the fighter's real name: Mohamad Jamal Amin Khweis.²⁰ Under the category of "current mission" was written *Muqatil*, Arabic for "fighter."²¹

Nearly a year before this find, which would serve as a critical piece of evidence in Khweis' trial, Peshmerga forces in Northern Iraq arrested a young American who, it was later revealed, was Khweis.²² He had fled IS some days earlier and handed himself in to Kurdish forces. After spending over two months in Kurdish custody and being interrogated by the FBI, he was extradited to the U.S. to face charges of fighting for a designated foreign terrorist organization.²³

[illegible]

Mohamad Khweis' intake form from IS-controlled Fatah al-Rum training camp, with Colonel Arkan's inscriptions.

The case of Mohamad Khweis, a former Metro Access driver from Virginia who traveled to join IS in late 2015, is emblematic of the loner category of American travelers. His story shares several similarities to Mo's. He reportedly told no one of his plans before he left, was largely influenced by his online activities, was not involved in any known physical jihadist networks in the U.S. and even took a similar route into Syria.

However, his case differs in two crucial ways. Firstly, he traveled a year and a half after Mo and was operating in a much less permissible environment. Authorities had by now begun to allocate more resources to investigating cases of Americans joining IS. This meant that, unlike Mo, Khweis had to take extraordinary measures to mask his communications and movements. As a result, this case reveals much more about how Americans were able to use the latest encryption and location masking technology to join IS. Of all the instances of American travelers, none have yet provided as much information about what technology they use to communicate and cross the border between Turkey and Syria.²⁴ Through his use of a suite of online tools, Khweis was able to plot his route into IS territory apparently without any outside assistance until reaching the Turkish border with Syria.

In addition, Khweis pleaded not guilty to the charges he faced and against the recommendations of his defense team, he also took the stand at his trial.²⁵ The cross-examination of Khweis as a witness during his trial allowed for the revelation of details that offer rare and useful insight to researchers.

Motivations

Unlike Mo, who had expressed a desire to live a more devout Muslim life after adopting a stronger Muslim identity, there is little evidence that Khweis experienced any semblance of a religious awakening. During his trial, he claimed that he was not devout, rarely prayed, and had even been drinking alcohol while making his way to IS territory.²⁶

Among other revelations from this trial were the details of a series of interviews Khweis gave to the FBI while still in Kurdish custody in Erbil, Iraq. During these discussions, Khweis explained both why and how he joined IS in Syria, including an admission that he had agreed to become a suicide bomber for the group. Unlike Mo, who joined during the earliest phases of the group's ascendancy before it was widely publicizing its violent acts Khweis admits to being fully aware of the nature of IS. He watched the group's extreme propaganda, including the video depicting the immolation of Jordanian pilot Muath al-Kasasbeh.²⁷ He also viewed numerous sermons from well-known English-language jihadist preachers, including Abdullah al-Faisal, Anwar al-Awlaki and Ahmad Musa Jibril.²⁸

According to one of the agents who conducted these early interviews, Khweis' inspiration to join IS was driven by his desire to be part of the establishment of the Caliphate. This was despite being aware of IS involvement in overseas terrorism, including the November 2015 Paris attacks, which took place just a month before Khweis left to join the group.

While the evidence strongly suggests that Khweis was sympathetic to IS, and he was found in possession of phones containing numerous pieces of the group's propaganda, he also later claimed during his trial that he believed aspects of IS' ideology went against Islam. These perspectives represented a significant part of his defense, in which he argued that he disagreed with IS' use of violence, had joined the group out of curiosity, and was forced to agree to become a suicide bomber out of fear for his life rather than due to his deep commitment to the organization.²⁹

Further contributing to the lack of clarity surrounding Khweis' motivations was his evasiveness during discussions with the FBI. The agents noted in the trial that he changed his story on a number of occasions. For example, on the subject of his agreeing to be a suicide bomber, he first claimed he did so to prove his commitment to the group and only later made the claim that he agreed out of fear. He also initially claimed to the FBI that he had "given" himself to the group.³⁰ It "controlled" him and he would have acted on orders he received from superiors whether or not he agreed with them.³¹ Later on during his trial, however, Khweis testified that he traveled to IS territory to satisfy his curiosity about a group he had been researching for many months. During cross-examination, he claimed that:

I wanted to go to the Islamic State, the caliphate, and see for myself how it is, how are people living there, and one day tell my kids, I have been there. You know, it's not all like it seems ... I just wanted to, you know, just share with them like history, like places, places I have been.³²

Considering that Khweis had mounted a vigorous defense after his "not guilty" plea, it is difficult to determine why he joined IS. His assertions denying his support for the group during the trial must be seen in this context, while also not being dismissed out of hand. Among the claims that were not disputed by the prosecution was that he was not profoundly ideological and had no links to a wider jihadist network. However, there is irrefutable evidence that he was in possession of a wide array of IS propaganda, had traveled to IS territory in the full

knowledge of its role as an international terror group that was targeting the U.S., and had willingly gone through the official IS intake process for all new recruits. Like many similar stories of IS recruitment, there may never be a fully comprehensive account of what drove Khweis to join the group.

Journey

In many ways, Khweis' journey to IS territory mirrors that of many other American travelers. He took a similar route, crossing the border near the Turkish town of Gaziantep on his way to Raqqa and a number of other IS strongholds in Syria and Iraq. The authors have since uncovered details about his case which allow for the most in-depth understanding about how American IS travelers make their journeys.

After approximately a year of planning, one of the first steps taken by Khweis once he had resolved to make the trip was to sell his car to help both pay off his credit card debts and finance his travel.³³ While it may seem a strange priority, these credit card payments were likely a diversion to distract investigators from his plans, by suggesting that he intended to return to America and continue his life. According to the FBI, this is a common tactic among successful and unsuccessful IS travelers.³⁴ He also created the first of several new email addresses that he would use during his journey. Within minutes of setting this account up, he used it to book his flights from the U.S. to Turkey.³⁵

On December 16, 2015, Khweis, equipped with five cellular phones and a laptop, took the Iceland-based budget transatlantic airline WOW Air from Baltimore–Washington International Airport, via Iceland, to London Gatwick.³⁶ While at the airport in London, he attempted to contact a well-known British extremist and member of the *al-Muhajiroun* network named Abu Bara'a, but he did not receive a response.³⁷ From Gatwick, he flew to Amsterdam, where he spent two days staying in the city's red light district. His final flight was from Amsterdam to Istanbul.³⁸

While still in America, Khweis also purchased a separate ticket for a flight from Istanbul to Greece which, like

Mo's ticket to Italy, he never intended to use.³⁹ Instead, he hoped it would mask his final destination from any suspicious border or law enforcement agencies. This also explains the circuitous route he took through Europe on his way to Turkey, which also helped him avoid any undue attention from authorities. While in Turkey, he booked a flight back to Washington, D.C., which he never boarded. This step was yet another effort to conceal his intentions and give the impression that he planned to return home after an innocent trip.⁴⁰

Upon his arrival in Istanbul on December 20, Khweis took a bus to Gaziantep.⁴¹ While in the border town, Khweis created another email address using the name Zach K.⁴² and set up two Facebook accounts and a Twitter profile using the handle @fearislove1, which he intended to use to contact IS members who could facilitate his travel into Syria.⁴³ One of his two Facebook accounts was set up using a nonexistent email address, again a standard tactic for IS travelers attempting to mask their identity.

Khweis' new email address was also used to set up an Apple ID which he used to download a variety of secure messaging applications he hoped would help him speak with IS members and mask his location and online activity. Between the time of his arrival in Turkey and his crossing of the border into Syria, he downloaded a host of apps that were based on encrypted communication and masking online activity including Kik, Surespot, Telegram, VPN Master, VPN Defender, VPN InTouch, and a Tor browser called VPN Browser.⁴⁴ Following his passage into IS-controlled territory, he continued expanding his digital toolbox. Among the apps he downloaded in Syria were secure/encrypted calling applications, including Vodafone Secure Call, VIVA Secured Call, Cryptotel, and Secure Video Calls Free.⁴⁵ He also used an app called Snaptube to download IS videos from YouTube, including videos of executions and mass graves.⁴⁶

After four days of trying to contact IS members using his new Twitter account, he gained little traction and decided to create a second account with a name that was more explicit in its support for the group: the username "Greenbird" with the handle @iAGreenBirdiA.⁴⁷ As

Khweis would later admit to FBI interrogators and in court, the names were an open advertisement to online IS recruiters of his sympathy for the group and his desire to die fighting for it. "IA" is an acronym for the Arabic term *inshallah*, meaning god willing, while "GreenBird" refers to the belief that people who die fighting for IS are martyred and turn into green birds for their ascent to heaven. One of the agents who interrogated Khweis testified in court that he "acknowledged that [IS] and other violent terrorist groups use this to reference martyrdom, violent jihad, suicide bombing."⁴⁸

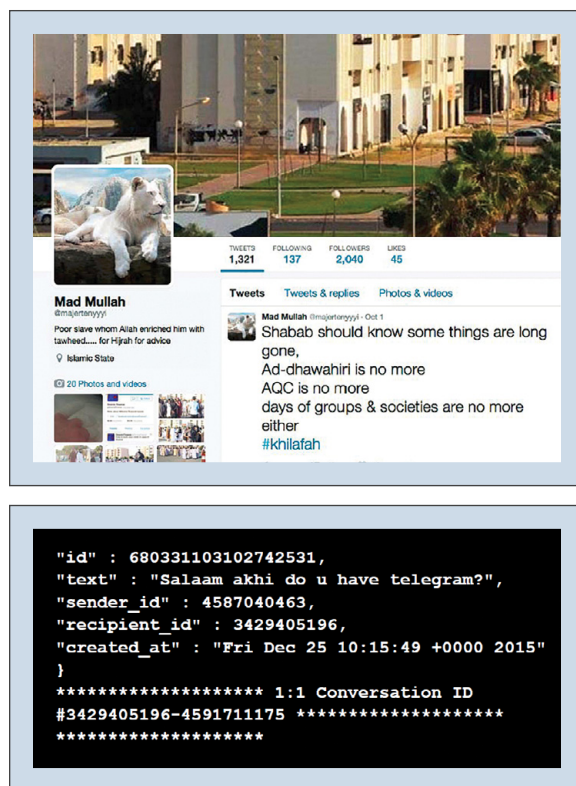
Using his new Twitter account, he reached out to at least three different Twitter users whom he had identified as actively assisting people who wanted to travel into Syria and join IS. The first responded to his request for help by telling him "I am a sister," suggesting that she was only able to interact with and help other women.⁴⁹

An account named "Mad Mullah" (@martenyiii) eventually helped Khweis.⁵⁰ The account's biography info stated that the user was based in Syria and offered advice on *hijrah* and other matters related to IS. Subsequent investigations by the authors have found that this account was involved in helping at least one other person travel to join the group.⁵¹ This account also interacted on Twitter with Shawn Parson (Abu Khalid al-Amriki), a Trinidadian national who fought for IS and appeared in one of the group's recruitment videos targeted at other Trinidadians.⁵²

On December 25, Khweis had sent a direct message to Mad Mullah: "Salaam akhi [brother] do u have Telegram?"⁵³ He was then asked to move their conversation to the encrypted messaging application. On this app, Khweis was told to download a second similar encrypted messaging application to which they moved and had a detailed conversation about arranging Khweis' safe passage into Syria.⁵⁴ This three-tiered communication approach—from Twitter, to Telegram, and finally to a third encrypted messenger application—demonstrates the length that IS members were going to hide their tracks online, making it very difficult for authorities to track their activities in real-time.

This example mirrors the tradecraft of IS travelers attempting to avoid detection online as they plan their route to the Caliphate and reach out to IS recruiters and facilitators. This approach appears to have worked in Khweis' case. Based on the information currently available, Khweis' interest in IS and his trip to join the group was completely unknown to authorities until his arrest by Kurdish forces in March 2016. Khweis' journey was only uncovered after his arrest, when he informed the FBI of his online activity and usernames. Despite volunteering this information, authorities do not appear to have been able to access the encrypted discussions Khweis had on Telegram and other similar applications.

Khweis was staying in his hotel room in Gaziantep when he contacted Mad Mullah. Later that day, he received a call telling him to meet with IS smugglers outside the hotel. Khweis left Gaziantep in a taxi, continued on foot across the border, and then traveled into IS-held territory in an SUV.⁵⁵ He was joined by other



Top: Twitter account of "Mad Mullah." Bottom: Private message from Khweis' account to Mad Mullah, December 2015.

new recruits, including, according to his own account, three men from Paris who claimed to have been inspired by the recent attacks in the city.⁵⁶ During the journey they were instructed to put their phones on airplane mode and, if possible, remove the batteries to avoid possible detection.⁵⁷ Similar to Mo's account, they too were stopped by Turkish police near the border, but were released after negotiations between the police and the taxi driver.⁵⁸

Khweis in Syria

Over the next few weeks, IS members took Khweis to a series of safe houses where he received ideological training and interacted with other travelers from around the world. He recalled to interrogators an unusually high number of Russian speakers from former Soviet countries.⁵⁹ Khweis' first experiences in Syria and Iraq were navigating the labyrinth of administrative bureaucracy that IS had created in its held territory.

In the first of these safe houses, located in Raqqa, he underwent the basic IS intake process for newcomers. He handed over his passport and driver's license, and his details were entered on the Microsoft Access form that Colonel Arkan would later recover in Mosul. Taking the *kunya* "Abu Omar al-Amriki," this is when he expressed his willingness to become a suicide bomber.⁶⁰

In the second safe house, also in Raqqa, Khweis spent two weeks undergoing religious training. During this period, he was introduced to the details of IS ideology. He studied alongside around 60 other recruits, including unnamed American and Australian citizens.⁶¹ He also underwent a blood test intended to check him for various diseases. Though it is unknown if IS could properly test the sample, he was given the all clear and issued with an official IS medical identification card.⁶²

Most significantly, however, it was also in this safe house where Khweis was introduced to the *Jaish al-Khilafa* brigade. *Jaish al-Khilafa* is a unit within IS tasked with identifying and training recruits from Western countries, with the intent of sending them back home to conduct terrorist attacks.⁶³ Members of the unit explained to Khweis the requirements of joining, which included

His final destination before he deserted was an IS *katiba* (IS community) made up of fighters and their families in Tal Afar, Iraq, where IS issued Khweis a uniform and instructed him to carry out basic tasks. He stayed

in the *katiba* for about 30 days.⁶⁸ As part of the indoctrination process he was undergoing, Khweis claims to have watched videos of apparent atrocities carried out by the Iraqi army on IS members and civilians.⁶⁹

In a number of cases, when inexperienced recruits such as Khweis first arrive, they act as apprentices to IS fighters who pass through the safe houses, cleaning up after them, arranging their meals, and organizing their weapons. For many, this inauspicious and unglamorous experience goes against the expectations they had developed before joining. In Tal Afar, Khweis grew tired of running errands and became frustrated that he was not receiving any military training. He expressed his concerns to a senior IS member in the area and, while he was promised things would change, they did not. This may have influenced his eventual decision to leave the group.⁷⁰

Khweis' escape from IS mirrored Mo's. Having gained the trust of his IS overseers while in Tal Afar, he was afforded more freedom than before, including being allowed to leave the house unescorted. Like Mo, he claims to have befriended a local taxi driver who helped him plan his route to Kurdish-held territory in Iraq. Having read about the American military alliance with the Kurdish Regional Government and its Peshmerga forces, he correctly

[illegible][illegible]

Left: Mohamad Khweis' IS Soldiers' Bureau, Eastern Region intake form in Arabic. Right: His form in English.

assumed that they would be the most likely to help return him home to America. Aware that there were Kurdish forces near to Tal Afar, Khweis downloaded a number of maps that helped him eventually find the Kurdish controlled region of Northern Iraq.⁷¹

After several preliminary attempts, Khweis left Tal Afar for Kurdish-held territory. Prior to doing so, he destroyed his laptop and cell phones. Khweis' taxi driver contact, fearful of retribution, refused to drive Khweis all the way into Kurdish territory. He dropped him off at a safe distance and made him walk the rest of the way.⁷² While traveling in the direction of Kurdish territory, he came across a group of Kurdish shepherds and began speaking to them in English, asking for help. A lost American IS fighter in the Kurdish desert instantly drew their interest. They began recording Khweis on their phones, and the Peshmerga arrived on-site to arrest him soon after.⁷³ Khweis was held by Kurdish forces for two months until the FBI arrived to question him. Soon after the FBI's arrival, Khweis was extradited to the U.S. to face trial for material support.⁷⁴ In 2017, he was convicted and sentenced to 20 years in prison.⁷⁵

Loners: Can Virtual Networks Replace Physical Recruitment?

As previous sections have shown, face-to-face interactions are often an essential element of the radicalization and mobilization processes.⁷⁶ Loners demonstrate the multiple paths individuals take in joining jihadist groups, and help warn against relying on any single specific theory or cause.

Cases of loners also shed light on how Americans were able to travel to jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq alone, armed only with smartphones and laptops. They did not require any in-person contacts until they reached

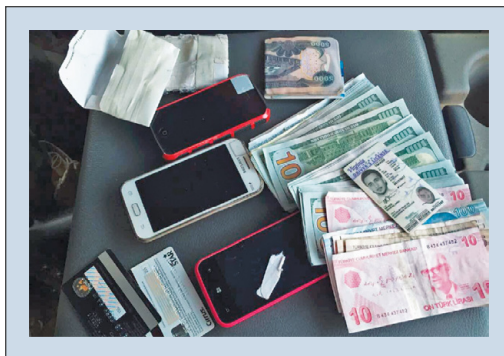
out to facilitators upon arrival near the Turkish border with Syria. While this may appear to be a remarkable

feat given the length of the journey and security challenges involved, groups such as IS and its sympathizers online have made extensive efforts to provide "travel guides" for Westerners intent on joining them.⁷⁷ These guides detail the latest and most secure communication applications, the most reliable facilitators, and the most secure routes. In the cases of the two individuals profiled in this section, their use of the internet, along with

a variety of operational security measures, ensured that both succeeded in traveling to join IS.

Thus, the role of online communications is also perhaps the most prevalent among cases in this category. Several recent developments in technology (particularly regarding secure and encrypted messaging) have proven to be valuable tools for modern insurgent and terrorist groups. In lieu of access to physical networks, both Mo and Khweis utilized virtual networks to facilitate their travel. Both men "met" the individual that was able to assist them in traversing the Turkish-Syrian border via Twitter. Highlighting the changing nature of IS' use of digital communications technology, Khweis, who traveled more than a year after Mo, was directed to several other messaging and communications platforms after first making contact on Twitter.

The track record of American recruits using social media as a "stand-in" for in-person travel facilitation networks is generally poor. There are dozens of cases in which a would-be traveler to Syria and Iraq who reached out to others on Twitter or other platforms caught the attention of authorities.⁷⁸ Mo avoided detection by waiting until arrival in Turkey to reach out to a facilitator on Twitter; Khweis covered his tracks with a host of encrypted



Personal property recovered from Mohamad Khweis at the time of his arrest by the Peshmerga, including two credit cards, U.S. dollars, Turkish lira, Iraqi dinar, three cell phones, and a Virginia drivers license.

messaging applications, anonymous browsers, multiple access devices, and other cybersecurity procedures.

Finally, these two “loners” demonstrate the multivalent impact of IS’ recruiting strategy towards Westerners, particularly Americans. Due to their fear of legal retribution, both Mo and Khweis’ accounts should be taken with a grain of salt. However, they cited not only the graphic, hyper-violent videos that many associate with IS, but also the group’s other propaganda output, depicting the legitimacy of their system of governance and their enforcement of Islamic law. It is essential to consider the differential impact of both types of messaging, and how they may contribute to drawing different types of recruits.⁷⁹

The stories of Mo and Khweis provide several new and unique insights into the motivations of American travelers and the methods they used to travel to join IS. While likely not generalizable, they demonstrate that in the U.S. context even individuals without access to broader facilitation networks still manage to go overseas to support jihadist groups. Neither Mo nor Khweis, according to publicly available evidence, were connected to any physical recruitment network or other cases of travel or support in the U.S. While not representative of the broader sample—most American travelers did so in conjunction with others—the loners reveal that face-to-face access to recruiters is not necessary to radicalize or successfully travel.