

## Category 1: Pioneers

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This report uses the term “pioneers” to refer to the top-tier of U.S. jihadist travelers in Syria and Iraq. Pioneers arrived early, built connections in jihadist networks, and contacted supporters who were still in the U.S. to encourage them to provide support or join their organizations. These individuals often become nodes of jihadist recruitment in the U.S. and are linked to several other cases of material support and travel.

This subset of cases rarely occurs in the dataset. The overwhelming majority of travelers embarked on their journey in small groups or alone, whereas these individuals travel with the support of more extensive networks. They use their connections and skills to build notoriety, and eventually reach leadership positions in jihadist organizations.

From a definitional standpoint, pioneers usually fit three criteria. First, as the name suggests, pioneers arrived earlier in the Syrian and Iraqi conflicts than many of their counterparts. Travelers who left prior to the rise of IS did not hold the same misconceptions as their later counterparts. Many had a clearer sense that they were going overseas to fight, versus subsequent travelers who may have been convinced that they could serve jihadist organizations in non-combat roles. Pioneers often hit the ground running upon arrival in Syria, nearly immediately participating in military campaigns.

To provide an overview of what this category of traveler entails, the following sections detail the stories of Abdullah Ramo Pazara and Ahmad Abousamra, two examples of pioneers. They highlight the networks they were able to build, both on the battlefields of Syria and back home in the U.S. Despite their differing backgrounds, both men became pioneers of the American jihadist scene in Syria and used their influence in order to further recruitment in the U.S. and elsewhere around the world.

### Abdullah Ramo Pazara

In February 2015, six Bosnian immigrants to the U.S. were charged with providing material support in the form of money, rifle scopes, knives, military equipment, and other supplies to jihadists in Syria and Iraq through intermediaries in Bosnia and Turkey.<sup>1</sup> A seventh individual, Abdullah Ramo Pazara, was named but not charged in the indictment as one recipient of the material support.<sup>2</sup> Pazara was described as a Bosnian native who immigrated to the U.S., became a naturalized citizen, and resided in St. Louis, Missouri, before leaving for Syria to fight for IS in May 2013.<sup>3</sup>

Pazara’s case drew interest from U.S. government agencies, scholars of terrorism, and the media for numerous reasons. He was one of the first Americans whom the U.S. government publicly acknowledged had traveled to Syria to fight. Digging into his backstory further, news outlets in Bosnia and Herzegovina uncovered that Syria was not Pazara’s first military engagement, revealing his service records from the Bosnian Civil War in the mid-1990s.<sup>4</sup> Upon arrival in Syria, he used connections to the dozens of Bosnians already in-theater to climb the ranks of multiple jihadist organizations, eventually ending up as a mid-level commander of an IS tank battalion.<sup>5</sup> Finally, his requests to his fellow Americans back home from the battlefields in Syria not only included military and tactical equipment, but also more mundane items, including packets of Swiss Miss hot cocoa mix.<sup>6</sup>

The full arc of Abdullah Ramo Pazara’s story, from his roots in the former republics of Yugoslavia to his death on the battlefield fighting the PKK in the town of Kobane, reveals the twisting paths that many Americans take in traveling to join jihadist groups overseas. Pazara is the classic example of an American pioneer traveler in Syria: setting up a litany of contacts, distinguishing himself in Syria from other Americans, and reaching back to the U.S. to recruit and mobilize others.

### Motivations

Ramo Pazara (at this time, he had not adopted the name Abdullah) was born in 1976 in the Socialist Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, then a part of communist Yugoslavia. His home village, Gomjenica, is situated on the outskirts of the town of Teslic in an area of Bosnia predominantly inhabited by Orthodox Serbians. In Teslic, a multiethnic and multi-religious municipality, Pazara lived alongside Bosnian Muslims, Orthodox Serbians, and Catholic Croats.

The civil war that tore Bosnia and the rest of Yugoslavia apart disrupted Pazara's adolescence. Teslic's location and multiethnic status made it subject to the ethnic cleansing that occurred during the Bosnian Civil War. In April 1992, the paramilitary forces of the Bosnian Serbs, known as Vojska Republike Srpske or VRS, demanded that Teslic's residents swear allegiance to the VRS. Bosnian Muslim and Croat public officials could join the VRS, or be forced to resign and face the consequences.<sup>7</sup> In Teslic, the VRS perpetrated dozens of crimes against humanity, including liquidating local Bosnian Muslim political leaders, indiscriminately bombing villages, and establishing concentration camps.<sup>8</sup>

Shortly following his death in Syria, the online newspaper *Sloboda Bosna* claimed that Pazara fought for the VRS, despite being a Bosnian Muslim.<sup>9</sup> Several Bosnian expert sources confirmed the existence of these records, which detail that Ramo Pazara joined the VRS at the age of 17 alongside his father and fought in the Pelagicevo region and the towns of Majevisa and Bihac.<sup>10</sup> During the height of the war, in 1994, Pazara served as a sniper for a VRS unit fighting in the Bosnian-Croatian border town of Orasje.<sup>11</sup>

The common assumption is that Pazara's generation of Bosnian Muslim jihadists all have networked ties to the jihadist brigades operating in Bosnia at the time of the civil war. These formations include the infamous *El-Mudžahid* brigade, in which many individuals (including foreign fighters) who were later connected to al-Qaeda operations in Bosnia and overseas fought during the civil war. Pazara's case is an exception to the rule. As a VRS paramilitary, it is likely that Ramo Pazara fought

directly against jihadists during the Bosnian Civil War—the Bosnian Serb VRS fought, in various circumstances, against the *El-Mudžahid* brigade, which allied itself with the Bosnian Muslim cause.

In any event, Pazara's experiences during the Bosnian War proved formative to his later life in America, and his eventual travel to Syria to join the fighting there. Firstly, after the civil war ended in 1995, and after Pazara and his father completed their alleged tour of duty for the VRS, they were still not allowed to return to their hometown of Teslic. Returning to Teslic risked their imprisonment, torture, or potential deaths. Ultimately, Pazara and his father were subject to the same ethnic cleansing inflicted on the rest of the Bosnian-Muslim residents. Like other Bosnian Muslim families, the Pazara family was forced into the diaspora.

Pazara's arrival in the U.S. during the late 1990s would have placed him in an immediate conundrum. If Pazara disclosed his participation in the Bosnian Serb Army on immigration forms, as required by law, he could have been subject to prosecution for war crimes or deported to Bosnia. Failing to disclose participation in the VRS on immigration forms is also a potentially prosecutable crime.<sup>12</sup>

Pazara ultimately decided not to disclose his war record on immigration forms, and did not formally apply for citizenship until he had lived for at least fifteen years in the U.S. The concern was likely not only the potential legal consequences of disclosure, but also the backlash from the Bosnian diaspora in America. Many members of the diaspora from Pazara's generation saw their hometowns destroyed and family members killed at the hands of the VRS and other Serb paramilitary forces, forcing them to flee the country. The mere rumor of VRS participation would likely have made Pazara a pariah. Few records of Pazara from the early years of his life in America are publicly available.

Pazara's transition from Bosnian militia sniper to U.S. civilian life was rocky. He settled in Warren, Michigan, and co-founded a commercial trucking company with his then-wife in 2004. Financial records detail the difficulties faced by the Pazaras' company—it registered slim profits and massive debts in the three years that it was

active. The Pazaras filed for divorce in 2007, with his wife taking control of the trucking company. One year later, Ramo Pazara filed for bankruptcy in the state of Michigan and agreed to forfeit most of his property.<sup>13</sup> From 2008 to 2011 Pazara maintained addresses in Michigan but spent a considerable amount of time with his relatives in Utica, New York.<sup>14</sup>

It was in Utica where Pazara likely first came into contact with one of the future members of the network that he would eventually reach out to once he arrived in Syria. Nihad Rosic, a much younger Bosnian immigrant, was working as a truck driver by day and a semi-pro mixed martial artist by night in the Utica area.<sup>15</sup> Rosic's parents and Pazara's brother and sister-in-law, as documented on social media, had a close relationship.

According to Rosic's attorney in the ongoing trial proceedings, Rosic "turned a corner" in terms of his religiosity around 2011—the same time that Pazara was frequently visiting Utica and began to adopt more conservative beliefs and appearance.<sup>16</sup> Prior to his arrest for material support, Rosic also had an extensive record of domestic abuse. In 2011, he was arrested and charged with endangering the welfare of a child after punching a woman who was carrying a baby in her arms.<sup>17</sup> Then, in 2012, he served a year-long sentence for beating his wife with a belt in front of their children. The dispute arose when Rosic found a bottle of his wife's perfume in the house, which he interpreted as violating the Islamic prohibition on alcohol-based products.<sup>18</sup>

By the time Pazara moved permanently to St. Louis, Missouri, in late 2011 in search of work, he had already adopted the outward appearance of a committed Salafi believer. The St. Louis metropolitan area is home to over 70,000 Bosnians, the largest diaspora community outside of Europe. The St. Louis Bosnian-American community has frequently been assessed to be one of

the most well-integrated immigrant communities in the U.S.<sup>19</sup> Although Pazara was living in a large, tight-knit Bosnian community, one local leader later told the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* that "nobody" knew him. Despite Pazara's reported embrace of conservative Islam, none of the local imams in St. Louis's many mosques claim to have known him. His landlord and neighbors, while noting his long beard and *thawb* (traditional Arab robe), claimed that he kept to himself.<sup>20</sup>

Pazara did, in fact, have a small group of friends in the St. Louis area. Many of them shared similar backgrounds, economic difficulties, and recent changes in their religiosity. Among them was Ramiz Zijad Hodzic

(nicknamed "Siki"), another former resident of Teslic. Hodzic served on the opposite side of the Bosnian Civil War as Pazara, and eventually won Bosnia's highest military honor (the Golden Lily).<sup>21</sup> In the mid-1990s, he and his wife Sedina arrived in America as refugees.<sup>22</sup> Pazara and Ramiz Hodzic shared a hometown, military experience, and less-than-stellar financial records. The Hodzics were over \$300,000 behind in federal and state taxes, and faced lawsuits for unpaid rent and credit card bills.<sup>23</sup> Their adoption of conservative Islam also apparently occurred around the time Pazara

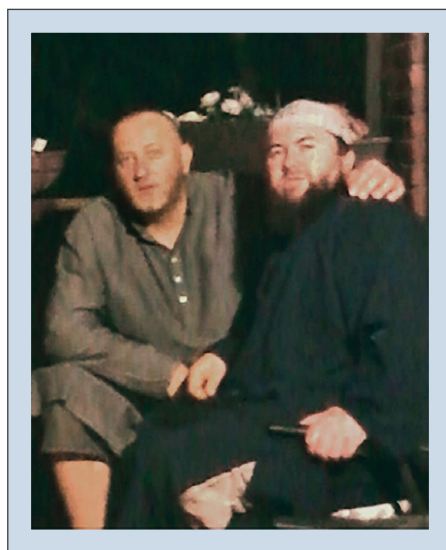
arrived in St. Louis. The Hodzics' neighbors claimed that they remembered Ramiz frequently attempting to barbecue while drunk and that Sedina started wearing the hijab just a few months before her arrest.<sup>24</sup>

Although publicly available evidence is sparse, Pazara and the Hodzics used the internet and social media to connect with like-minded members of the Bosnian diaspora worldwide. The period between 2011 and 2012, when Pazara moved to St. Louis and connected with the Hodzics, was also the timeframe in which the Syrian conflict began to escalate from its roots in opposition protests to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to a more globalized engagement involving foreign participants.



Ramo Pazara in Utica, New York, 2010.

Members of the Bosnian diaspora, many of whom have personal experiences with the plight of civil war, the status of refugees, and ethnic cleansing, were understandably deeply concerned about similar events taking place in Syria.<sup>25</sup> Unsurprisingly, Salafi-jihadist groups who publish in the Bosnian language used these sentiments to recruit on social media. Using websites like *Put Vjernica* (Way of the Believer), *Vijesti Ummeta* (News from the Ummah), as well as popular social media platforms like Facebook, they disseminated material encouraging Bosnians in the diaspora to respond to the plight of Muslims in Syria by joining militant groups.<sup>26</sup>



*Ramo Pazara (L) and Ramiz Hodzic (R) in St. Louis, Missouri, 2012.*

Pazara was not a particularly observant Muslim prior to about a year or so before his travel to join Salafi-jihadist groups in Syria, but he also once participated in a paramilitary formation which directly fought, and even committed war crimes against Muslims in Bosnia. Today, however, many Bosnian jihadist supporters in the diaspora are too young to have actively participated in the Bosnian War, and may not have viewed Pazara's alleged participation in the VRS as damning, or even relevant. The only connection that would have mattered was their mutual interest in jihad.

### ***Journey and Network***

Shortly after he became an American citizen in May 2013, Pazara traveled to Syria to fight.<sup>27</sup> He adopted a new name as part of his naturalization proceedings, and formally became Abdullah Ramo Pazara.<sup>28</sup> Eleven days later, he traveled to Syria through Zagreb, Croatia, Bosnia, and Istanbul.<sup>29</sup>

Pazara was supposed to go with two others, but only one—Haris Harcevic—made the journey. Nihad Rosic, who remained in touch with Pazara via social media, also intended on traveling to Syria, according to the

2015 indictment.<sup>30</sup> However, at the time of Pazara's May 2013 journey, he was still imprisoned on the domestic violence charge and could not go.<sup>31</sup> Several individuals with knowledge of the investigation, as well as border records in Bosnia, confirmed that Harcevic also traveled with Pazara through the Balkans, Turkey, and Syria in summer 2013.<sup>32</sup> Harcevic, who is included in the study's sample, arrived in Syria, remained only for a short time, and promptly returned to the U.S.<sup>33</sup> He has not faced any charges in the criminal case against Pazara and his network,

although his brother Armin was charged with providing material support.

After Pazara arrived in Syria, his friends in St. Louis, Ramiz and Sedina Hodzic, allegedly began reaching out to online contacts to collect funds and buy supplies for Pazara. From August 2013 to September 2014, Pazara reportedly used Facebook and email to request specific items, coordinate shipments, give updates on his location and status, and share information about the jihad in Syria.<sup>34</sup>

In total, four people (Nihad Rosic, Mediha Salkicevic, Jasminka Ramic, and Armin Harcevic) allegedly sent money to Ramiz and Sedina Hodzic to help buy military equipment and supplies for Pazara and other travelers in Syria.<sup>35</sup> According to the indictment, the money was used to purchase "U.S. military uniforms, combat boots, military surplus goods, tactical gear and clothing, firearms accessories, optical equipment and range finders, [and] rifle scopes."<sup>36</sup> The Hodzics allegedly sent the supplies to unnamed individuals in Turkey and Saudi Arabia, who then transferred the materials to Pazara and other Bosnian fighters in Syria and Iraq.<sup>37</sup> They also allegedly collected funds for the families of Bosnian travelers.

In April 2014, Nihad Rosic purchased a plane ticket to Istanbul for July 20, 2014 after discussing travel to



Syria with Pazara on Facebook Messenger.<sup>38</sup> However, when Rosic tried to board Norwegian Airways Flight DY7002 to Oslo, Norway, for the first leg of his journey, he was prevented from flying due to the conditions of his probation.<sup>39</sup> Rosic's failed voyage to Syria may have tipped off law enforcement to the funding scheme. In February 2015, the U.S. Attorney's Office filed indictments against Nihad Rosic, Ramiz Hodzic, Sedina Unkic Hodzic, Mediha Salkicevic, Jasminka Ramic, and Armin Harcevic. Federal agents arrested all six defendants.<sup>40</sup>

### *Pazara in Syria*

According to Vlado Azinovic, Pazara's role in Syria was a mid-level tank and vehicle battalion commander for IS, commanding a unit of about 60 to 70 men.<sup>41</sup> However, when Pazara first arrived in Syria in the summer of 2013, IS as an organization had not reached the level of notoriety and success that it attained after the declaration of its self-proclaimed caliphate in June 2014. Like many other travelers, Pazara initially fought for a smaller outfit, and as a result of the changes in the political and military landscape in Syria, eventually found his way into IS.

Pazara initially was a member of a jihadist outfit called *Jaish al Muhajireen w'al Ansar* (The Army of Emigres and Helpers, or JMA). The group largely comprised travelers from the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Balkan countries who made up the bulk of the group's fighting force.<sup>42</sup> JMA was led by former members of the mid-2000s jihadist underground in the Caucasus and the Balkans, who, after facing prosecution in their home countries, migrated to Turkey and then onwards to Syria at the outset of the conflict.<sup>43</sup>

JMA has played an outsized role in the intra-jihadist competition in Syria. Soon after Pazara's arrival, one of JMA's commanders, Tarkhan Batirashvili (aka Umar al-Shishani), defected to IS.<sup>44</sup> JMA split, with the bulk of the group's members joining Umar al-Shishani in IS; this cohort included the majority of JMA's Bosnian militants.<sup>45</sup> Ultimately, Umar al-Shishani became

IS' most senior military leader, and the fighters that stayed with him from his JMA days were also given leadership positions.

The JMA split particularly benefited one of Umar al-Shishani's lieutenants, a seasoned Bosnian jihadist named Bajro Ikanovic. Ikanovic had previously spent four years in Bosnian prison after being apprehended during the planning stages of attempting to detonate an explosive device outside of a Western embassy in Sarajevo, on behalf



*Top: Bosnian jihadists in Syria. L-R: "Amr Ibn Islam," "Ebu Malik el-Sanjaki," Abdullah Ramo Pazara, Bajro Ikanovic, Sejdin Omerovic. Bottom: Jihadists in Syria, including Abdullah Ramo Pazara (seated in second row, center), and German jihadist Denis Cuspert, also known as Deso Dogg (second row, left, with keffiyeh). Cuspert married another American traveler, Daniela Greene. Greene, a former FBI employee, traveled to Syria in 2014.*

of al-Qaeda.<sup>46</sup> Before his reported death in March 2016, the State Investigation and Protection Agency (SIPA) of Bosnia and Herzegovina considered Ikanovic to be the most dangerous Bosnian citizen in Syria and Iraq.<sup>47</sup>

Ikanovic was sanctioned as a specially designated global terrorist by the U.S. Department of the Treasury in 2015. The designation claims that Ikanovic held various leadership positions in IS, including being a member of the organization's judicial branch for religious-military affairs, the Shura Council, and the head of the largest IS training camp in northern Syria at the popular border-crossing point of Azaz.<sup>48</sup> In Azaz, Ikanovic "appropriated" a mansion from a former Syrian regime official that was used to transit travelers from the Balkans and elsewhere into Syria.

Another one of Pazara's Bosnian connections in Syria made his name in a completely different, but nonetheless prescient manner. A teenager from the Sanjak region of Serbia, Mirza Ganic (aka Abu Shahid) was in charge of multiple Bosnian online jihadist forums, and was known for his braggadocio and charisma in supporting IS.<sup>49</sup> Despite his youth and combat inexperience, Ganic's prolific social media presence commanded the respect of a broad swath of Bosnian travelers. His influence apparently extended far into the diaspora. According to court

documents, Ramiz Hodzic posted a picture of a combat knife and commented that Mirza Ganic was interested in obtaining the weapon for "slaughtering."<sup>50</sup> When Ganic was killed in Aleppo in September 2014 at the age of 19, Pazara posted on Facebook:

My brother Abu Shahid was martyred. I pray to Allah to grant him *jannah* [heaven] and the paradise of *Firdaus*, and bring him together in *jannah* with the Prophet of Allah, peace be upon Him.<sup>51</sup>

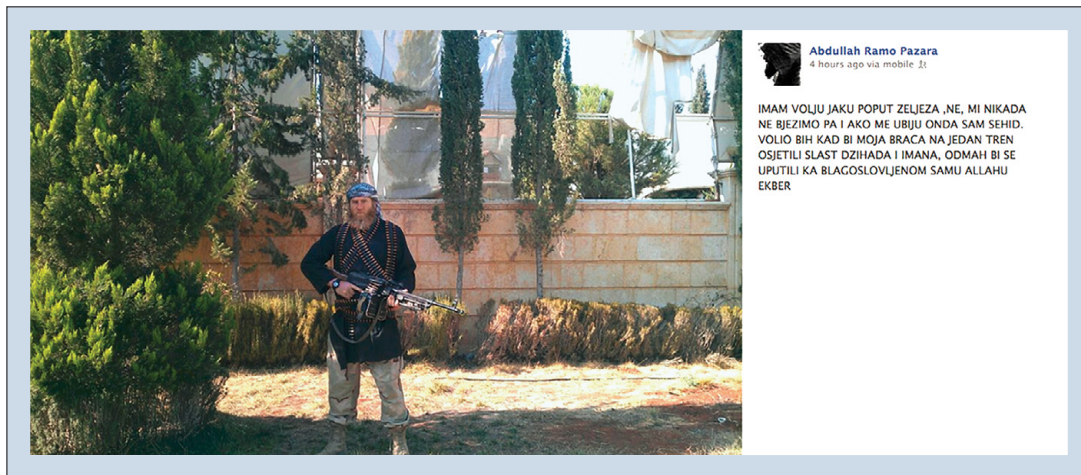
Most of the available evidence about Pazara's time in Syria comes from his Facebook account. While today, jihadist formations make more active pushes to prevent their fighters from harming their operational security by using social media in-theater, during the early days of the Syrian conflict it was *en vogue* for travelers to become outsized social media personalities. Pazara's account, under the name Abdullah Ramo Mudzhahid, kept a diary of who he was associating with, daily news from the frontlines, and pictures of himself, his compatriots, and their activities.

The earliest photos on this account depict a more romanticized view of combat, showing Pazara in recruitment-style pictures. Accompanying one image of him posing with a rifle, Pazara commented:



Left: Facebook post from Abdullah Ramo Pazara eulogizing Mirza Ganic. Picture shows Pazara (L, on motorcycle), and Ganic (R, standing). January 24, 2014. Right: Abdullah Ramo Pazara (back left) and Bosnian jihadist "Amr Sham" (back right, with child on shoulders) with Syrian children.





*Facebook post from Abdullah Ramo Pazara in Syria. "I have a strong will, like iron. No, we will not run away, and even if they kill me I will become a martyr. I would love for my brothers felt the sweetness of faith and jihad for just one second, they would immediately be sent to heaven, Allahu Akbar."*

I pray to Allah that this picture can be used for *da'wa* [outreach] ... May Allah give my brothers and sisters even more strength for this job, which leads us on the path to Paradise.<sup>52</sup>

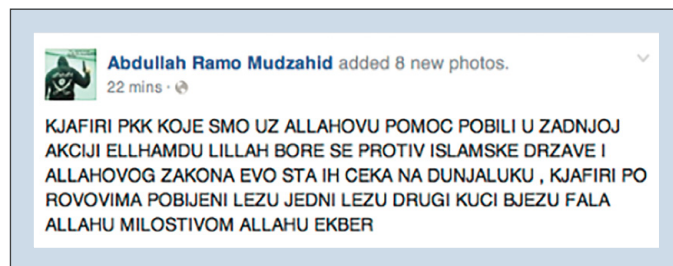
Other images attempt to explain to those outside of IS-controlled territories that their creature comforts from their home countries—including motorcycles and Bosnian-style lamb roasts—would be available if they too joined IS.

However, other pictures show that Pazara was wholeheartedly committed to fighting and combat in Syria. In March 2014, he communicated with an unnamed individual in the U.S. Pazara allegedly told of a mission in which his battalion took control of a large area, killed 11 opposing soldiers, and captured one prisoner. Pazara stated that he intended to slaughter the prisoner the next day.<sup>53</sup> A few weeks later, Ramiz Hodzic, Pazara's friend in St. Louis communicated with Nihad Rosic, Pazara's friend in Utica, New York. Hodzic claimed he saw a video of Pazara's group in action, potentially during the late-March operation Pazara described. Hodzic told Rosic that he saw "ours" (that is, Pazara's group) kill five soldiers, one of whom they

beheaded.<sup>54</sup> He allegedly used this example to encourage Rosic to donate money to buy "five good snipers," which Rosic allegedly did on April 15, 2014.<sup>55</sup>

In May 2014, Pazara uploaded a photo album of dead Kurdish combatants to his Facebook page, killed fighting Pazara's battalion. "These kafirs [nonbelievers] of the PKK [the Kurdistan Workers' Party] ... with Allah's help, were killed during the last military action fighting against the Islamic State," Pazara proclaimed online. "This is what is waiting for them in the world, these infidels in the trenches were killed one by one fleeing their homes."<sup>56</sup>

Four months later, IS fighters began a siege of the areas surrounding Kobani in the autonomous region



*Facebook post from Abdullah Ramo Pazara discussing a battle against PKK fighters. May 2014.*

of Rojava on the Turkish-Syrian border. They faced stiff resistance from a coalition led by Kurdish factions and Iraqi Peshmerga forces, along with elements of the Free Syrian Army. On or around September 22, 2014, Pazara died in battle in Kobani at the age of 38.<sup>57</sup>

To date, Pazara stands as one of the highest-ranked Americans to ever have fought for IS. His combat experience during the Bosnian Civil War, regardless of what side it was for, appears to have helped him navigate jihadist combat in Syria in ways that other American citizens could not. Building on his position, he remained in contact with his networks in the U.S., and attempted to facilitate their material support, and in Nihad Rosic's case, travel to join IS. Abdullah Ramo Pazara is thus a quintessential example of a jihadist pioneer in Syria and Iraq. His story serves as a reminder of how particular Americans, contingent on their abilities and networks, can distinguish themselves from other American travelers.

## Ahmad Abousamra

The eighth issue of IS' official magazine publication, *Rumiyah* (Rome), released in early April 2017, contained a eulogy for the media propagandist Shaykh Abu Sulayman ash-Shami.<sup>58</sup> The magazine claimed that Abu Sulayman was a senior figure in the production of IS media, and that he died in January 2017 as a result of a missile strike during a battle.<sup>59</sup> In a rare incidence, the magazine identified Abu Sulayman by his real name halfway through the article. Even before that, close followers of the American jihadist scene could instantly recognize his identity from the cover photo alone. "Abu Sulayman" was Ahmad Abousamra, a dual Syrian-American citizen wanted by the FBI for providing material support to terrorists.<sup>60</sup>

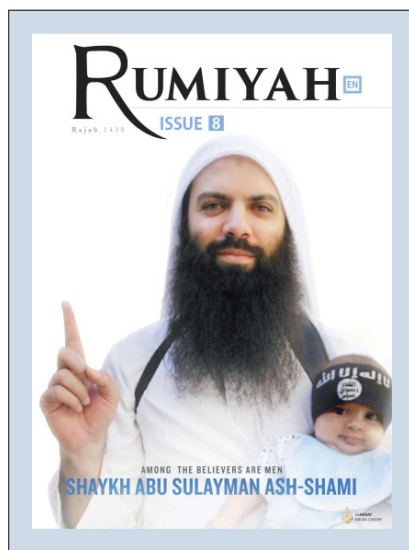
By the time of his death in 2017, Abousamra had attempted to participate in jihadist organizations

across the globe (including Pakistan, Yemen, Iraq, and Syria) for a decade and a half. Abousamra, a computer scientist by training, spoke Arabic and English fluently, was a skilled propagandist with a deep understanding of jihadist ideology. These traits made him an invaluable asset, especially because he also had a knack for eluding U.S. law enforcement. He avoided arrest on multiple occasions and transitioned between two passports and dozens of aliases. In some ways, Abousamra helps elucidate the threat posed by individuals who can seamlessly transition between various jihadist battlefields. As the nature of the Syrian and Iraqi conflicts change, the travelers who will be vital to establishing jihadist campaigns elsewhere may fit profiles like Abousamra's.

## Motivations

Abousamra was born in 1981 in France.<sup>61</sup> His father, Dr. Abdulbadi Abousamra, moved the family to the Boston, Massachusetts, metropolitan area after accepting a position as an endocrinologist at Massachusetts General Hospital.<sup>62</sup> Dr. Abousamra is also a prominent Muslim Brotherhood-linked activist and community organizer. He helped found the Islamic Academy of New England and the al-Noor Academy, a private Islamic middle and high school in Mansfield, south of Boston. He was also the president of the Islamic Center of New England's Sharon, Massachusetts, branch, and the vice president of the Muslim American Society of Boston.<sup>63</sup>

Ahmad, nevertheless, attended the Xaverian Brothers Catholic High School while growing up in Boston.<sup>64</sup> He was on the honor roll, but transferred to Stoughton High School during his senior year, reportedly because Xaverian Brothers did not permit male students to grow beards.<sup>65</sup> After graduating in 1999, he attended Northeastern University, and eventually transferred to the University of Massachusetts-Boston, where he graduated in 2006 with a degree in computer science.<sup>66</sup>



Cover page of IS' *Rumiyah* magazine, issue 8, depicting Ahmad Abousamra. April 2017.



Around the time of the September 11, 2001, attacks, Ahmad Abousamra reportedly began outwardly expressing his interest in participating in jihadist movements to his circle of friends, including allegedly praising the 9/11 attacks.<sup>67</sup> One member of this circle was Tarek Mehanna, an Egyptian-American student from Sudbury, Massachusetts, another upper-middle-class suburb in the Boston area. Abousamra and Mehanna were family friends. They also developed a shared interest in Salafi-jihadism and were highly active on jihadist web forums. In the early 2000s, they began researching ways to travel to Pakistan to attend al-Qaeda training camps using the internet.<sup>68</sup> Abousamra also contacted Hassan Masood, a Pakistani national with knowledge of the areas in Pakistan with training camps. Masood was the son of the former imam of the mosque in Sharon that Abousamra attended.<sup>69</sup> The elder Masood was eventually deported to Pakistan for immigration violations.<sup>70</sup> His brother (and Hassan Masood's uncle), Hafiz Muhammad Saeed, was the founder of *Lashkhar-e-Taiba* (LeT), a Pakistani affiliate of al-Qaeda.<sup>71</sup>

Abousamra traveled to Pakistan in 2002, with the intent of receiving military training at a LeT training camp. He was given money by an unnamed co-conspirator to donate to the *mujahideen*.<sup>72</sup> Upon arrival in Pakistan, he attempted to enter the LeT training camps, but according to Masood, he was “blown off.” Abousamra was turned away from the camps because he had no fighting experience, and he was an Arab, and not a Pakistani.<sup>73</sup> Abousamra eventually met a facilitator named Abdulmajid after talking about a religious slogan with him on a bus; Abousamra believed he could help him gain entry to a training camp. Instead, Abdulmajid instructed Abousamra to return to the U.S. and “do whatever [he could]” to help the cause of jihad.<sup>74</sup> Upon his return, Abousamra, Mehanna, and a recent convert to Islam named Daniel Maldonado continued to research ways to support jihadist groups overseas and commit attacks at home.<sup>75</sup>

After the Pakistan plan failed, Abousamra and his friends discussed next steps. They planned an attack on a mall in the Boston area, in the hopes of mimicking the terror caused by the 2002 Beltway sniper shootings.<sup>76</sup> The

group discussed other possibilities, including assassinating members of the Bush administration and committing an attack on a local U.S. Air Force base. However, they could not find a source for the automatic weapons that they needed.<sup>77</sup>

Moving forward, the group re-considered jihadist travel. Iraq was initially appealing: the U.S. military engagement there had just started, and al-Qaeda in Iraq (later, the Islamic State in Iraq, the predecessor group to IS) were growing in influence due to high-profile operations. However, Abousamra and his co-conspirators could not determine a way to reach Iraq from neighboring countries. Instead, Abousamra traveled to Sacramento, California, in October 2003 to receive guidance from Jason Pippin, an American-born convert from Georgia who had trained with LeT and also studied in a Yemeni madrassa in the 1990s.<sup>78</sup> Abousamra met Pippin on an online Salafi-jihadist web forum. Pippin discussed his experience in Yemen and gave Abousamra and Mehanna advice about how to travel and who to contact.<sup>79</sup> Abousamra gave Pippin \$5,000 for a plane ticket, hoping that he would join them. However, Pippin remained in California.

### *Journey*

In February 2004, Abousamra, Mehanna, and an unnamed co-conspirator embarked on their journey to Yemen through the United Arab Emirates.<sup>80</sup> All three only saw Yemen as a transition point.<sup>81</sup> Per Pippin's advice, they were to stay in Yemen for a few weeks to participate in a training camp, before eventually transferring to the battlefield in Iraq to fight with AQI.<sup>82</sup>

On arrival in the United Arab Emirates from the U.S., the unnamed co-conspirator dropped out after he received a call that his father was sick. He gave Mehanna and Abousamra the money he had saved for the trip—a few thousand dollars—and promptly returned to the U.S.<sup>83</sup> Mehanna and Abousamra entered Yemen on February 4, 2004.<sup>84</sup> Again, their attempt to find a suitable training camp was thwarted. Abousamra went onwards to Iraq to fight for AQI, arriving in the country on February 13.<sup>85</sup> Mehanna, on the other hand, returned the U.S. and acted

as a conduit between the al-Qaeda media offices and Western jihadists by translating propaganda material.<sup>86</sup>

Abousamra's first Iraq expedition did not last long, either. After two weeks in-country, he traveled through Jordan and his father's home country of Syria, eventually returning to the Boston area in August 2004.<sup>87</sup> He then regrouped with Mehanna, who described their new role to another unnamed individual as "the media wing" of AQI, assisting in the translation of several videos produced by the group from Arabic into English.<sup>88</sup> As late as April 2006, Mehanna and Abousamra were in contact, hatching a plan to reach out to the leader of LeT in the hopes of traveling to Pakistan again.<sup>89</sup> Another member of Abousamra's group of friends, Daniel Maldonado, went to Somalia in 2006 with his family and another American, Omar Hammami (also known as Abu Mansur al-Amriki), whom he met online.<sup>90</sup> Maldonado attended a training camp run by *al-Shabaab*; after catching malaria and escaping Somalia into Kenya, he was apprehended by Kenyan forces in 2007, extradited to the U.S., and sentenced to 10 years in federal prison.<sup>91</sup>

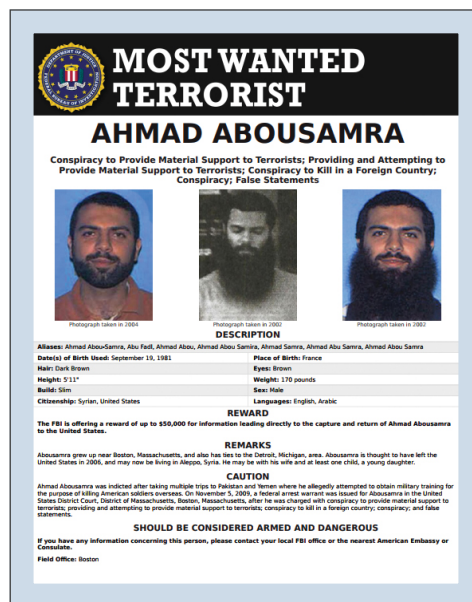
Maldonado called Mehanna while he was in Somalia prior to his arrest. At this point, federal agents were monitoring Mehanna and Abousamra, and knew that Maldonado had reached out to Mehanna about his purpose of travel to Somalia.<sup>92</sup> In December 2006, FBI agents interviewed Abousamra first and Mehanna second, four days apart. Authorities inquired about their respective trips to Yemen and Iraq and Mehanna was also asked about Maldonado's call.<sup>93</sup> According to court documents, Abousamra lied about the "purpose and intended destination[s]" of his two trips to Yemen and Iraq; Mehanna lied not only about these activities, but also provided false information about the location of Daniel Maldonado.<sup>94</sup>

Abousamra saw the writing on the wall and fled the country in December 2006. At this point, he had already graduated from UMass-Boston.<sup>95</sup> Tarek Mehanna, absent a second passport and held down by studies at the Massachusetts College of Pharmacy, stayed behind. Mehanna and Abousamra (*in absentia*) were indicted in 2009 on a variety of charges, including providing material support to designated FTOs, conspiring to kill U.S. nationals in a foreign country, and making false statements to the FBI.<sup>96</sup> A jury convicted Mehanna and he was subsequently sentenced to 17 and a half years in federal prison in 2012.<sup>97</sup>

Abousamra vanished after his December 2006 departure. The FBI did not place Abousamra on a watchlist before his departure, reportedly for "operational reasons."<sup>98</sup> He repatriated to Syria, and settled in the Aleppo area with his wife and at least one child. By the time a court issued his arrest warrant in 2009, Abousamra was well outside the reach of American law enforcement. In December 2013, the FBI listed Ahmad Abousamra as a "Most Wanted Terrorist," and offered a reward of \$50,000 for information leading to his arrest.<sup>99</sup> However, there was no updated information regarding his activities since the departure to Syria. It was unclear whether he was involved in jihadist activity in Syria or the region in between when he left the U.S. in 2006, and the beginning of the Syrian conflict in 2011.

### Abousamra in Syria

The first verification that Abousamra had joined a faction of the Syrian conflict was in 2014. A senior U.S. law enforcement official revealed that Abousamra had joined IS, claiming that the group had assigned him to assist in their efforts to spread their English-language propaganda on social media.<sup>100</sup> At this time, scholars, analysts, and governments were still attempting to uncover the leadership behind the IS media



FBI Most Wanted Terrorist notice for Ahmad Abousamra, released December 2013.

distribution division. Two features that seemed to distinguish the media operations of IS from previous jihadist organizations' material was their professional-quality productions and their ability to disseminate this content through social media.

Abousamra, in his years of attempting and failing to find a long-term role in several jihadist organizations, found a match in IS. After the start of the Syrian conflict, he lived in one of the hotspots of resistance to the Syrian regime on the battlefields of Aleppo. His eulogy in *Rumiyah* claims that he joined one of the factions in Aleppo, but was wounded in a battle. He eventually came across soldiers affiliated with IS in Iraq, who Abousamra recognized as the successor of al-Qaeda in Iraq, the organization that he fought for and assembled media products for nearly a decade prior.<sup>101</sup> The soldiers were fighting in the Aleppo region under the name of *Jabhat al-Nusra li-Ahl ash-Sham* (The Victory Front of the People of Sham).<sup>102</sup>

He first requested that these soldiers take him to Iraq, which was denied. Then, he asked to participate in a suicide bombing, which was also rejected. Eventually, he found a role "preaching *aqidah* [the creed]" to the soldiers.<sup>103</sup> During this period, the split between JN and IS occurred, and Abousamra joined the ranks of the faction's soldiers who pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. A wounded Abousamra was set to participate in a suicide bombing mission early in his career with IS, but by chance he came into contact with one of the senior-most members of the media division of IS, Wa'il al-Fayad (Abu Muhammad al-Furqan).<sup>104</sup> Abousamra's eulogy claims that al-Fayad instantly recognized Abousamra's talent, brought him on board to the media team, and sent another fighter in his place for a suicide mission.<sup>105</sup>

Abousamra's first job in the IS media department was ghostwriting treatises and opinions for the director, al-Fayad. Abousamra used the pen name "Abu Maysarah ash-Shami" to denote the articles he wrote on behalf of al-Furqan, most of which are available in Arabic and take an especially harsh stance on Salafi-jihadist organizations that had not declared allegiance to Abu Bakr

al-Baghdadi.<sup>106</sup> The most famous of Abousamra's essays written under the Abu Maysarah *nom du plume* coined the phrase "Jews of Jihad." This has since become the common pejorative used by IS supporters to refer to followers of al-Qaeda's current leadership, particularly Ayman al-Zawahiri.<sup>107</sup> In the essay, Abousamra claimed that al-Qaeda and its leaders were the contemporary equivalent to the Jews during the time of the original Caliphate, who converted to Islam not due to their belief in the religion, but because they merely feared their declining political position in the Arabian Peninsula if they did not.<sup>108</sup>

Eventually, al-Fayad rewarded Abousamra for his efforts. In July 2014, IS' al-Hayat Media Center, directed by al-Fayad, published the first issue of the monthly magazine *Dabiq*.<sup>109</sup> The issues of *Dabiq*, which ran for a two-year period until July 2016, were translated into several languages. Abousamra, now under his own *kunya* of Abu Sulayman ash-Shami, was responsible for directing translation efforts (especially for the English version), and was the magazine's chief editor and a frequent contributor.<sup>110</sup>

*Al Arabiya*, citing a source from the Iraqi Ministry of Interior, claimed in May 2015 that the Iraqi military killed two Americans who had been senior members of IS' media team, as the result of a strike in the west of Anbar province near Fallujah. The men were named as Abu Osama al-Amriki, a documentary filmmaker, and another filmmaking expert, Abu Mohammad al-Suri, also known as "Abu Samra."<sup>111</sup> While proof of death was unconfirmed, the Iraqi military made a concerning claim that Abousamra was involved in the filming of the infamous videos depicting the beheadings of James Foley, Stephen Sotloff, David Haines, Alan Henning, and Peter Kassig in 2014.<sup>112</sup> These claims were not verified, although evidence that Abousamra was directly involved in English-language media production for IS around this time lends them some credence.

According to IS sources, Abousamra was working with Wa'il al-Fayad on a new magazine product, *Rumiyah*, in the fall of 2016; this contradicts the claim that Abousamra was killed in 2015.<sup>113</sup> The first version of



*Rumiyah*, released on September 5, 2016, hailed the death of IS' official spokesperson, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, who reportedly died in late August.<sup>114</sup> According to some sources, al-Fayad, Abousamra's mentor, was slated to assume al-Adnani's role.<sup>115</sup> However, al-Fayad was killed two days after the release of the first issue.<sup>116</sup>

Following al-Fayad's death, Abousamra could have taken his job as director of the IS media division. Abousamra's eulogy, however, reports that the death of his mentor "greatly saddened" him, and that in the days following his passing, Abousamra requested to return to the battlefield rather than staying to manage the media office. He was transferred to *ribat* (forward position) in al-Thawrah, Syria, where he was reportedly killed in January 2017.<sup>117</sup> Alongside his eulogy appearing as the feature article of the eighth issue of *Rumiyah* is an original poem scripted by Abu Sulayman ash-Shami called "The Bliss of a Martyr."<sup>118</sup>

The U.S. government has not verified Abousamra's death. The FBI reward offered for information leading to his capture or arrest remains active—in the cases of other known jihadists who have been confirmed dead, the Bureau traditionally retracts the reward offer. A senior law enforcement also claimed that IS issued false death claims in the past to "get the heat off" their leaders if they were subject to surveillance or a targeted airstrike.<sup>119</sup>

Outside the death claim, there are, however, some interesting commonalities and discrepancies between the account in *Rumiyah* and U.S. law enforcement's timeline. The article places Abousamra in Aleppo around the same time that the FBI released updated information that he was living there in 2013. It states that Abousamra was active on the Aleppo front of the jihadist resistance, and adds that his counterparts often referred to him as "Abu Sulayman al-Halabi" (Halab referring to the Arabic name for Aleppo), rather than the more generic Abu Sulayman ash-Shami (the Syrian) or al-Amriki (the American).<sup>120</sup> The eulogy also gives an account of Abousamra's previous travel to join jihadist groups, claiming that he:

... completed his studies in Computer Science at the University of Massachusetts in Boston, graduating as an engineer and programmer, before resolving

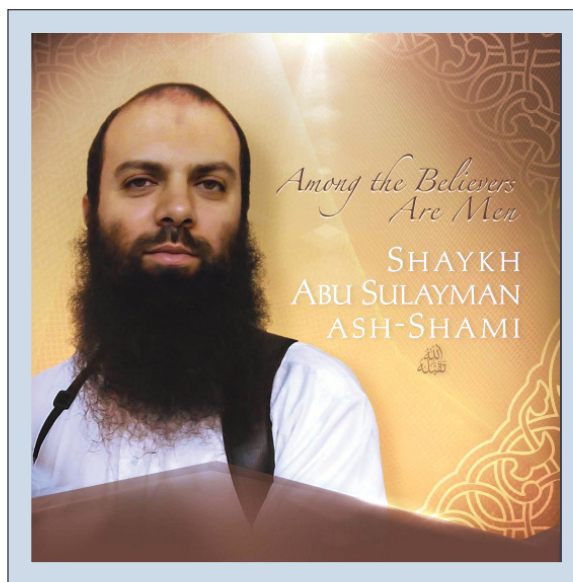


Image from Abousamra's eulogy in *Rumiyah*, issue 8. April 2017.

to go forth in the cause of Allah with some of his friends. So they left as *muhajirin* [travelers] to Allah, not coordinating their journey with anyone. They roamed between Yemen, Pakistan, and Iraq, hoping to meet someone who would bring them to the *mujahideen*. But once they became weary of finding the way, and as they feared inciting the suspicions of intelligence agencies, they returned to America, asking Allah to guide them towards their goal.<sup>121</sup>

Two elements of the eulogy differ from the details on Abousamra included in court documents in the Mehanna trial. The eulogy states that he was close to carrying out a jihadist attack with "two of his companions" that would involve "seizure of some weapons from the Crusaders, which they would then use for an attack behind enemy lines that they hoped would cause the killing of a large number of *mushrikin* [polytheists]."<sup>122</sup> This account varies from the FBI account regarding the sequencing of the attack plot. According to court documents, Abousamra and Mehanna discussed committing attacks in the U.S. *before* their trip to Yemen in 2004; according to *Rumiyah*, they continued discussing this plot and were in the final stages of preparation when FBI agents interviewed Mehanna and Abousamra in 2006, which prompted Abousamra to leave the country. Whether

this claim is jihadist bluster, a “journalistic” mistake, or direct evidence that the two continued their interest in a domestic attack after returning from Yemen is hard to parse.

The eulogy also documents another plot by Abousamra to kill a U.S. citizen overseas, claiming that he “took part in planning to kill the American apostate Hamza Yusuf during his last trip to Turkey.”<sup>123</sup> Yusuf, a prominent American Islamic scholar and co-founder of Zaytuna College, did visit Turkey in the aftermath of the July 2016 military coup attempt.<sup>124</sup> However, *Rumiyah’s* account does not provide any more details about this plot or Abousamra’s involvement.

Ahmad Abousamra is another instructive example of a “pioneer.” He arrived in Syria at least five years before any other Western traveler had done so. Like Pazara, he managed to find himself in the right place at the right time in Syria’s jihadist networks, directing himself towards the political allegiances and critical relationships that allowed him to rise in the ranks of his group’s leadership. His skills, including language proficiency, religious knowledge, and technical know-how, set him apart from other recruits. Unlike Pazara, Abousamra reportedly did not directly reach out to individual Americans in his networks back in the U.S. (according to available public knowledge). Nevertheless, his role as a propagandist and media distributor allowed him to edge himself into the media products, treatises, and scholarship that attracted thousands of other travelers to Syria and Iraq to fight for IS.

### **Pioneers: Enduring Relevance for Jihadist Groups**

From a security or law enforcement perspective, jihadist pioneers pose vexing challenges. Not only do they have deep influence in homegrown networks, but if not killed or apprehended while in Syria and Iraq, this category of traveler is the most likely to drive recruitment efforts to new battlefields. Besides, few Americans possess the capabilities or influence necessary to rise in the ranks of jihadist organizations. Many do not have the required combat experience, language abilities, technical skills,

or connections necessary to amount to much more than foot soldiers in insurgent militant organizations. Pioneers stand out in this regard; they often possess one or more of these qualities and build on them after their arrival in Syria and Iraq.

However, date of arrival in Syria can sometimes be misleading: some early arrivals were killed quickly, reneged on their beliefs, or struggled to adapt to their new circumstances. The mere feat of a pioneer’s survival and longevity in a combat or insurgency environment is a testament either to outright skill or tactical and strategic adaptation. Both Pazara and Abousamra lasted through their first combat experiences in Bosnia, Pakistan, Yemen, and Iraq, respectively. Abousamra was never arrested, despite transiting back and forth between the U.S. and the three different countries in which he attempted to receive military training from jihadist organizations. Pazara hid his wartime records, allowing him to avoid potential war crimes prosecution or deportation in the U.S.

Moreover, pioneers are specialists in critical skills needed by jihadist groups. The majority of American travelers to Syria had little to no combat experience prior to their travel. While Abousamra did not have extensive combat experience, he was able to distinguish himself in Syria through his understanding of Salafi-jihadist ideology, abilities as a propagandist, and computer skills. This combination made him incredibly important to IS. At the time he joined, IS was in the process of revolutionizing its branding through stark points of departure from the current debates in Salafi-jihadism, propaganda that could appeal to Western (and especially English-speaking) audiences, and a comprehensive use of digital communications technology. Assisting in these efforts may not have constituted an automatic entry ticket into the leadership ranks of LeT, AQAP, or AQI, but they did for IS during that time.

Lastly, pioneers make the right connections. Sometimes, this happens as a result of random occurrences. Abu Muhammad al-Furqan stumbled across Ahmad Abousamra, a zealous but wounded Syrian-American with experience in the media business and computer

skills, just as he was about to undertake a suicide mission. Abdullah Ramo Pazara happened to arrive in Syria just as the split between AQ and IS was being finalized, propelling his countrymen into leadership roles.

These three characteristics—adaptability, technical skills, and connections—are also why the category of pioneer travelers must be examined as part of the larger threat that jihadist travelers pose to the U.S. and the West. The current debate focuses heavily on the danger of returning fighters and whether the territorial demise of organizations like IS will increase the likelihood of homegrown attacks or broader recruitment networks, jump-started by returnees.

This debate, while useful and necessary, could benefit from an assessment of which kinds of travelers pose the largest threat from a national security perspective. The Pazara and Abousamra stories add some insight in this regard, not only into how returning travelers have influenced recruitment in the U.S., but also the comparative risk of returnees and pioneers.

Both Abousamra and Pazara had contact with veterans of jihadist campaigns at some point during their sagas, with Abousamra talking to at least one returned traveler. Abousamra traveled from Boston to Sacramento, California, to meet Jason Pippin, who had returned from a training camp in Kashmir operated by LeT, via a madrassa run by another “Afghan Arab” whom he met in Yemen. After his return to the U.S., Pippin remained active on several jihadist web forums, which is where he first encountered Abousamra. Pippin advised Abousamra about jihadist training camps in Yemen, testifying at Mehanna’s trial that he told Abousamra which airport to travel through, which madrassas to attend, and who to contact. Although Abousamra eventually was unsuccessful in his search for training camps in Yemen, in this case, Pippin, a returned traveler, provided expertise, contacts, and other information about fighting for jihadist groups overseas.

Pippin, a former “pioneer” himself, returned to the U.S. and continued to assist in jihadist recruitment until 2005, when he denounced extremism. He eventually became a government witness in the trial against Mehanna.

Nonetheless, this incident shows that while returning travelers from Syria and Iraq, especially returning “pioneers,” may not directly participate in attack plots or travel themselves, they retain the contacts and skills that they attained during their travel. They may attempt to assist the next generation of recruits in reaching those territories, or whichever battlefield overtakes them as the next attractive destination for jihadist travelers.

Pazara’s commander Bajro Ikanovic was not a returnee. Instead, he was a veteran of a homegrown cell of al-Qaeda supporters in Sarajevo. The relationship between Pazara and Ikanovic demonstrated the inverse of the argument that former travelers return home and spur homegrown plots: in this instance, Ikanovic, a former homegrown plotter in Bosnia, traveled overseas to Syria and facilitated the travel of other individuals.

Returning pioneers are likely to be few and far between. Those who do come back to the U.S. may not attempt to participate in attacks themselves, but may encourage others to either commit violent acts or travel overseas to join jihadist groups. From previous mobilizations, there are several relevant examples of both. Christopher Paul, a former participant in the Afghan and Bosnian jihad, was contacted when he returned to Ohio by two men who wanted to conduct a bomb attack at a mall. Like Pippin, Paul shared his expertise with the group in a series of meetings, but authorities arrested all three before the plan came to fruition. Daniel Curtis “Saifullah” Boyd, also a returnee from training camps in Afghanistan and Pakistan, set up another camp in North Carolina, where several individuals who eventually traveled or attempted to travel to join jihadist groups underwent military training.

A more pertinent issue related to pioneers, however, concerns who the next generation of pioneers will be when the next major battlefield opens after Syria and Iraq. The travelers who pick up their first major experience with jihad and jihadist movements in Syria and Iraq and then transition to another campaign will be the Ahmad Abousamras and Abdullah Ramo Pazaras of tomorrow. If the history of Americans participating in jihadist organizations is any indication, the next generation



of pioneers will be crucial to recruiting and inspiring Americans to join alternative battlefields. Whether it will be in the Middle East, North Africa, Southeast Asia, or anywhere else remains to be seen. Like their counterparts who carried their experiences from previous military engagements to Syria and Iraq, these recruits will represent the upper echelon of American jihadists.

The most concerning takeaway from the current generation of pioneers is that it is difficult to determine which of the contemporary travelers may become pioneers in subsequent mobilizations. While Pazara had combat experience, he garnered it in a completely

different ideological context outside the confines of the Salafi-jihadist movement. Abousamra, for various reasons, was unable to join jihadist groups during his first attempts in Pakistan, Yemen, and Iraq. Even those who have attempted but failed to travel to Syria may be successful in traveling to other battlefields and rising the ranks there. Nevertheless, the pioneer category is the foremost example of the linkages and networks between jihadist organizations in different geographic and temporal contexts. It is therefore prudent for analysts, scholars, and law enforcement to place extra attention on which individuals become “pioneers,” and how they manage to do so.