



**COMBATING TERRORISM CENTER**

*at West Point*



## ***The Caliphate's Global Workforce:***

***An Inside Look at the Islamic State's Foreign Fighter Paper Trail***



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The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Combating Terrorism Center, U.S. Military Academy, Department of Defense, or U.S. Government.

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Brian Dodwell, Daniel Milton, and Don Rassler

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## Executive Summary

The purpose of this report is to provide an analysis of over 4,600 unique Islamic State personnel records that were produced by the group primarily between early 2013 and late 2014. The importance of this data for understanding the Islamic State and, in particular, the foreign fighter flow, cannot be overstated. To put it simply, it is the largest cache of primary source documents produced by the Islamic State available in the open-source as of this date.

These particular documents were acquired by NBC News from an Islamic State defector and subsequently provided to the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point (and other entities). This report provides a window into the organization's global workforce, revealing information about foreign fighters' countries of origin, citizenship, points of entry into Syria, marital status, skills and previous occupations, education levels, religious knowledge, fighting role preferences in the group, and previous jihadist experience. In addition to analyzing the data at the macro-level, the report also highlights numerous anecdotes of individual fighters. Taken together, the analysis in this report reveals an organization that is attempting to vet new members, manage talent effectively within the organization, and deal with a diverse pool of recruits. Key findings are found below:

### Diversity

- » The fighters in this dataset present a remarkably diverse population, hailing from over 70 countries, and arriving with diverse skills and experiences.
- » While this diversity would seem to present challenges for those implementing prevention, intervention, and rehabilitation/reintegration programs to counter the threat, the level of fidelity in the data allows us to examine the effects that geographic location and other variables have on trends and profile shifts in foreign fighter flows. This could lead to the development of more nuanced programs that can be tailored to specific countries and regions.

### Education and Employment

- » The fighters in the dataset came from a wide range of educational backgrounds, but as a whole, the group appears to be relatively well-educated when compared to educational levels in their home countries. The second most populated education category was those with some college-level education.
- » The range of occupational experience was equally broad. But the most populated categories were those comprising lower skilled positions. This is an interesting juxtaposition to the educational profile and raises intriguing questions about the possibility that some fighters in this dataset may have been motivated by frustration over failure to achieve expected success in the job market following their education. The unemployment rate of fighters in this dataset, however, was generally no greater than the rate in the general populations of most donor countries, and in many cases lower. More analysis is required to evaluate these issues.

### Prior Experience

- » Approximately 10 percent of the recruits stated that they had previous jihadist experience, primarily in Syria, Libya, and Afghanistan. Many recruits provided details on previous groups with which they had served. Jabhat al-Nusra is one of the most commonly referenced groups that these recruits have left in order to join the Islamic State.

### Preferences of Recruits: Suicide vs. Fighter Roles

- » Only 12 percent of Islamic State recruits expressed a preference for a suicide role over a more conventional fighting role. This is far lower than the 56 percent of recruits who preferred the suicide option in a similar set of foreign fighter records recovered in Sinjar, Iraq, in 2007.
- » A potential explanation for this difference may be the different environments faced by both

organizations. Unlike al-Qa`ida in Iraq, the Islamic State is now tasked with holding and governing a significant amount of territory. This reality has impacts on both the demand and supply side of the foreign fighter equation. On the demand side, the Islamic State is trying to build a functioning military and government. While the Islamic State needs some suicide bombers, it also needs personnel to fill roles like conventional soldiers, sharia officials, police and security, or administrative positions. On the supply side, the group's sales pitch promotes building a pure Islamic society, and that it is succeeding. Thus, many foreigners are presumably travelling to the Islamic State to live, not die – or at least not do so as quickly.

- » Those who had claimed advanced knowledge of sharia (Islamic law) were less likely to express a desire to fill a suicide role than those with limited knowledge.

### **Talent Management**

- » There are clear indicators in the data that the Islamic State was using these forms to “talent scout” and identify individuals with specific educational, professional, or military backgrounds that might prove useful to the group in the future. In numerous cases, Islamic State officials included notes in the forms to highlight these individual skills.
- » This is evidence that the Islamic State has learned lessons from its previous mistakes. In 2008 the Islamic State of Iraq, the precursor to the Islamic State, produced a document that analyzed why it experienced setbacks in the 2006-2007 timeframe in Iraq.<sup>1</sup> One of the group's findings identified the failure of certain emirs in the organization to properly exploit the talents of their fighters, oftentimes tasking them with jobs that did not match their background and expertise. Five years later, the organization appears to have been making a concerted effort to avoid repeating such mistakes.

### **Points of Entry into Syria: Gaining Access to the Islamic State**

- » The main body of fighters in this dataset crossed into Syria at six points, which accounted for over 93 percent of all border crossings in the dataset. Those who gained access to the group through other channels were in the minority, and only a few fighters appear to have gained access via Iraq or Lebanon.

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1 Harmony Document, NMEC-2007-612449, “An Analysis of the State of ISI,” accessible at [ctc.usma.edu](http://ctc.usma.edu).

## Introduction

This report will provide the first in-depth analysis of the large cache of Islamic State foreign fighter records that emerged from inside the so-called Caliphate in early 2016. The Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) was provided the documents by NBC News. The report aims to deliver an initial assessment of the material and several key themes and trends that emerge.

While the phenomenon of individuals traveling to foreign lands to participate in conflict is certainly not new,<sup>1</sup> the conflict in Iraq and Syria stands out due to the number, global scale, and influence of foreign fighters. International media attention and the ability of the fighters to advertise their activity themselves via social media has only enhanced the perceived significance of and widespread interest in this topic.

Numerous attempts have been made to provide some sense of the scale of the foreign fighter flow to Iraq and Syria. Most studies have focused on the number of individuals traveling to join Sunni militant groups fighting against the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria,<sup>2</sup> with a smaller number examining those joining groups on other sides of the conflict, to include Shia militias and Kurdish forces.<sup>3</sup> With the emergence of the Islamic State as the most influential group on the Sunni side of the equation, especially after the June 2014 announcement of its self-declared Caliphate, much of the world's attention turned to this organization as it spread its reach not only across Syria and Iraq, but also into self-declared provinces (*wilayat*) across the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia.

Most attempts to provide an assessment of the number of individuals traveling to Iraq and Syria have been based on official estimates provided by the governments of nations from which individuals traveled, in addition to collection and compilation of publicly available information to include media accounts, court records, and the media output of the militant groups and individual fighters themselves. While many of these studies provide valuable data and analysis regarding the Syria conflict, until recently there was little way of knowing just how accurate these assessments were. A similar challenge existed during the 2003-2011 war in Iraq. The 2007 release by the CTC of approximately 600 al-Qa`ida in Iraq (AQI) personnel records captured in the Iraqi town of Sinjar provided the first assessment of the foreign fighter flow during that conflict that was based on primary source produced by AQI itself.<sup>4</sup>

In early 2016, reports began to circulate about similar caches of personnel records emerging from inside the Islamic State. First, on January 20, Zaman al Wasl, a Syrian opposition news site, stated that it had obtained 2,000 documents produced by the Islamic State's General Border Administration containing personal information of its prospective fighters.<sup>5</sup> On March 8, Zaman al Wasl released further information regarding the documents, including almost 150 sample documents and a summary of the citizenships of the 1,736 unique fighters they identified in their cache.<sup>6</sup>

As many are aware, this Syrian outlet was not the only recipient of a trove of internal Islamic State fighter files. Between March 7 and 10, multiple news outlets reported their own acquisition of seemingly similar, if not identical Islamic State records. In Germany, a Munich-based newspaper, *Süddeut-*

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1 David Malet, *Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identity in Civil Conflicts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

2 Peter Neumann, "Foreign fighter total in Syria/Iraq now exceeds 20,000; surpasses Afghanistan conflict in the 1980s," The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, January 26, 2015; Soufan Group, *Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq* (New York: Soufan Group, 2015).

3 Rebecca Collard, "Meet the Americans on the Front Lines in the Fight Against ISIS," *Time*, 20 January 2015; Roc Morin, "The Western Volunteers Fighting ISIS," *The Atlantic*, January 29, 2016.

4 Brian Fishman and Joseph Felner, *Al-Qa`ida's Foreign Fighters in Iraq* (West Point: Combating Terrorism Center, 2007).

5 "Zaman Al Wasl obtains names of ISIS fighters, nationalities and jihadi backgrounds," Zaman al Wasl, January 20, 2016.

6 "Exclusive: 1736 Documents Reveal ISIS Jihadists Personal Data," Zaman al Wasl, March 8, 2016.

*sche Zeitung*, and NDR and WDR, the public broadcasters, stated they had acquired the documents, and confirmed that German security services also had access to the material.<sup>7</sup> Shortly thereafter, Sky News<sup>8</sup> and NBC News<sup>9</sup> reported that they too had been provided caches of Islamic State personnel records. The latter two media organizations stated that they had acquired the documents from a man that claimed to be a former Islamic State fighter who became disillusioned and stole the records before defecting from the organization.

Shortly after these reports emerged, NBC News contacted the CTC (in addition to other entities) and asked if we would be interested in accessing and analyzing the large number of documents it had received.<sup>10</sup> Given our history analyzing jihadi primary source material as part of the Harmony program and other similar research efforts, the CTC decided to conduct a comprehensive study of this cache of documents, which dwarfs any previously released set of similar material. Although initial reports from other media outlets mentioned the existence of “tens of thousands” of documents and 22,000 fighter names, these totals were revised over time as it became apparent that many of the files were duplicates. NBC News, which never claimed any specific number in its initial reporting, received approximately 11,000 files from the Islamic State defector. After receiving the material, the CTC set to work sorting through the files to determine the real number of unique documents. Significantly, the CTC was able to cross-reference the NBC News documents against a pre-existing repository of similar Islamic State personnel records maintained by the U.S. Department of Defense. This comparison found that approximately 98 percent of the NBC News documents could be corroborated.<sup>11</sup>

Given the significant interest in these documents, the CTC has decided to release this initial product, which provides a first-cut assessment of the data. Given both the size and the challenging nature of the data, a significant amount of work remains to be done in order to fully exploit this material. The CTC will continue to refine the dataset and conduct deeper analysis across the full range of categories outlined below.

## Caveats and Limitations

As with any data of this nature, significant caveats apply. First, there is the source. Despite the fact that the CTC is convinced of the authenticity of the documents, there is always some degree of uncertainty when working with documents of this nature. We have to trust that the information on the forms is accurate and has not been fabricated or manipulated along the way. In addition, we do not know for certain how comprehensive this collection of records is. Is this set part of a larger collection of records during this timeframe, or is it the totality of the records? Was it taken from a regional hub, or from a centralized repository? How representative is it of the totality of the fighters who joined the Islamic State during this timeframe? Despite these outstanding questions, given the number of records and how this number compares with public estimates of foreign fighter flows, it is safe to assume it is sufficient to provide an accurate assessment and understanding of who exactly was joining the group in 2013 and 2014.

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7 Von Georg Heil, Volkmar Kabisch, und Georg Mascolo, “Geheime Liste deutscher IS-Kämpfer aufgetaucht,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, March 8, 2016.

8 Stuart Ramsay, “IS Documents Identify Thousands Of Jihadis,” Sky News, March 9, 2016.

9 Richard Engel, Ben Plessner, and Ammar Cheikh Omar, “Leaked ISIS Personnel Files Paint Picture of Group’s Recruits,” NBC News, March 10, 2016.

10 As a federal entity, the CTC did not enter into any formal agreement with NBC News. The decision for NBC News to share the data and for the CTC to conduct analysis of it was seen by both parties as a mutually beneficial arrangement that is in the best interests of both organizations.

11 Given how close the match was, it is possible, maybe even likely, that those documents that could not be corroborated are in fact in the repository, but could not immediately be found due to the challenging nature of the search.

Second, the size of the cache posed a number of challenges beyond simply the time required to sort through and code this number of documents. The cache was haphazardly organized and contained a large number of duplicates. Of the 11,000 or so documents received by NBC News, approximately 6,700 were duplicates. However, while most were exact copies, in many other cases there were multiple forms for the same person, with some additional data provided in one form that was missing in the other. This made it an immense challenge to pare the data down to the actual list of unique fighters, which we ultimately determined to be 4,188 incoming personnel reported on in-processing forms and spreadsheets, and several hundred names mentioned in other types of documents.<sup>12</sup> In addition, the coding of this data was further complicated by significant variance in how individuals used and filled out these forms, varied and inconsistent spellings of names, the use of real names and *kunyas*, and the inherent challenges associated with translating and transliterating this amount of material from the original Arabic.

While the term foreign fighters is often used in this report to describe the subjects in the dataset, the CTC recognizes that the data contains some recruits from Iraq (36) and Syria (126). It is highly unlikely that these 162 people are the totality of Syrians and Iraqis who joined the group during the timeframe of these documents (2013-2014), and it is not clear why these individuals were registered and why the others were not, or if they were, why their records are not in this cache. Given the small percentage of the total fighters represented in the dataset by those from Syria and Iraq, it is the CTC's determination that the story these documents tell is primarily that of the foreign fighter. To be true to the data, however, we left the fighters from those two countries in. Regarding the Iraqis, given the timeframe (mostly prior to the group's sweep through Iraq in the summer of 2014), and the territory the group held primarily in Syria during this time, one definition of foreign fighters could include Iraqis fighting in Syria. Also, almost all the Iraqis are recorded as having entered Islamic State territory through one of the border crossings along the Turkish-Syrian border, not directly from Iraq, leading to questions about where exactly they were traveling from, Iraq or elsewhere. The Syrians present a more complicated case. Like the Iraqis, approximately 50 were recorded as having entered through the Turkish border, raising similar questions about their origin and route. Another 50 had no point of entry recorded. But only 21 were listed as being local fighters who therefore did not have a point of entry. Again, it is unclear why these local fighters were in this cache with a group that was so predominantly from foreign locales. For the tables and figures below, we have used the term "fighter" instead of "foreign fighter," to be clear, but as stated above, the bulk of the data describes the foreigners in the Islamic State.

For all these reasons, it is important to reiterate that this is an initial look at the data, and the CTC expects that as we continue to examine and refine the work, new information, inconsistencies, and errors will be uncovered, leading to corrections to some of the data reported below. Given the large size of the dataset, however, we are confident that any such errors will not significantly impact the overall findings. Nonetheless, as follow-on products are released, the CTC will update and correct the data contained herein if applicable.<sup>13</sup>

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12 This total number included 15 Americans. Although they were part of the original batch of documents given to NBC News, the CTC did not collect or analyze data on American citizens or residents as part of this report. Therefore, the CTC's dataset is comprised of 4,173 individuals. All subsequent analysis in this report will begin with that total of 4,173.

13 This approach mirrors that used by the CTC back in 2007 and 2008 with the Sinjar records. See Brian Fishman and Joseph Felter, *Al-Qa'ida's Foreign Fighters in Iraq* (West Point: Combating Terrorism Center, 2007); Brian Fishman, Peter Bergen, Joseph Felter, Wahid Brown, and Jacob Shapiro, *Bombers, Bank Accounts, and Bleedout: Al-Qa'ida's Road In and Out of Iraq* (West Point: Combating Terrorism Center, 2008).

## The Data

### Types of Documents

Several different types of files emerged from the large-scale sorting process described above, almost all related to the movement of people into and out of territory controlled by the Islamic State.

**Mujahid Data Forms.** The vast majority of the documents were one-page in-processing forms, titled Mujahid Data,<sup>14</sup> and filled out in Microsoft Powerpoint templates. There were 4,018 unique individuals represented in these forms, along with an additional 155 individuals logged in two Microsoft Excel files that contained almost identical fields as those found in the Powerpoint files. It is not exactly clear whether the forms were filled out by the incoming fighters themselves, or by Islamic State personnel who screened the new arrivals and took down their information. There was a mix of first-person and third-person language used to enter the data, and in some cases such a mix existed within a single form, which suggests that the Islamic State used a mixture of both approaches (i.e. filling some forms out for fighters, possibly by multiple officials, and having some fighters fill out all or some fields on their own).

The in-processing forms were marked in their header with “Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant,” an indication of the timeframe within which these documents were produced, which was generally between early 2013 and late 2014. This time period straddles the declaration of the Caliphate in June 2014, and so were first created when the organization called itself the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. The template was obviously not revised following the June 2014 name change to the Islamic State. The header of the document is also marked with a stamp for the General Border Administration, indicating that these forms were used to collect data on incoming fighters, or *mujahideen*. The footer of the document was also labelled Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, and stamped either Border Official or General Border Administration. Each was also marked Secret by the Islamic State.

Each form contained the following fields:

1. Full name
2. *Kunya* [Nickname / Nom de guerre]
3. Mother's name
4. Blood type
5. Date of birth and citizenship
6. Marital status: [check boxes for] Single, Married, Number of children
7. Address and place of residence
8. Education level
9. Level of sharia expertise: [check boxes for] Advanced Student, Intermediate, Basic
10. Occupation prior to your arrival
11. Countries visited and time spent in each
12. Point of entry and facilitator
13. Do you have a recommendation, and from whom?
14. Date of entry
15. Have you engaged in jihad before, and where?
16. [Do you want to be a] fighter, *istishhadi* [suicide bomber], or *inghimasi* [suicide fighter]?
17. Specialty: [check boxes for] Fighter, Sharia [official], Security [personnel], Administrative
18. Current work location
19. Personal belongings that you deposited

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14 Two templates were used. Both contained the same questions, but there were mild stylistic and grammatical differences in the headers and footers of the documents. For example, some forms were titled Mujahideen Data and others Mujahid Data.

20. Level of understanding [of orders] and obedience
21. Address where [point of contact] can be reached
22. Date and location of death
23. Notes

The Notes field was a particularly interesting one, in that this category was used as a catch-all for additional detail. In most cases, this field appeared to be filled out by an Islamic State official to notate particular items of interest about the prospective fighter, whether that was, for example, to emphasize that the occupation reported by the fighter was of particular interest, or to highlight previous militant groups with which he had experience.

**Exit Records.** The second most common type of document was Microsoft Word documents that compiled records of personnel leaving Islamic State territory. Each document contained information on anywhere from one to 62 individuals who had departed. They were usually, but not always, grouped by the general timeframe in which the individuals had left.

These exit records were generally similar in structure, with some slight variance. The information they collected included:

1. Name
2. Nickname
3. Country
4. Workplace
5. Specialty
6. Name of emir
7. Date of Entry
8. Date of exit
9. Reason for leaving
10. Crossing point\*
11. Personal belongings that you deposited\*
12. Notes

*\*Not all documents contained these fields*

**Miscellaneous.** There were several other types of documents included in the cache. They were:

- A Microsoft Access database that had been set up to store a range of material, but that had, for the most part, not yet been populated.
- A PowerPoint presentation with a small number of names and contact information for their family members to be contacted in the case that information about the fighter needed to be conveyed.
- A set of audio files containing recitations of Quranic verses
- An assortment of less detailed documents containing anywhere from simple lists of *kunyas* to only slightly more detailed lists of names, *kunyas*, dates, crossing points, and belongings logged.

Type of Document	Number
Mujahid Data form (In-Processing)	4018 files, one fighter per form
Excel sheet (In-Processing)	2 files, 155 individuals entered
Exit Records	31 files, 431 individuals
Miscellaneous	15 files

### Number and Timespan of Documents

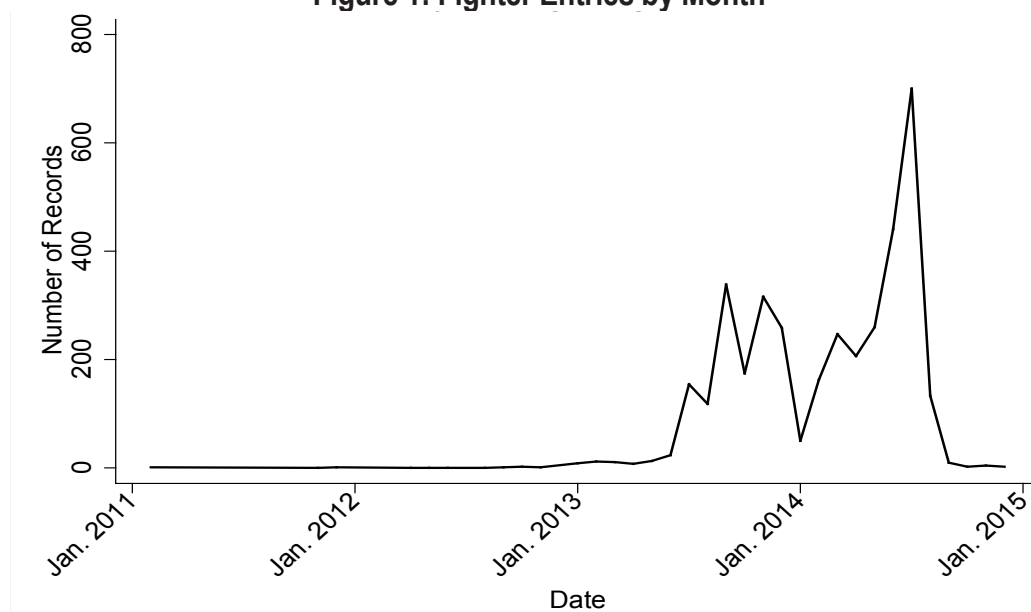
The total number of records in this dataset represent by far the highest number of primary source documents of their kind ever uncovered. More importantly, they provide solid data on a significant percentage of the total number of individuals who are believed to have travelled to Syria and/or Iraq to fight. Public estimates of that total figure have now exceeded 30,000, meaning this cache represents approximately 15 percent of that total.

These documents, however, came from a specific window of time. The earliest entry is recorded as having occurred in early 2011. The early entry dates are sparse, and the entries do not markedly increase in frequency until July 2013. We cannot know for sure the significance of this date, although it is interestingly close to the date in April 2013 when Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared the creation of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Certainly this specific form would not have been used any earlier given the use of that new group name in the document template. We can only assume that the pre-April 2013 entrants filled out the form retroactively, even though they had been in the theater for some time. The latest entry recorded in the documents is in December 2014, although similar to the front-end of the time window, the entries significantly decrease in September 2014, again, interestingly close to the June 2014 declaration of the Caliphate and the name change to the Islamic State. We have no real way of knowing if this decline represents an actual decrease or just a bureaucratic issue resulting in the decline in use of this form. Given these dynamics, these records are most accurately described as the "ISIL Files,"<sup>15</sup> as they align closely with the time period when the Islamic State used that name.

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15 Despite this, the report will continue to use the organization's current name, the Islamic State, for the sake of consistency.

Figure 1: Fighter Entries by Month



To help understand how significant these documents are, it is appropriate to compare the total number of fighters in this cache to estimates of foreign fighter flows from that same general time period as opposed to the totality of the conflict. By the end of 2014, estimates of the overall flow to the theater were in the 20,000 range,<sup>16</sup> whereas estimates in early- to mid-2013 were in the 5,000 range,<sup>17</sup> putting the estimated total number of foreign fighters arriving during the time span of these documents at around 15,000. This would mean the files provide information on approximately 31 percent of those who entered the conflict zone at this time. Of course, these larger numbers are estimates for those who joined any militant group in Syria, not just the Islamic State. If these documents are the totality of applicants to the group in this timeframe, this means that at least 30 percent of those arriving to fight in Syria at this time were joining the Islamic State. If these documents are only one portion of the group's records for this time period, that percentage is even higher.

## Assessment of the Data

This section provides a detailed presentation of the data contained in the forms. Generally speaking, this section is organized around the key questions and fields represented in the entry forms. The section also addresses other key topics, such as the organizational affiliations fighters had prior to joining the Islamic State. In addition, it also examines the smaller but equally intriguing set of exit records.

Overall, the data suggests remarkable diversity amongst the Islamic State's recruits. As detailed below, not only do these individuals come from a wide range of geographic locations, as most would have expected, but their diversity extends into their age, educational background, employment history, and most other facets of their lives.

<sup>16</sup> Neumann.

<sup>17</sup> Aaron Y. Zelin, "ICSR Insight: European Foreign Fighters in Syria," The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, April 2, 2013.

**Country/Citizenship**

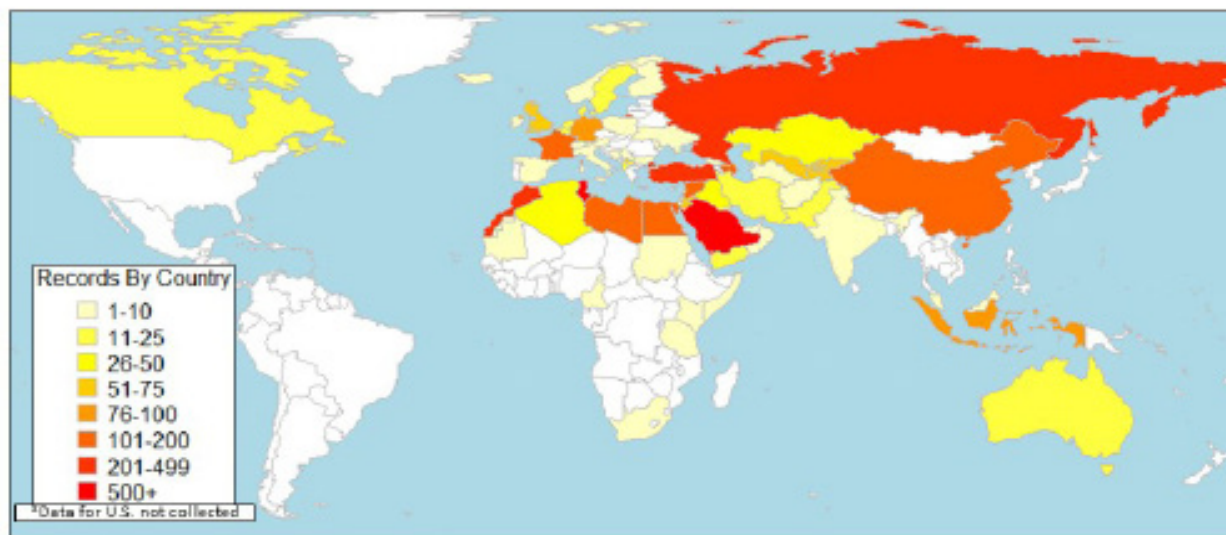
The nationalities of Islamic State fighters in this data is one of the variables of most interest. However, the question of fighter nationality is not straightforward, as it can be thought of in two ways given the data available in these records. The first is to assume that fighter nationality is the same as fighter citizenship, which was one of the fields in the in-processing forms. The limitation to this approach is that citizenship may differ from where the fighter actually lived before coming to Iraq and Syria. For instance, focusing on citizenship would mean that a Tunisia citizen who lived in France for three years before traveling to Iraq and Syria would be considered as being from Tunisia, despite the fact that the relevant point of departure was France. The other downside to this approach is the response rate of fighters in answering the citizenship question on the form. Of the 4,173 records that were filled out, only 3,244 indicated a citizenship. The full breakdown of records by citizenship appears in Table 1.

Table 1: Fighter Records by Citizenship Response

Citizenship	Records (#)	Fighters Per Million Citizens	Citizenship	Records (#)	Fighters Per Million Citizens
Unknown	935		Bosnia and Herzegovina	7	1.83
Saudi Arabia	579	18.75	Sweden	6	0.62
Tunisia	559	50.83	Netherlands	5	0.30
Morocco	240	7.08	Qatar	4	1.84
Turkey	212	2.79	Malaysia	4	0.13
Egypt	151	1.69	Spain	4	0.09
Russia	141	0.98	United Arab Emirates	4	0.44
China	138	0.10	Finland	3	0.55
Syria	120	5.42	Kenya	3	0.07
Azerbaijan	107	11.22	Portugal	3	0.29
Libya	87	13.90	Serbia	3	0.42
Indonesia	76	0.30	Bangladesh	3	0.02
Uzbekistan	72	2.34	Switzerland	2	0.24
Tajikistan	71	8.56	Trinidad and Tobago	2	1.48
Jordan	54	8.17	Eritrea	2	0.39
France	49	0.74	Mauritania	2	0.50
Kyrgyzstan	47	8.06	Oman	2	0.47
Albania	42	14.51	Ukraine	2	0.04
Algeria	39	1.00	Ethiopia	2	0.02
Germany	38	0.47	Norway	2	0.39
Kosovo	32	17.54	Georgia	2	0.44
Yemen	31	1.18	Senegal	2	0.14
Lebanon	30	6.60	Austria	1	0.12
Palestine	30	6.99	Cambodia	1	0.07
Iraq	29	0.83	Mali	1	0.06
United Kingdom	26	0.40	Sri Lanka	1	0.05
Kazakhstan	26	1.50	Moldova	1	0.28
Bahrain	23	16.89	Zimbabwe	1	0.07
Kuwait	18	4.80	Brazil	1	0.00
Pakistan	12	0.06	Tanzania	1	0.02
Australia	11	0.47	Korea	1	0.02
Iran	10	0.13	Niger	1	0.05
Sudan	10	0.25	Gabon	1	0.59
Afghanistan	10	0.32	South Africa	1	0.02
Macedonia	9	4.34	Armenia	1	0.33
Belgium	9	0.80	India	1	0.00
Denmark	8	1.42	Comoros	1	1.30
Somalia	8	0.76	Bulgaria	1	0.14
Canada	7	0.20	Benin	1	0.09

The second way of thinking about nationality is to focus on the fighter's last country of residence. In this case, the place a fighter considers to be their home or residence become the proxy for nationality. Given the focus of this report being on foreign fighters, an emphasis on from what country each person is actually traveling, as opposed to what citizenships they maintain, is more applicable and useful for understanding where they may have radicalized or mobilized, as well as where they may return to should they depart the conflict zone.<sup>18</sup> Individuals who consider their home to be Canada or Tunisia may be more likely to return to those places upon leaving Iraq and Syria, regardless of their citizenship status. In addition, the organization itself may see residence as important data to collect when thinking about future overseas operations. Finally, fighters and border bureaucrats paid more attention to collecting information on residence. Of the 4,173 records that were filled out, a total of 4,000 indicated residence. While we discuss both citizenship and residence in this section, for all sections moving forward, we rely on the residence data for comparisons and data analysis.<sup>19</sup> Figure 2 provides a heat map showing the countries of residence from the dataset. Table 2 contains the complete list of records by country of residence.

**Figure 2: Fighter Records by Residence Response**



18 It is important to note that not all who depart the conflict zone go home (some choose not to out of fear of government response, or to travel to a different conflict zone), and not all that go home do so with violent intent.

19 One possible way to fully leverage the information would be to combine both citizenship, country of residence, and the fighter's nickname (which often contain geographic references) into a new nationality indicator. While this may be done in the future, we opted to avoid using nicknames to guess nationality because of the fact that geographic references found in nicknames can often be misleading and at times are not based on actual citizenship or residence, but a family's heritage or another characteristic.

Table 2: Fighter Records by Residence Response

Residence	Records (#)	Fighters Per Million Citizens	Residence	Records (#)	Fighters Per Million Citizens
Saudi Arabia	797	25.80	Sweden	14	1.44
Tunisia	640	58.20	Australia	13	0.55
Morocco	260	7.66	Netherlands	13	0.77
Turkey	244	3.21	Qatar	10	4.60
Russia	210	1.46	Spain	10	0.22
Egypt	194	2.17	United Arab Emirates	8	0.88
Unknown	173		India	7	0.01
China	167	0.12	Sudan	7	0.18
France	128	1.93	Turkmenistan	7	1.32
Syria	126	5.69	Malaysia	6	0.20
Azerbaijan	122	12.79	Bosnia and Herzegovina	5	1.31
Libya	106	16.94	Finland	5	0.92
Germany	80	0.99	Georgia	5	1.11
Indonesia	79	0.31	Afghanistan	4	0.13
Tajikistan	66	7.96	Israel	4	0.49
Kyrgyzstan	65	11.14	Ukraine	4	0.09
Uzbekistan	63	2.05	Austria	3	0.35
Jordan	57	8.63	South Africa	3	0.06
United Kingdom	57	0.88	Switzerland	3	0.37
Kosovo	52	28.51	Kenya	2	0.04
Iraq	36	1.03	Norway	2	0.39
Kazakhstan	35	2.02	Oman	2	0.47
Lebanon	33	7.26	Serbia	2	0.28
Algeria	29	0.74	Tanzania	2	0.04
Bahrain	28	20.56	Trinidad and Tobago	2	1.48
Belgium	25	2.23	Bulgaria	1	0.14
Kuwait	25	6.66	Cameroon	1	0.04
Yemen	25	0.95	Iceland	1	3.05
Palestine	19	4.42	Ireland	1	0.22
Albania	18	6.22	Italy	1	0.02
Canada	17	0.48	Mauritania	1	0.25
Iran	17	0.22	Moldova	1	0.28
Macedonia	16	7.71	Poland	1	0.03
Pakistan	15	0.08	Somalia	1	0.10
Denmark	14	2.48	Western Sahara	1	

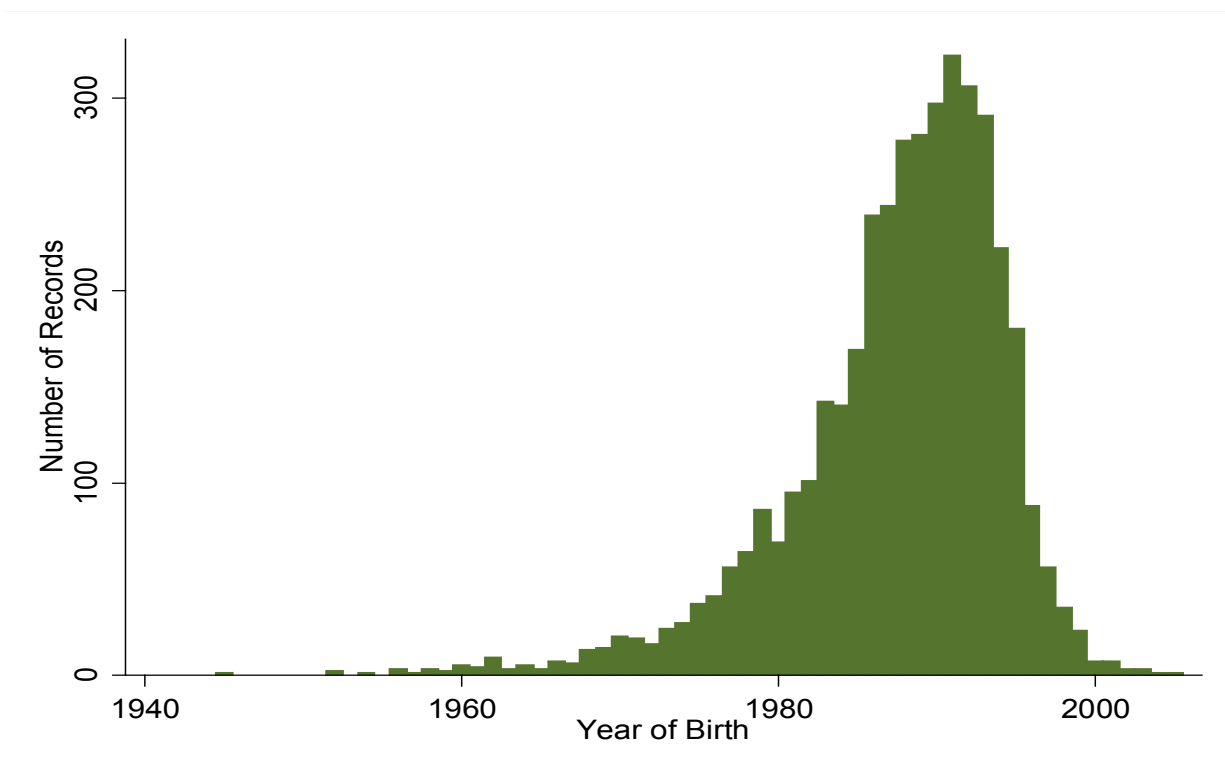
One of the interesting findings in the original Sinjar foreign fighter data from 2007 came about by scaling the number of records by the source country's population; in other words, instead of focusing on the absolute number of records, take into account that 10 records from a country of 1 million may be just as intriguing as 100 records from a country of 10 million. The third column in both Table 1 and Table 2 does this by dividing the number of records by the overall population of the source country and then multiplying this figure by 1,000,000. The result is the number of foreign fighters coming from each country for each million citizens in that country. This calculation provides one way of comparing the relative number of fighters coming from each country.

Examining these figures yields some interesting insights. Saudi Arabia, while accounting for the largest number of records, is not the largest contributor of records on a per capita basis. Depending on the nationality measure used, Tunisia and Kosovo account for a larger number of the records in our database. One point of emphasis is that these numbers should not be confused as hard estimates of the overall contribution of fighters to the conflict in Syria from these countries. As discussed above, these numbers are limited to Islamic State fighters and to a specific window of time.

### Age

The average year of birth across the dataset was 1987, making the average prospective fighter 26-27 years old when he filled out the Islamic State's form. This average is more or less in line with the assumptions and estimates offered in the wide variety of public estimates of foreign fighter age. Those who joined AQI, as the Sinjar records indicate that on average those who joined AQI were between 24-25 years old. The overall distribution of ages of fighters in the Islamic State cache appears in Figure 3.

**Figure 3: Average Year of Birth of Fighters**



More interesting than the average age, however, is the wide range of ages and, more specifically, those at the extremes of this range. The oldest person in the dataset was 'Abd-al-'Aziz al-Kyrgyzi, a resident of Kyrgyzstan who was born in 1945 and was married with five children. He entered Syria via Jarabulus on July 31, 2014 and aspired to be a fighter (i.e. not a suicide bomber/fighter). There are 12 individuals born in the 1950s in the set, two of whom were from France. Not surprisingly, this group demonstrated relatively significant professional experience, to include multiple engineers, teachers, business owners, and a government employee (from Saudi Arabia). One in this group had previous jihadist experience fighting in Afghanistan (he was not specific regarding the date of that experience). One of the French citizens in this older group had fought in Mali. Just outside this group is an Egyptian born in 1960 who stated that he had participated in the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan between 1987 and 1989.

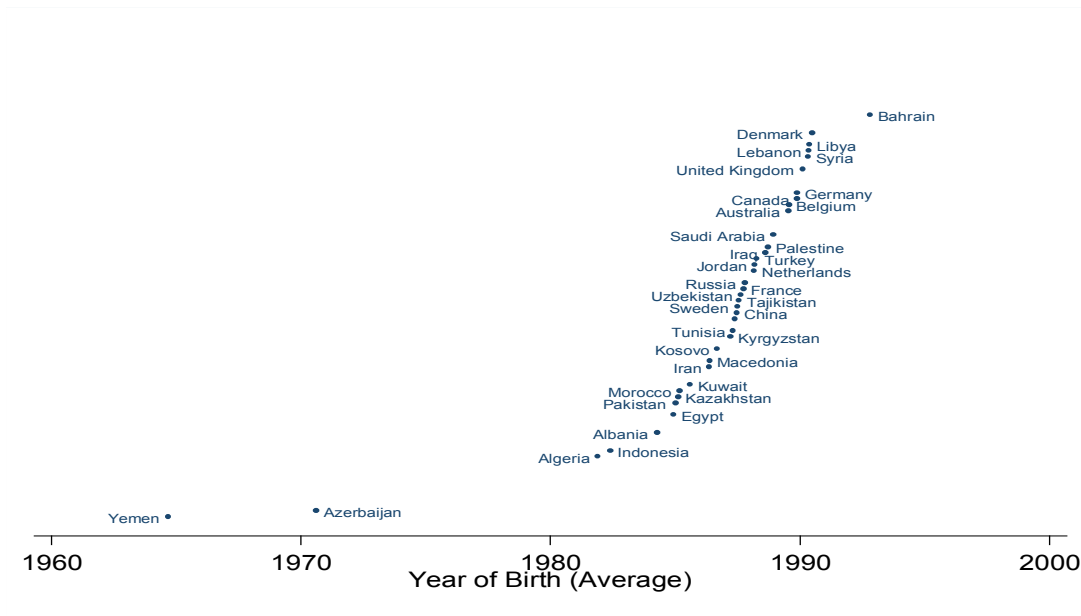
At the other end of the spectrum are the approximately 400 prospective fighters under the age of 18, with 41 of those being 15 or younger when they arrived. There are several fascinating stories in this group. Of particular note are two children, presumably brothers, who arrived in Tal Abyad, Syria on July 4, 2014, from Tashkent, Uzbekistan. They were 14 and 12 years old when they arrived, and were listed as primary school students. Next to both it is annotated that they are children and are going to a camp, and after the camp they are to be returned to their father, who is known to the organization. In this particular case, the children appear to be preparing for roles as fighters in the future, not the present, although the number of other minors present in the dataset reinforce what is already known about the Islamic State's active use of children in violent capacities.<sup>20</sup>

While the age range of these fighters is interesting, one relevant consideration for countering violent extremism may be the way that the foreign fighter population differs from one country to the next. For example, if the age of the group of fighters leaving from one country varies greatly from the average, then the possibility exists that the underlying motivations or networks producing these fighters differ from country to country. To assess whether the average age differed from country to country, the average age of fighters from each country was calculated for countries with more than 10 records. Figure 4 below displays the results of this analysis.

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20 Mia Bloom, John Horgan, and Charlie Winter, "Depictions of Children and Youth in the Islamic State's Martyrdom Propaganda, 2015-2016," *CTC Sentinel* 9:2 (February 2016).

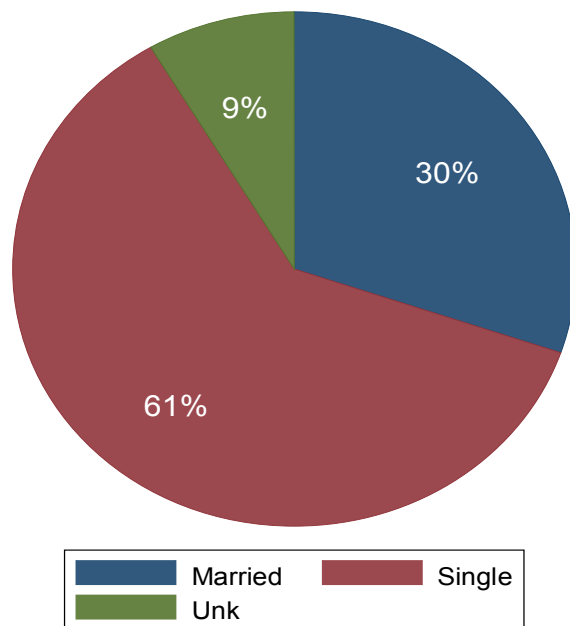
Figure 4: Average Year of Birth of Fighters by Country



Each of the dots in Figure 4 represents the average age of the foreign fighters from a given country. The variation is both interesting and unanticipated. Yemen (25 entries), on the far left of the graph, has an average age that is over 25 years different than that of Bahrain (28 entries), on the extreme right of the graph. Another finding that sticks out from this graph is that it appears that the average age of Western fighters is lower than that of non-Westerners. This suggests the need for tailored and nuanced prevention, intervention, and rehabilitation/reintegration programs to deal with the fact that the underlying population seems to differ across countries.

**Other Personal Data**

A variety of other personal data was provided in the forms, much of it not relevant to any broader analysis. For example, the individuals were asked their blood type, and other than the one prospective fighter who listed his blood type as “Muslim,” there is little to report from this category.

**Figure 5: Marital Status of Fighters**

Of some interest, however, is marital status. As seen in Figure 5, 61 percent of individuals in the dataset stated that they were single, 30 percent were married, and 8 percent did not respond. Of those that were married, it seems apparent that some either had been married multiple times or had multiple wives. One form noted the number (5) next to the checkbox indicating that the fighter was married. Not represented in Figure 5 are six individuals that said they were divorced or separated. In addition, 892 people said they had at least one child, with 4 individuals indicating that they had a total of 9 children. The entire number of children indicated by the 892 individuals who filled out this part of the form is 2,171, which indicates an average of 2.43 children per individual who indicated that they had at least one child.

Taken together, these numbers offer an interesting counterpoint to the conventional wisdom that foreign fighters are loners and social outcasts who are not leaving behind anything significant to go fight. To be clear, the fact that a large number of fighters are leaving behind spouses and families does not necessarily overturn that perspective. What it does suggest, however, is that there may be another type of prospective fighter: one who finds the narrative of the caliphate so compelling that it overcomes even significant and important social commitments to join the Islamic State.

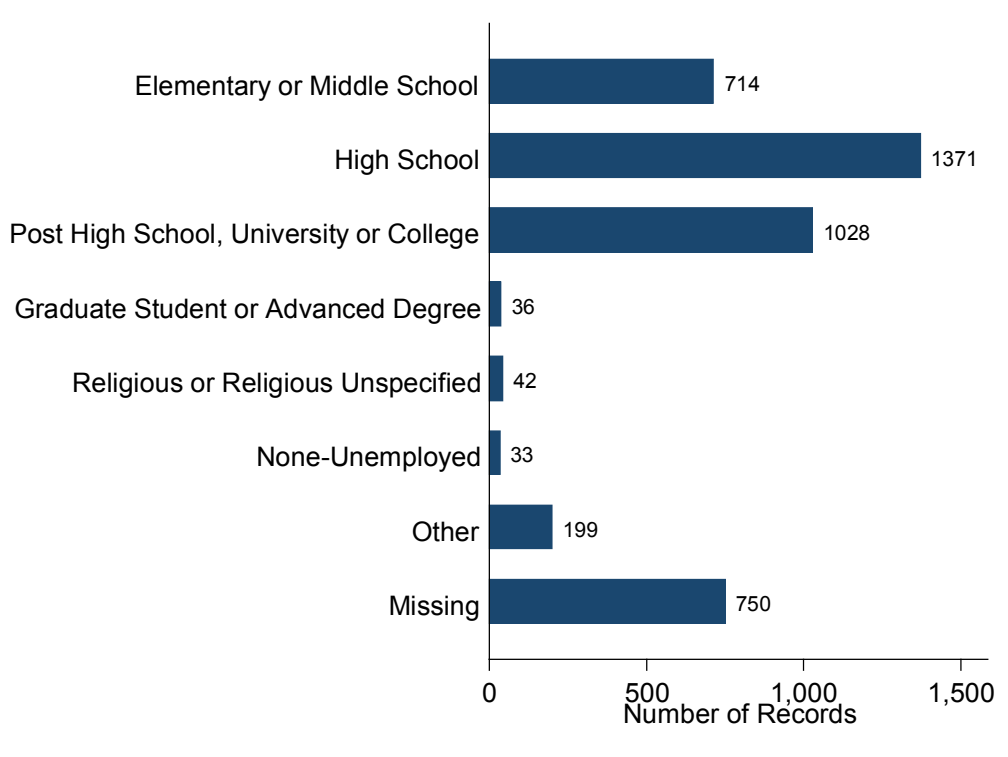
One final observation based on this data is that, while a focus on the foreign fighter is important from a CVE perspective, it is also the case that, particularly in countries that have experienced large numbers of fighters leaving to fight in Iraq and Syria, there is a neglected cost that is paid by the spouses and children who have lost their primary means of support. Understanding the cascading social, economic, and psychological effects on those left behind in the wake of foreign fighter departure is an important part of dealing with the overall phenomenon.

### Education Level

The question about level of education led to a wide variety of responses, ranging from “None” to PhDs, medical degrees, MBAs, and a “Certificate from Cambridge.” Given that the responses were haphazard in terms of how people reported their education (e.g. some listed a specific grade level while others made more general statements like “High School” or “Middle School”), the CTC cre-

ated eight distinct categories for education and coded the entries accordingly. The categories are listed below in Figure 6.<sup>21</sup>

**Figure 6: Education Level of Fighters**



As Figure 6 indicates, there is a relatively even distribution across the three “middle” categories, with the plurality of individuals reporting a high school education. It is interesting that the group seems overall to be generally well educated, especially when compared to United Nations data on the average years of schooling in the countries in the dataset,<sup>22</sup> with the second most populated category being those with some college-level work (30 percent of the total who responded – the missing category was excluded from this calculation). A very small number reported graduate work or advanced degrees,<sup>23</sup> and at the other end of the spectrum an equally small number reported no formal education. We did code a category for religious schooling, and this category was reserved for those who specifically said

21 Given the inconsistent nature of the original entries, a number of judgment calls had to be made. When numbered grade levels were given, we converted those into a category based on where that grade number is situated in the U.S. school system. We recognize that these levels do not line up country to country, but it was the most straightforward way to arrive at some sort of standardization, short of analyzing the educational systems of each country in the dataset.

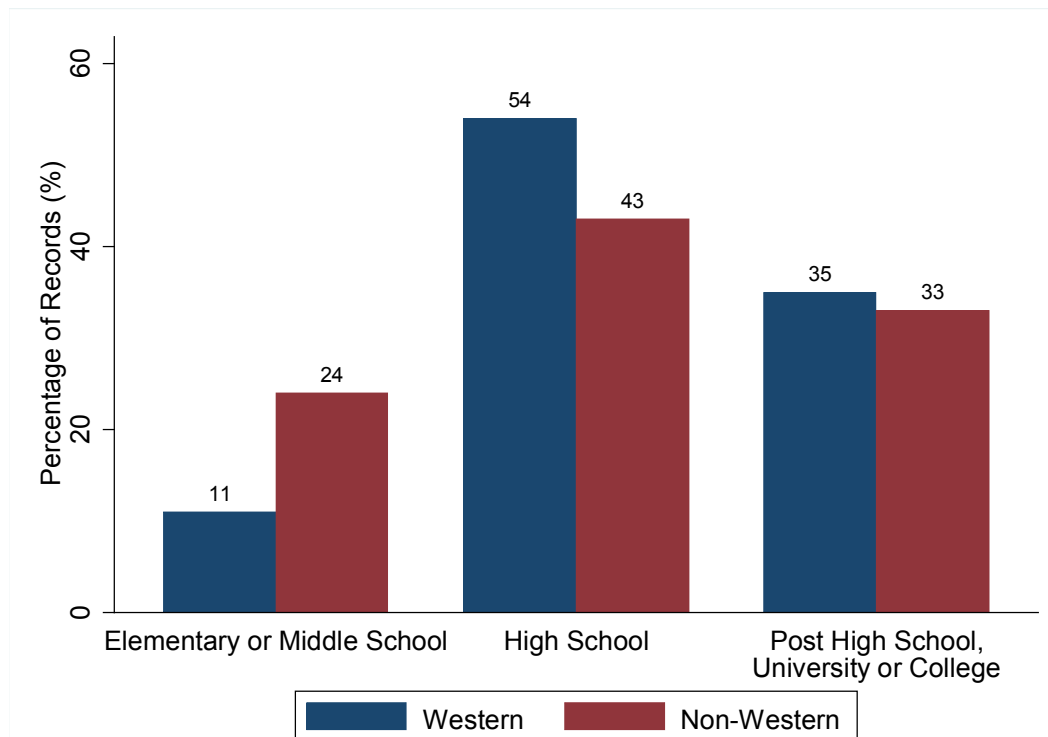
22 For example, the average years of schooling in 2013 for the top five countries in the dataset are: Saudi Arabia: 8.7; Tunisia: 6.5; Morocco: 4.4; Turkey: 7.6; Russia: 11.7. United Nations Development Programme Human Development Reports, “Mean Years of Schooling (of Adults),” United Nations.

23 Advanced degrees included: Doctorate in Sharia, PhD (not complete) in Economic and Development Science, Master’s in political science, Master’s in mechanical engineering, PhD in English language, Master’s in law, medical school, Master’s in accounting, Master’s in management, Master’s in finance, law school, Faculty of Pharmacy, Master’s in industrial media, Master’s in comparative jurisprudence and Sharia jurisprudence, Master’s in Islamic history, Master’s in commercial engineering, Master’s in Business Administration, Master’s in geology, Master’s in economics, PhD in computer science, Master’s in chemical engineering, PhD in physiology and agriculture, and PhD in teaching.

they attended a religious institution like a *madrasa*. The number in this category was small (1.2 percent of those who responded). However, there were a number of additional individuals (119) who reported that they studied religion or sharia at a college or other school. These were not coded in the Religious category because the form did not explicitly state the studies were at a religious institution, but they are indicative of interest in religion, and potential advanced knowledge.

Another interesting finding in relation to the educational data is that the educational level appears to differ broadly contingent on the source country of the fighters. To illustrate this point, the data were broken down broadly into two types of source countries: Western and Non-Western.<sup>24</sup> A comparison among Western and Non-Western countries was then done by the three most frequent educational categories: Elementary or Middle School, High School, and Post High School, University or College. Among those prospective fighters who filled out at least one of these educational categories, there were 253 fighters categorized as Western and 2,860 categorized as Non-Western. The results of this comparison appear in Figure 7.

**Figure 7: Breakdown of Top Three Education Categories by Western vs. Non-Western**



There clearly appear to be differences in the underlying educational profile of Western and Non-Western prospective Islamic State foreign fighters. However, it is surprising to note where this difference occurs and where it does not. For example, there appears to be very little difference when it comes to those possessing an educational level categorized as Post High School. A slightly greater proportion of Western Islamic State fighters possessed a Post High School educational level, but one may have expected to see a greater difference. Where the largest difference appears between these two groups is

<sup>24</sup> Countries of Residence labelled as Western include: Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, "Europe" (marked by one individual), Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom.

in their pre-university education. While approximately two-thirds of each group have a High School education or less, the Non-Western contingent has a much larger proportion of fighters indicating only an elementary or middle school education as compared to the Western contingent.

Finally, it is of particular note that the Islamic State officials who collected this information used the content of these forms to conduct "talent scouting." In the notes section of the form, officials would often note specific aspects of the background of the entrant in question as being of particular interest to the Islamic State. One example from the education field was the prospective fighter who stated that he had a Master's degree in chemical engineering. This 28-year-old listed dual residences in Munich, Germany and near Tunis, Tunisia. He had been a student when he left Germany, where he had lived for seven years. In the notes section, an official had written, "Important \*\* he has experience in chemistry." While it is unclear from this data whether any of these individuals were specifically recruited for their academic backgrounds, at a minimum the Islamic State was using this form to identify individuals who showed up with skills that could be of significant use to the organization.

This talent scouting is evidence of the Islamic State having learned lessons from previous failures in this area. In 2008, the Islamic State of Iraq produced a document that highlighted the difficulty it had in talent scouting.<sup>25</sup> The document was essentially an analysis of why the group experienced setbacks during 2006-2007 in Iraq. One of their findings was that certain emirs in the organization were not putting the talents of their fighters to the best use, often tasking them with jobs that did not match their background and expertise. One such example that appeared in this document was that of a foreign fighter from Italy who was apparently fit and strong, had a background in the IT field, and was proficient in many languages. This foreign fighter also had connections with excellent currency counterfeiters, and had offered his services in this area. However, his emir never made use of his talents and the fighter, after having languished in idleness for months and only participated in one raid (in which he was wounded), decided to leave the Islamic State of Iraq. As he was leaving, another emir held him overnight in a village against the fighter's desire, ultimately leading to his death after American and Iraqi security forces converged on the village. Five years later, the organization appears to have been making a concerted effort not to repeat such mistakes.

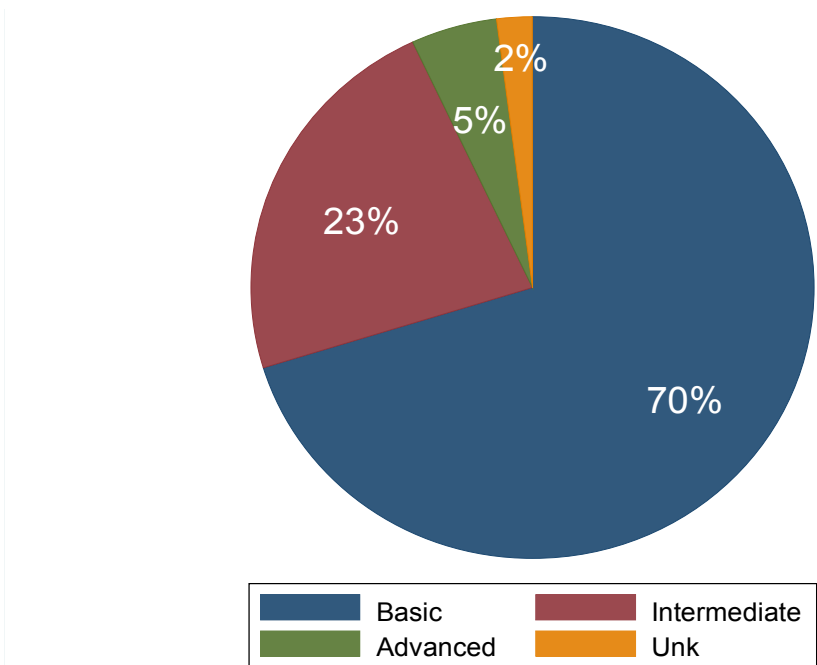
### **Sharia/Islamic Law**

Beyond their basic education level, recruits were asked to self-report their level of sharia expertise, and were given three options to choose from: Advanced Student, Intermediate, or Basic. 70 percent stated that they had only a basic level of sharia expertise. Only 5 percent reported they had an advance understanding.

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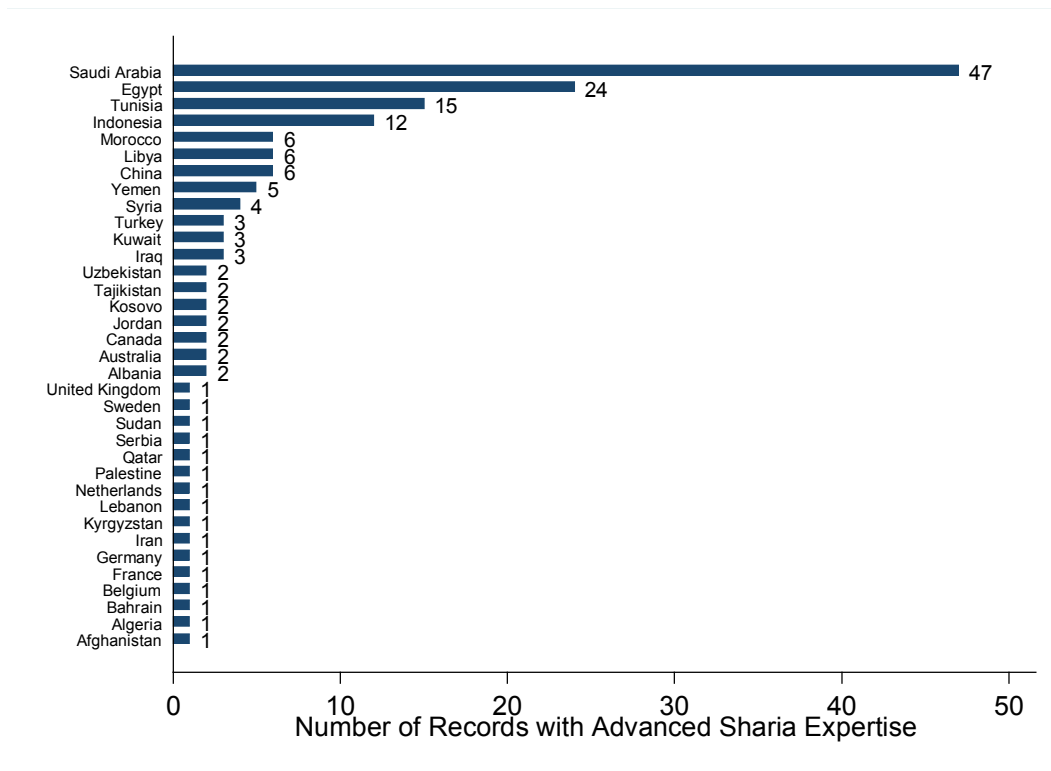
25 Harmony Document, NMEC-2007-612449, "An Analysis of the State of ISI," accessible at [ctc.usma.edu](http://ctc.usma.edu).

Figure 8: Level of Sharia Expertise



Despite the fact that only a small fraction of potential fighters self-certify as advanced in terms of their Sharia expertise, those who claim this advanced knowledge do come from a relatively small number of countries. Despite having 70 countries in the dataset, only 35 countries had at least one individual who claimed advanced expertise in Sharia. Figure 9 shows the breakdown of where these individuals come from in terms of country of residence.

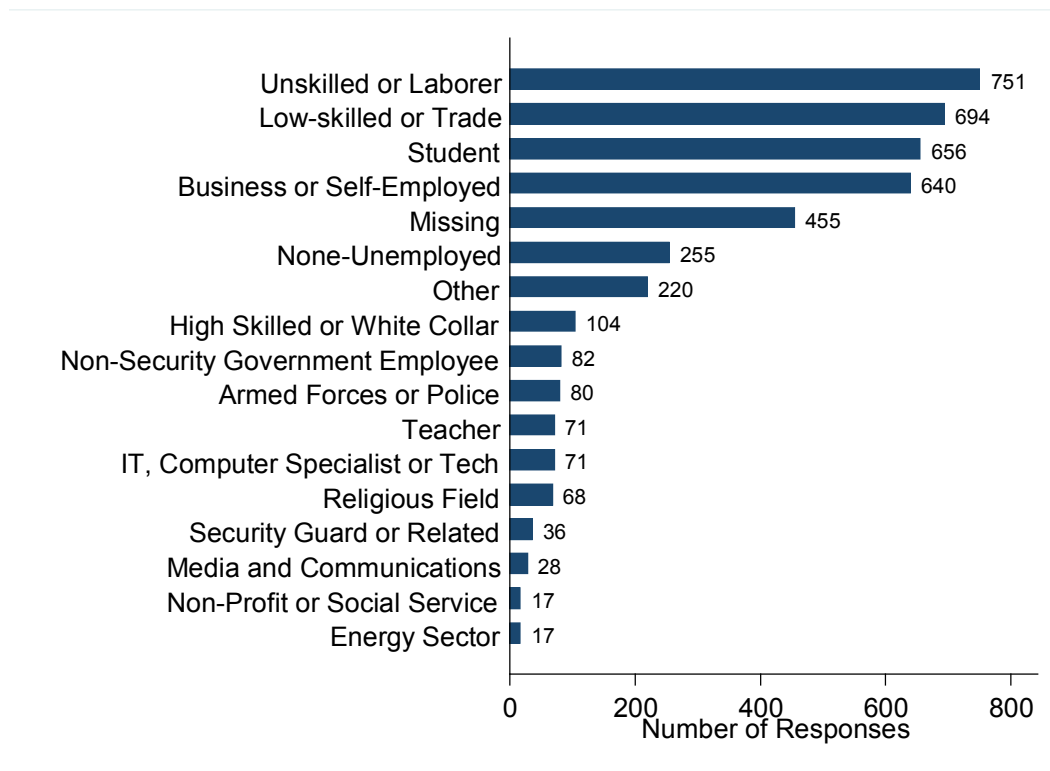
Figure 9: Individuals with Advanced Sharia Knowledge by Country



**Prior Occupation**

Answers to the question regarding Occupation Prior to Arrival were quite interesting, but like the educational field there was no consistency in how they were reported. Therefore, the CTC created 17 categories of employment and sorted the entries into these categories. It is important to note an individual could be coded as having multiple positions depending on the response. Two examples will illustrate this challenge. One fighter’s form contained the following text in the occupational field: “Laying tiles; served in the army for a year and half, sniper.” He was coded in the first instance as “Unskilled or Laborer” and in the second instance as “Armed Forces or Police.” In other cases, the specific skill a fighter had was worth highlighting. One response was that the fighter engaged in “Maintenance of gas and oil pipes.” The actual job itself was coded “Low-skilled or Trade” while the nature of the work was highlighted as “Energy Sector.” The number of cases where such coding occurred was small (approximately 72 cases). Figure 10 illustrates the breakdown of fighters across these categories.

Figure 10: Number of Responses by Occupation Type



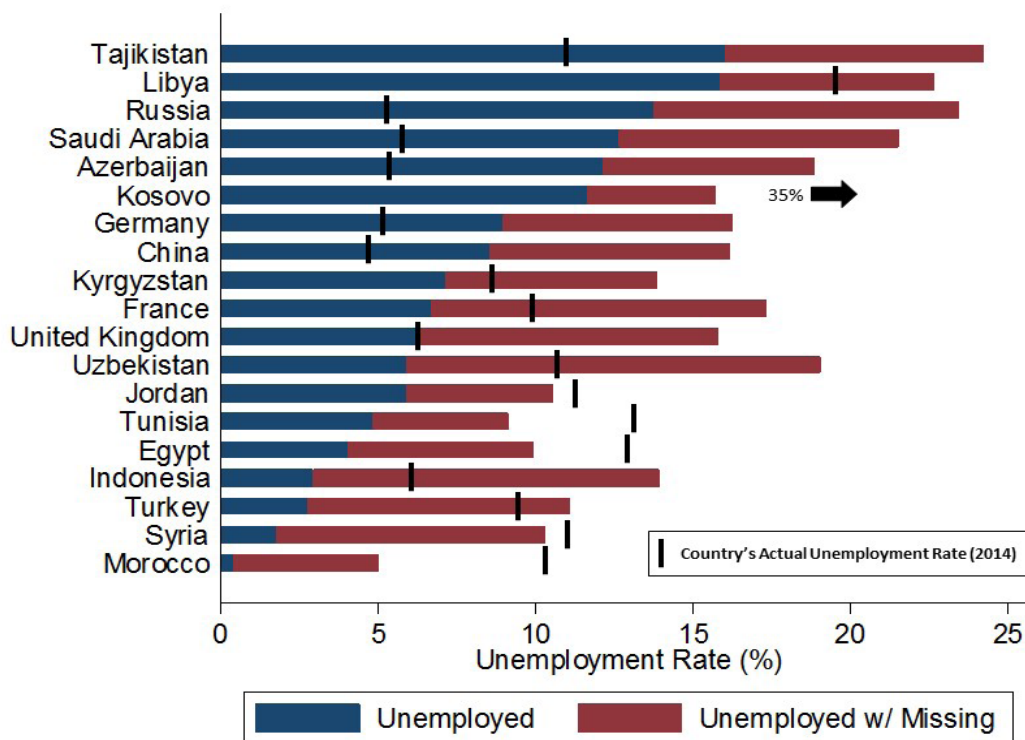
Interestingly, the occupational background of Islamic State recruits seems to be centered on lower skilled positions. Of those who actually responded to the question, four categories stood out well above the rest. The plurality of individuals that responded to the question (20 percent) fell into the unskilled/laborer category, with the second most populated category being low-skilled/trade (18 percent). Business/self-employed represented 17 percent of those who responded to this question. This category comprised a range of occupations. While it did contain many individuals with what appeared to be more prosperous careers (e.g. factory owner, company director, etc), it also included many lower level employees and a large number of ambiguous career fields (e.g. trader, self-employed, vendor, freelance). The final category in this group is student, which was the third most populated field (17 percent). The prevalence of students is not surprising given previous research that has explored the connection between education and involvement in radical organizations.<sup>26</sup>

Of this group of top four categories, two categories could be classified as appearing at the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum, one comprises a mix, and the other is the students who might possess promise, but have generally yet to enter the workforce. Interestingly, the next category after these four is the unemployed at 7 percent. It is worth noting that the number increases to 11 percent if all of the “missing” are interpreted and recoded as unemployed. Although, our belief is that this would be a very liberal interpretation given the large number and seemingly arbitrary nature of missing responses across all the fields, meaning there is little reason to assume that a missing response in this field means

26 Ethan Bueno de Mesquita, “The Quality of Terror,” *American Journal of Political Science* 49, no. 3 (July 2005), 515-530; Bruce Hoffman, “Today’s Highly Educated Terrorists,” *National Interest*, 15 September 2015; Diego Gambetta and Steffen Hertog, *Engineers of Jihad: The Curious Connection between Violent Extremism and Education* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

the person was unemployed. Regardless, depending on how one looks at this data, the unemployment rate among this population was as low as 7 percent and as high as 11. As a point of reference, the European Union unemployment rate for 2014 was 10.2 percent, and was 22.2 percent for those under the age of 25-years-old.<sup>27</sup> In sum, the unemployment rate within this dataset is not particularly high. The average recruit either was a student or had a job, just not a particularly high-paying one.

Figure 11: Unemployment Rate of Fighters by Country



Moving beyond the general unemployment rate of the overall pool of fighters, there is considerable variation in terms of the unemployment by country of residence of the foreign fighters in the dataset. Figure 11 contains a breakdown of the unemployment rate by country of residence for those countries with more than 50 records in the dataset.<sup>28</sup> The blue portion of the bar that appears next to each country is the unemployment rate excluding the missing records. Interestingly, for 12 of these 19 countries, the unemployment rate for the fighters is lower than that of their home country. (The red bar reflects the more liberal reading of the data in which all missing records are changed to the unemployed column. Under this interpretation 6 of the 19 countries have lower rates for fighters.)

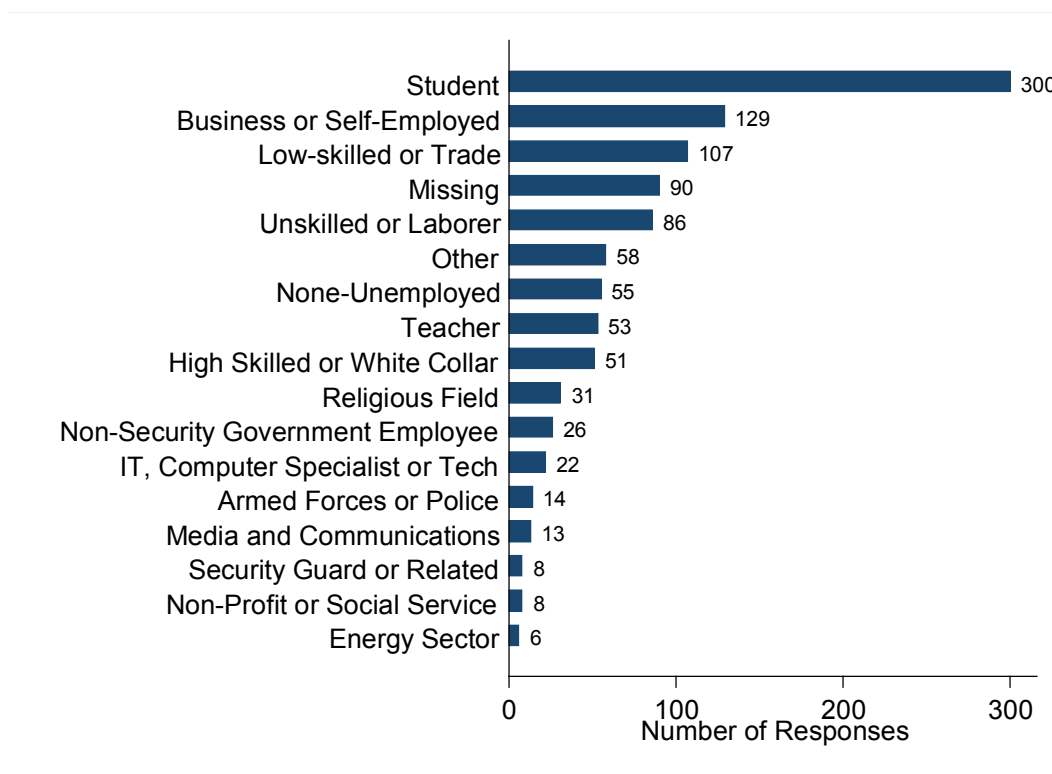
Another interesting dynamic to explore is the relation between education levels and occupation. As stated above, the data indicates that these fighters are relatively well educated. But only a small percentage were in the occupation categories in which one might expect to find those with college-level education, such as High-Skilled or White Collar, Government, Teacher, IT, and Media/Communications. This raises intriguing questions about the possibility that some in this dataset may have been

27 Eurostat, "Unemployment Statistics – A Detailed Look at 2014," European Union, February 2016.

28 World Bank, "World Development Indicators – 2014," April 2016.

motivated by frustration over failure to achieve expected success in the job market following their education. Relative deprivation is a well-covered theory of political violence.<sup>29</sup> More analysis of this data will have to be done to determine what it has to say about this theory, but in a first attempt to get at this issue, Figure 12 provides a breakdown of the occupations of those fighters with Post High School Education. Not surprisingly, students are the dominant category, and would not be a factor in this discussion since most have likely not yet attempted to enter the job market. The second category is Business or Self-Employed. As mentioned above, this category was comprised of a wide range of occupations. The third and fourth categories (excluding the Missing category) were the lower-skilled occupations. The professional fields appeared lower down the list, despite the fact that all in this portion of the data have at least some college-level work. This is certainly an indicator that this issue should be explored further in order to understand what it says about the motivations of some foreign fighters.

**Figure 12: Employment Breakdown for Fighters with Post High School Education**



A number of specific career fields stand out for various reasons. First, of course, are those with military/police experience. While there were a relatively small number of these in the dataset (78), their specific experiences are interesting nonetheless, as is where they are from. Of the 78, 50 were from Saudi Arabia, a remarkable 64 percent. The forms often contained derogatory terms to refer to this experience, such as the “atheist guard” to refer to the Saudi National Guard. Some of the specific positions described are of note, to include:

- Special Forces

29 Ted Robert Gurr, *Why Men Rebel* (Princeton, 1971).

- Special Forces trainer
- Assistant manager of the office of foreign communities at the Air Force base in Riyadh
- Facility security
- Air Force, specializing in radar

In addition to those in the military/police category, an additional 31 people fell into the security guard or related category.

Other career fields that might be of interest to the Islamic State would likely include those in the computer/IT field and those in media and communications. While these fields did not occupy a significant percentage of the total dataset, they were present and could potentially offer up some unique skill sets to the organization. In the IT field there were a variety of individuals with backgrounds in computer design and engineering, networks, programming, telecommunications, and website design. Three specific individuals of interest offered up the following job experience:

- A network and encryption technician;
- A supervisor of a computer division at an Egyptian chemical company, and;
- One ambitious individual who listed all the following areas of expertise: designer, photographer, Photoshop expert, network, copying equipment experience, and modification of personal photographs and passports (offering the Islamic State both media and potential forgery expertise).

In the media/communications field, there were multiple former journalists, an online marketer, and someone with experience in marketing and advertisement design. Perhaps most interesting were the three individuals who merged their professional and jihad experience. One said he served as a “sound engineer at Al-Tawhid radio station, working with Ansar al-Sharia in Sirte [Libya].” In addition, a Tunisian said he worked as “a media official for Ansar al-Sharia [presumably Tunisia] for more than five years.” When asked about his specialty, he stated “Media expert with Ansar al-Sharia, and [talent] for hacking into encrypted websites (good hacker [highlighted in red]).” Also with Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia was another media official in their media office.

There were also a number of individuals who possessed experience that might prompt concerns about potential future insider threats. These included technicians at petroleum facilities and companies (including two employees of Saudi Aramco), hospital employees, and a number of individuals with jobs in the aviation sector. There was an airplane mechanic, an employee for an airport grounds services company, someone responsible for aircraft security who was affiliated the Saudi Ministry of Interior, and three pilots.

As with the education field, it appears Islamic State officials used this process and these forms to talent scout for those with useful occupational backgrounds. For example, when the person mentioned above with marketing and advertising design experience was asked who recommended him, he stated two people: “Abu-al-Bara’, a media official in the [Islamic] State in Aleppo” and “Khallad, media man [from *wilayat*] al-Jazirah [in Iraq].” And in the notes section of his form it stated that “Abu-al-Bara’, the media official needs him in Aleppo.” And in the notes for one of the Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia media officials, it was noted that “He is proficient in programs of montage, hacking and Photoshop.” Others were noted for having experience in hospitals assisting with surgeries, having good English language skills, backgrounds as radar controllers, and having military experience assaulting buildings and working with mines.

Of course, not all occupations were seen as desirable. A 24-year-old from Gaziantep, Turkey was listed as having been a “drug and hashish dealer.” Instead of a talent scouting note like those above, his form contained a note from an Islamic State official stating, “May God forgive him and us!”

### Countries Visited

Aspiring fighters were asked what countries they had visited and how long they had spent there. Unlike

the Sinjar records, in which fighters were asked about their route of entry, one should not interpret this category as conveying the route the fighter took to arrive in Syria. In this case, it appears that almost all respondents listed what was apparently every country (or most) that they had ever been to in their lives. As such, this field does not offer any value in determining the most active and popular routes into Syria. It does, however, give us a sense of how widely traveled some of these aspiring fighters are. While not supported by other documentation, it may be the case that the Islamic State was attempting to gain a better understanding of the travel experience that existed among its fighters in an effort to find candidates suitable for external operations, or to identify opportunities for recruitment from those locations.

Assessing the level of travel experience in this column is difficult, as there does not appear to be a great amount of consistency in terms of how this column was completed. Some individuals were very specific about the places they had visited, the length of time they spent there, and even the purpose of such visits. One fighter, Muhammad 'Abdallah 'Uthman al-'Utaybi, a 24-year old from Saudi Arabia, stated that his travel experience consisted of going to "America for 2 years of schooling." Other fighters might simply list "America" as a previous travel destination with no further detail or explanation. Overall, 70 individuals listed travel to the United States in this section.

Another example of the challenge in assessing the overall travel experience of these fighters was that some fighters were particularly vague in their descriptions. While not frequent, it was not uncommon for fighters to say that they had traveled to "most western European countries" or "all Gulf countries."

Despite this, there are a few interesting points to be made. Some of these fighters are very well traveled. One recruit from Sweden, 'Abdallah Bin-Muhammad Bin-Ahmad Al Zaydan, listed 14 separate countries to which he had traveled, including the United Kingdom, Finland, Egypt, Iran, and Afghanistan. And the Frenchman mentioned above who was born in 1956 and participated in jihad in Mali also stated that he had travelled to 38 different countries in Europe, Africa, Latin America, and Asia. Overall, it appears that 2,170 of these fighters listed had some form of prior travel experience. This amounts to over 50 percent of the fighters in the dataset. Among those fighters who listed at least one travel location, the average number of travel destinations listed was 2.1, although the caveat regarding the vague nature of some of these responses clouds the exact meaning of this figure.

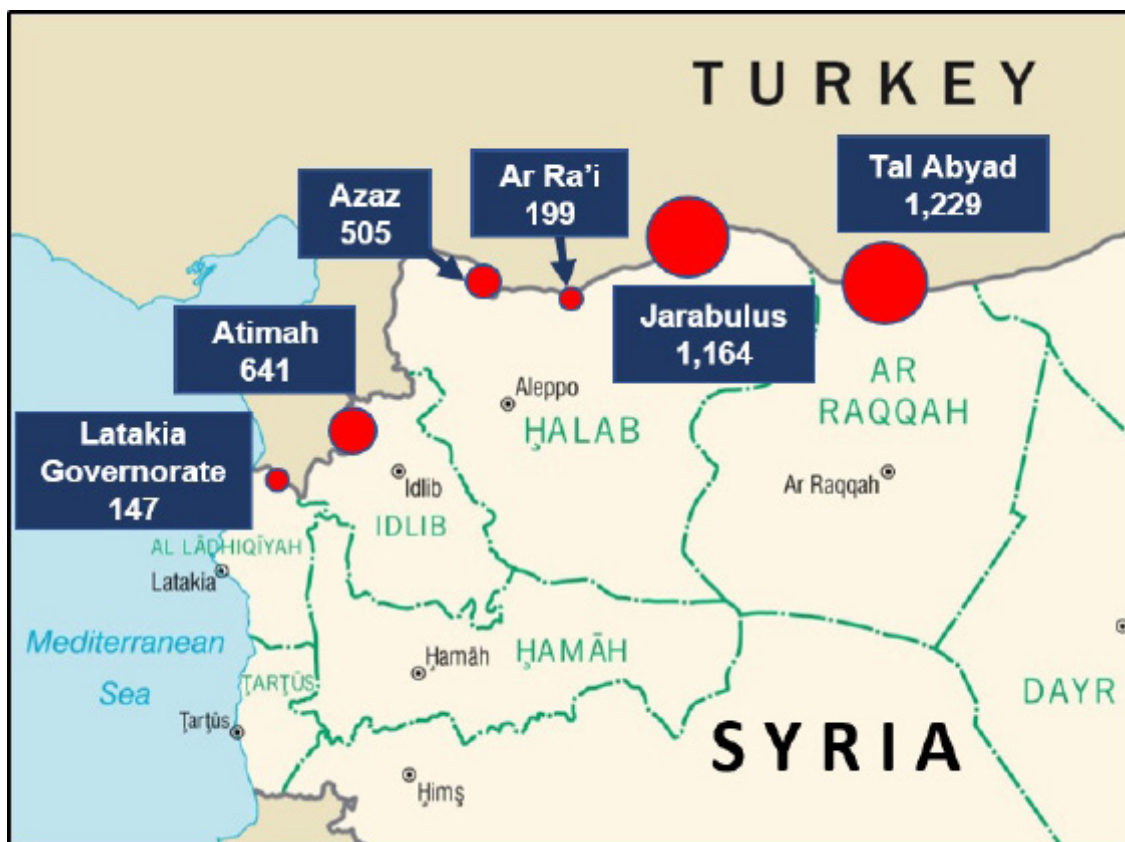
### **Border Crossings and Facilitators**

The forms also contained information regarding where the fighter crossed the border and who the facilitator of that crossing was.<sup>30</sup> The border crossings data shows that while small numbers of individuals may have crossed at various border points, the main body of fighters in this dataset crossed at six points as represented in Figure 13. These six border crossing points account for at least 93 percent of all border crossings in the dataset.

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30 Of the Syrians in the dataset, 19 had "Ansari" [local supporter/member] listed under Point of Entry.

Figure 13: Top Border Crossings with at Least 100 Fighters



The response category that dealt with border facilitators was also challenging from a data perspective. The variations on how the same name were entered into the forms made combining the data with any finality for this report nearly impossible. That said, clear leaders in terms of the Islamic State’s border operations emerged in the dataset.

Table 3: Top 5 Border Facilitators

Name	Fighters Facilitated	Overall Percentage Facilitated
Abu-Muhammad al-Shimali	1306	31.3%
Abu-al-Bara’ al-Shimali	212	5.1%
Abu-Mansur al-Maghribi	165	4.0%
Abu-Ilyas al-Maghribi	143	3.4%
Abu-‘Ali al-Turki	117	2.8%

As can be seen in Table 3, Abu Muhammad al-Shimali is by far the top facilitator of Islamic State foreign fighters. An Iraq by birth, al-Shimali has been publicly identified as the Islamic State’s Border Chief and an important figure in the group’s Immigration and Logistic Committee.<sup>31</sup> Following the November 2015 attacks in Paris, open-source reports implicated him in helping facilitate the travel

31 The U.S. Government has offered a \$5 million reward for al-Shimali through the “Rewards for Justice” program. See [https://www.rewardsforjustice.net/english/abu\\_al\\_shimali.html](https://www.rewardsforjustice.net/english/abu_al_shimali.html) for more information.

of some of the individuals responsible for the attacks.<sup>32</sup> One interesting finding is that it appears that al-Shimali has moved around during his time in the organization. By breaking the data down in terms of the date of entry of the fighters and the location that the entries took place, it could be seen that 96 percent of entries facilitated by al-Shamali in 2013 took place at Azaz. However, in 2014, 99 percent of al-Shamali-facilitated entries took place at Jarabulus.

Of the remaining top 5 facilitators, only Abu-Ilyas al-Maghribi experienced similar geographic variation, with all of his facilitated entries in 2013 taking place in Latakia and all but one in 2014 occurring in Ar Ra'i. The other facilitators appear to have been attached to the following border entry points: Abu-al-Bara' al-Shimali (Tal Abyad), Abu-Mansur al-Maghribi (Atimah), and Abu-'Ali al-Turki (Jarabulus).

### Recommenders

Perhaps the field with the most potential for intelligence value is the one in which incoming fighters were asked who recommended them to the organization. Unfortunately, this field is also the most difficult to analyze given the large number of unique names cited, the use of aliases and *kunyas*, variations in spelling and transliteration, and a variety of other idiosyncrasies of the data and how it was entered. While the CTC intends to explore this data over time to determine if there are any trends to identify or discernible networks to explore, that type of assessment was not feasible for this initial analysis.

### Experience Conducting Jihad

One of the potentially most interesting questions in the document was the one that asked the recruit if they had previously engaged in jihad, and if so, where. As discussed above, the Islamic State clearly used the forms to identify recruits with useful backgrounds, so certainly this category would have been of use to them for the same reasons. Overall, however, the percentage of arriving personnel who had answered "yes" to this question was relatively low, at 9.6 percent. Before we can draw any firm conclusions from this information, certain caveats need to be provided. Most significantly, this question appeared to be interpreted differently depending on the fighter or Islamic State official filling it out.

In almost one quarter of the approximately 400 cases in which the recruit claimed prior jihad experience, they stated that experience was acquired fighting in Syria, presumably (and in many cases clearly stated) while affiliated with a different group. In many other cases, while the response to this jihad question was "No," either the fighter or the official went on to log information about that person's prior jihad activity in Syria in the notes section or elsewhere. It appears that in these cases whoever was filling out the form was operating under the assumption that the question was not asking about activity as part of the ongoing Syrian conflict, but rather about experience in previous jihads outside of the Syrian theater. As such, the significance of this specific data point from the documents is up for debate.<sup>33</sup>

Fortunately, however, many recruits did provide information regarding where they had fought and with whom. Unfortunately, this data was not provided in a consistent format, and so breaking it down and then aggregating the different components remains a work in progress. But we can say a few things about the countries mentioned most often in this category (information on group affiliations will be addressed in the next section). Behind Syria, the second most commonly cited location of previous jihad experience was in Libya, with approximately 70 cases. Afghanistan was third, with approximately 60 cases. Beyond these, the numbers drop off significantly, down to 20 or less for each of

32 Gordon Rayner, "US offers \$5 million reward for Isil 'gatekeeper' who arranges terrorists' safe passage from Syria," *Telegraph*, November 19, 2015.

33 Also of note is the fact that due to an anomaly in the logging and coding of this material, the data regarding how many responded "no" to this question versus those who simply didn't answer contained errors and is therefore not as reliable as the data on who responded "yes."

the remaining countries, which included locations such as Yemen, Pakistan, Mali, Somalia, Chechnya, Dagestan, and Gaza.

### Relationships with Other Militant Groups

Given the variance in how this was handled in the prior jihad experience question, the Notes section was often used to mention groups the person has been with before, but didn't mention in his answer to the jihad question. Given that these responses were not structured in any type of systemic way, and not even always placed in the same field, it is beyond the scope of this initial report to provide a detailed and comprehensive breakdown of the variety of groups that the Islamic State's new recruits had access to at this time. More work will be done to refine this data for further analysis. In the interim we will have to rely on more anecdotal observations of the available information. What becomes immediately apparent during such a look is the fact that Jabhat al-Nusra is one of the most commonly referenced groups that these recruits have left in order to join the Islamic State.<sup>34</sup> Further research is necessary in order to confirm this observation and also run these cases against the dates of entry in order to determine if there are any identifiable trends regarding when people are leaving their previous groups. Recruits also stated previous affiliation with other groups, to include al-Qa`ida, al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb, Afghan Taliban, Pakistan Taliban, and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. At times, specific units within those groups, or commanders the fighters previously served under, were also provided.

### Desired Role and Specialty

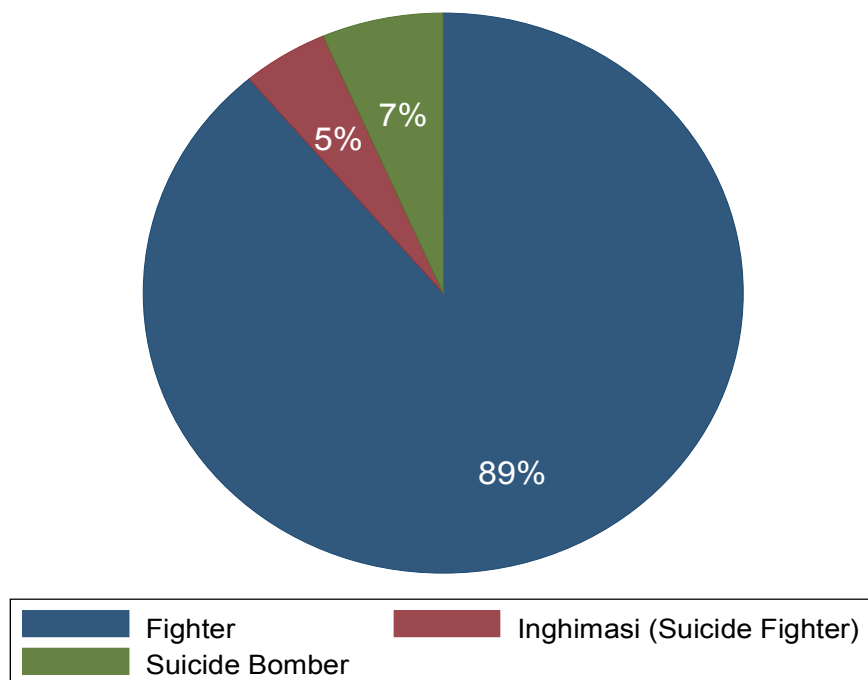
Once the Islamic State lets these individuals into their territory, they then are asked to express a preference regarding what role they would like to fill in the organization. In the entry form, fighters are asked to respond to two questions related to this issue. The first question asks, "[Do you want to be a] fighter, *istishhadi* [suicide bomber], or *inghimasi* [suicide fighter]?" The second question asks for their "Specialty," and offers up four options: Fighter, Sharia [official], Security [personnel], Administrative. While there appears to be some overlap, these questions are likely addressing two different levels of involvement in the organization. The latter is asking what kind of role they want to fulfill on a day-to-day basis. But regardless of what someone's day job is in the Islamic State, it appears all are expected to have a fighting role. And so, even if one is assigned to an administrative position, for example, they still have to have identified their fighting role as either a fighter, a suicide bomber, or a suicide fighter.

Due to the fact that the fighting-role question was answered by a far greater percentage of recruits than the one on specialty, and that the former question provides a more direct and interesting point of comparison with past foreign fighter studies, the bulk of the subsequent analysis will focus on that area.<sup>35</sup> Figure 13 contains a breakdown of the foreign fighter records according to the fighting role that the fighters indicated. The asterisk (\*) is a reminder that these figures do not include 13 individuals who indicated their preference for multiple fighting roles, the 39 individuals who indicated a preference for some other role (for example, one fighter said "media man" was his preferred role), the 171 individuals from whom the role was left blank or otherwise uncertain, and the one individual who responded by writing the word "jihad." This leaves 3,949 individuals represented in Figure 14.

34 Of interest is the derogatory terminology periodically used in the documents to refer to Jabhat al-Nusra. In several cases Jabhat al-Nusra was referred to as "Jabhat al-Khusra," which means the Front of Failure.

35 Less than 1,000 substantive responses were given for the "Specialty" field, as opposed to nearly 4,000 in the case of "Fighting role."

Figure 14: Organizational Role\*



In one of the most interesting findings in these documents, the percentage of recruits who selected suicide operations over serving as a more conventional fighter was remarkably low, only 12 percent, a figure all the more intriguing when compared with the figures found in the Sinjar records from 2007. In those documents, the majority of recruits (56 percent) expressed a preference to be a suicide bomber. Seven years later this preference appears to have reversed, based on this data. A number of factors likely account for this dramatic shift. Perhaps one of the most significant could be the vastly different environment in which the two iterations of the organization functioned. AQI was an insurgent organization struggling for survival against a vastly superior military foe in the United States. It held no real territory and was focused on inflicting damage however it could.

The Islamic State, on the other hand, holds significant territory and by the end of the period covered in these documents had self-declared the establishment of the Caliphate. This reality has impacts on both the demand and supply side of the foreign fighter equation. On the demand side, the Islamic State is trying to build a functioning military and government, so while it needs some suicide bombers, if most of its recruits were suicide candidates, that would leave few personnel left to fill roles like Sharia officials, police and security, or administrative positions. Although, it should be noted that given the significantly larger scale of this dataset versus Sinjar, the total number of suicide volunteers in this data (474) far outweighs that of Sinjar (217).

On the supply side of the equation, the Islamic State's message is now focused on a longer-term vision of a successfully governed state. While one cannot ignore the apocalyptic aspects of the organization's ideology, recruits coming to the Islamic State are being sold a narrative of success and the promise of a pure Islamic society and way of life for them and their families. Therefore, many may be traveling to the Islamic State to live, not die (although certainly many are prepared to do the latter if the need arises, or if they have a strong desire for martyrdom).

There are a number of different ways to look at the data on organizational role to glean additional insight from the data. One is by breaking down the expressed organizational role by other variables

already presented, such as age. This is done in Table 4. What this table shows is, at a very aggregate level, that there appears to be some difference between those fighters who express a preference for fighting and those who seek suicide missions. There appears to be at least a one year difference in the average year of birth between those who identify as fighters, those who want to become suicide bombers, and those who seek to undertake missions with a very low probability of return, with the individuals who select the more deadly missions being younger.

**Table 4: Organizational Role by Average Year of Birth**

Role	Number	Average YOB
Fighter	3521	1986.85
Suicide Bomber	259	1987.77
Inghimasi (Suicide Fighter)	184	1988.95
Other	39	1988.31
Multiple	13	1989.08

While Table 4 offers a macro-level examination of how fighting role differs by age, another perspective worth analyzing is whether the willingness of fighters to select into certain fighting roles differs by their country of residence. To assess this possibility, the data was first broken down by country of residence. Within each country, fighters were coded as fulfilling a suicide role if they identified as suicide bombers or *inghimasi* (suicide fighters).<sup>36</sup> The rest of the fighters where a role was identified were coded as non-suicide operatives, with those whose role was unknown being excluded from the analysis, leaving a total of 3,910 fighters. Finally, we calculated a simple figure which identified how many suicide fighters we would expect for each 100 fighters coming from a specific country.

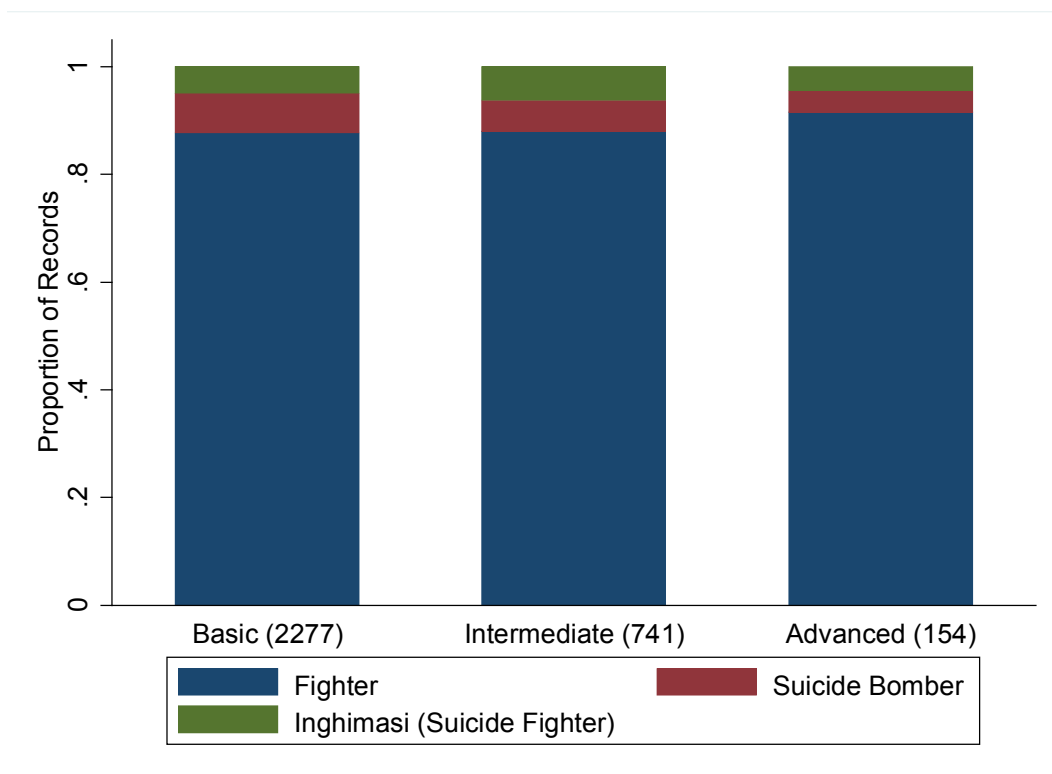
<sup>36</sup> Fighters who volunteered for multiple roles were coded as fulfilling a suicide role as long as one of the roles for which they volunteered was that of a suicide bomber or *inghimasi*.

Table 5: Fighters in Suicide Roles by Country

Country of Residence	Overall Role Identified	Number in Suicide Role	Suicide Rate Per 100 Fighters
Pakistan	15	4	26.7
Lebanon	33	8	24.2
Libya	106	25	23.6
Kuwait	25	5	20.0
Netherlands	12	2	16.7
Morocco	260	41	15.8
Saudi Arabia	795	120	15.1
China	167	25	15.0
Tunisia	636	90	14.2
Jordan	57	8	14.0
Algeria	29	4	13.8
Egypt	193	25	13.0
Tajikistan	66	8	12.1
Palestine	19	2	10.5
Spain	10	1	10.0
Uzbekistan	63	6	9.5
United Kingdom	57	5	8.8
Syria	126	11	8.7
Belgium	25	2	8.0
Australia	13	1	7.7
Kyrgyzstan	65	5	7.7
Sweden	14	1	7.1
Bahrain	28	2	7.1
Iran	17	1	5.9
Kazakhstan	35	2	5.7
Azerbaijan	122	5	4.1
Yemen	25	1	4.0
Indonesia	79	3	3.8
Turkey	243	9	3.7
Russia	209	7	3.3
Iraq	36	1	2.8
Germany	80	2	2.5
France	127	3	2.4
Qatar	10	0	0.0
Denmark	14	0	0.0
Albania	15	0	0.0
Macedonia	16	0	0.0
Canada	17	0	0.0
Kosovo	51	0	0.0

Table 5 contains the results of each of these calculations. The same data cautions that have been mentioned in the rest of this report apply here. This analysis should not be taken as an ironclad prediction of how fighters from each contingent will act or serve in the battlefield. For example, there were no Canadian fighters in the dataset who identified with a suicide role. However, open-source reporting indicates that in June 2014, Salman Ashrafi, a member of the Islamic State from Calgary, conducted a suicide bombing that left 46 Iraqis dead.<sup>37</sup> These caveats notwithstanding, operatives from certain countries appear to be more likely to volunteer for suicide missions. Countries from the Middle East and North Africa appear most prominently at the top of this list, although exceptions such as the Netherlands, China, and Tajikistan appear.

Figure 15: Fighting Role by Sharia Expertise



Religion plays an important role in the Islamic State. The organization itself mobilizes religious concepts to motivate and direct fighters. This has led many scholars and policymakers to engage in various debates regarding religion and violence. One of these debates has to do with the way in which religious concepts motivate individuals to carry out acts of martyrdom. The purpose of this report is not to adjudicate this debate, but rather to see how it plays out from the perspective of the organization’s own fighters. If martyrdom is seen as the highest religious calling, then a reasonable expectation would be that the people with the most knowledge about Islamic law (sharia) would desire to carry out these operations with greater frequency.

37 See Stewart Bell, “Canadian suicide bomber killed in Iraq becomes martyr for jihadists,” *Ottawa Citizen*, June 16, 2014. While not featured in the documents that make up this report, Ashrafi’s image did appear in other captured documents from a previous and unrelated operation. Nazim Baksh, “Inside ISIS: Salman Ahsrafi’s photo found in documents revealing underbelly of extremist group,” *CBC*, November 14, 2014.

To understand if this was the case, fighting role was broken out by level of sharia experience. Figure 15 presents the findings in this case. What it shows is that, whereas 7.3 percent of individuals with basic sharia knowledge end up identifying as suicide bombers, only 3.9 percent of individuals with advanced sharia knowledge do so. In other words, despite the religious justification that the organization uses for these actions, those with the most religious knowledge *within the organization itself* are the least likely to volunteer to be suicide bombers. This distinction is less clear with those volunteering to be suicide fighters, with 5 percent of individuals with basic sharia knowledge and 4.6 percent of individuals with advanced sharia knowledge falling into this category.

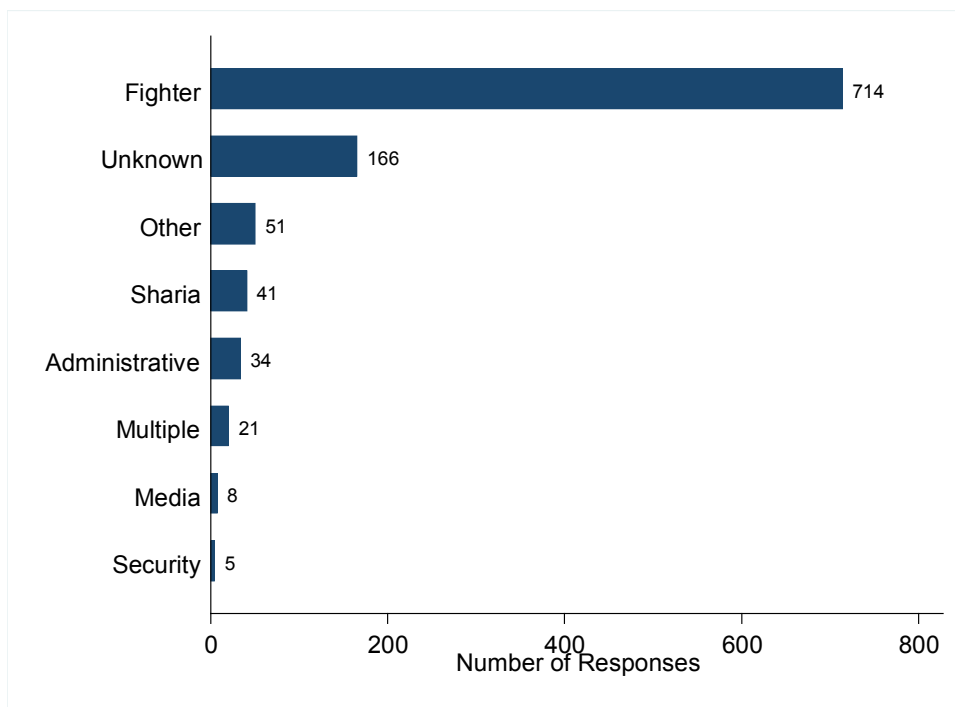
While age, country of residence, and sharia experience seem to differ by fighting role, one final question the data can provide insight on is whether marital status plays a part in influencing fighting role. One argument is that fighters with a family connection would be less likely to want to volunteer for a role where the desired endstate is death. An alternative expectation is that, given that the prospective fighter has already volunteered to join a brutal organization like the Islamic State, we are unlikely to see differentiation based on family characteristics. It turns out that there is some evidence to suggest that a fighter's family situation does have a bearing on the fighting role they selection. Among single individuals, 87 percent indicated fighter as their preferred role, with 7 percent and 5 percent electing to be suicide bombers and *inghimasi*, respectively. Among married individuals, the respective percentages are 91 percent electing to be fighters, 6 percent suicide bombers, and 3 percent *inghimasi*. This difference between single and married fighters, when combined with the previous findings on fighting role differentiation by age and country of residence, does suggest that prospective Islamic State members are affected by the environments in which they exist prior to joining the group. An understanding of such factors may prove useful, not only in countering violent extremism, but also in designing intervention and rehabilitation/reintegration programs.

Beyond the macro-level analysis of fighting role, there was a rich amount of variation in how individuals approached this particular part of the form. Not content with simply selecting one of the three offered options, some expressed more specific ambitions before getting around to answering the question. From an 18-year-old, unemployed, first-time jihadi from Saudi Arabia: "He wants to be the right hand man to Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi. He is learning the Sharia, preaches Islam to people, and works in Al Hisbah. He is a fighter." Other unique answers provided included several who highlighted their desire to work in the Sharia field, one who wanted to be a "Doctor on the frontline," and one person whose desired role was to be an, "English teacher, media officer and work on computers."

This type of free-form answer was more the norm in the Excel sheets where it does not appear the recruits were limited to the options provided to those who filled out the Powerpoint form. Their answers articulated a much wider range of goals and desires, for example "media man," "sniper," and "chemical manufacturing – rockets."

While we did not focus our analysis on the Specialty field, it is still worth noting the breakdown of responses. One hurdle in creating this breakdown was that there was a wide variety of responses, even though the question itself attempted to place fighter in one of four specialty fields. To clean up the data, each specialty field was coded based on the macro-level category to which the response pertained. For example, the response "Media expert with Ansar al-Sharia, and [talent] for hacking into encrypted websites (good hacker [highlighted in red])" was placed in the "Media" category. The resultant distribution of the 1,040 responses appear in Figure 16.

Figure 16: Breakdown of Specialty Response Field



Despite being answered far fewer times, the question on Specialty also saw numerous free-form answers, to include “booby-trapping,” “Tanks (tank gunner, tank maintenance and seeking training),” and someone who offered up their skills as an accountant, economist, or producer of project feasibility studies. The enthusiasm of some fighters is apparent with responses such as “everything, fast learner” and “whatever my emir wants.” And again, the Excel files saw far more diverse responses, which included:

- Surgeon
- First class PK machine gun operator
- Manufacturing
- Kalashnikov, PK, sniper
- RPG and Kalashnikov
- Whatever the state sees as appropriate - lawyer maybe
- Training the brothers in Mixed Martial Arts
- Manufacturing plastic windows and doors
- Knows a little bit about computers
- Driving long distances
- Good at promoting virtue and preventing vice

### Other Fields

As mentioned above, the forms contained a field indicating what items the fighter had “deposited” with the organization. The documents offer no clarity regarding the rules for what items had to be left and when (if) they could be retrieved, but it seems clear from this field that Islamic State border operatives confiscated a wide diversity of items from entering individuals. Among these items are at least 2,955 passports, a large number of cell phones, a handful of iPods and iPads, and other sundry items. While the Sinjar foreign fighter documents indicated the amount of money taken from fighters at the border by AQI, these documents do not seem to indicate a systematic collection of money (or, at the very least, record of such a collection). A small number of fighters appear to have deposited various

sums of money, with one fighter bringing \$6,900.

Similar to the recommenders, the inclusion on the vast majority of forms of contact information for family or friends likely has intelligence value, but analysis of such data is not within the scope of this report.

Other fields such as current work location (inside the Islamic State), level of obedience, and date of death were left blank in almost every case. Our assumption is that these documents were not intended to simply be entry records that were filed away in a static format. It appears that the Islamic State intended to keep these as personnel records that could be added to over time as additional information became available or needs arose. For example, the level of obedience could be filled out as part of some sort of regular review of the member's performance. Based on some of the miscellaneous documents, it does appear that they may have been building the architecture for an accessible and editable personnel database, but based on the information in this cache, it does not appear that their vision was ever achieved.

### **Exit Forms**

In addition to the entry forms, there were records of 431 individuals leaving the Islamic State for various reasons. While the sample size is much smaller than the entry forms, and it is not clear if this is due to it being an incomplete set or if this is the totality of the exits during this time period, they still provide interesting data regarding how the Islamic State managed its personnel and their movement. On these exit records, the individuals had to list their home country, and these are reflected in Table 6.

**Table 6: Number of Exit Forms by Country**

<b>Country</b>	<b>Number of Exit Forms</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Number of Exit Forms</b>
Saudi Arabia	79	Yemen	4
Tunisia	66	Denmark	3
Turkey	48	Jordan	3
Syria	29	Kosovo	3
Libya	21	Belgium	2
Egypt	15	Bulgaria	2
Iraq	14	Iran	2
Indonesia	13	Kyrgyzstan	2
Morocco	13	Sweden	2
France	9	Africa	1
Kuwait	9	Australia	1
Russia	9	Canada	1
Algeria	7	Finland	1
China	7	Georgia	1
Germany	7	India	1
Azerbaijan	6	Netherlands	1
Tajikistan	6	Oman	1
Albania	5	Palestine	1
Lebanon	5	Qatar	1
Macedonia	5	South Africa	1
Bahrain	4	Spain	1
United Kingdom	4	Sudan	1
Uzbekistan	4	United Arab Emirates	1

They also listed their specialty in the organization, and these mostly reflected the same type of information that was recorded in the entry forms, in that the vast majority were listed as fighters. There was more variation in the exit forms however, with people listed as having specialties such as manufacturing, administration, transport, proselytizer, media, trainers, Islamic judiciary, booby trapping, doctor, and numerous others.

Of particular interest is the field that recorded their reason for leaving. The vast majority of the records indicated either that the person was leaving to receive medical treatment (usually in Turkey) or for family reasons. Many of the family reasons were to go home to collect their family and bring them back to the Islamic State. It is unclear from these documents how many of these actually followed through on that objective.

Interestingly, some left for more problematic reasons. For example, for two fighters, in the reason for leaving field it was simply stated in large red font that they “Lied.” These two individuals also had notes at the end of their forms stating, “If he comes back again, he’ll be imprisoned.” Others had vaguer references to there being some issues, such as, “Confusion with matters,” or, “Could not practice patience.” Some expressed dissatisfaction and stated they were leaving because they did not want to be transferred to a particular location, while one simply said he, “does not want the military life and jihad.” Two were listed as leaving due to “Issues between ISIL and Jabhat al-Nusra.”

Finally, there were some who were leaving for more operational reasons. One was leaving in order to “Go back to Libya and organize the way for the State.” Another was leaving for Algeria in order to “join the organization.” Some had vague descriptions, like, “A Task.” Others were more specific: “Omar al-Shishani charged him with a job in Turkey.”

Overall, these reasons are interesting in that they demonstrate a process for leaving the Islamic State's territory. Much reporting has been focused on the difficulties some have had leaving the Islamic State.<sup>38</sup> This data does not dispute those kinds of experiences, but it does show that many were allowed to leave, including some who were not exactly in good standing with the organization. This may have something to do with the timing. Given that this data is from 2013 to 2014, pressures to compel members to stay may not have been as high at those earlier stages.

## Conclusion

The analysis of primary sources produced by militant groups can yield important insights not only about how an organization works, but, particularly in the case of documents such as those examined in this report, also about who populates those types of groups. This preceding analysis and discussion have illustrated important differences across Islamic State foreign fighters when it comes to their countries of origin, age, education, employment, and participation in the organization. While this report has focused on a broad range of questions, it represents only a first attempt at using this data to enhance our understanding of the Islamic State.

There are important categories that the CTC will more fully examine in the subsequent weeks and months. For example, understanding the interplay between the network of recommenders and border facilitators may help uncover important and vulnerable organizational relationships. Additionally, gaining a more complete picture of not only how well-traveled Islamic State fighters are, but more specifically which countries they have been to with the greatest frequency and longevity, can serve to improve our understanding of the potential threat posed by these fighters over the long-term.

Less than a year ago, General Joseph Votel, then commander of U.S. Special Operations Command, stated that one of the challenges of dealing with terrorist organizations was their ability to “surprise us with their actions and capabilities.”<sup>39</sup> In that same speech, he noted that part of the solution lies in “identifying the multitude of motivations, tools, and techniques that enable [terrorists] to do harm.” This study, and the data supporting the findings within it, represent an important step in leveraging the Islamic State's own documents and words to better understand that group's “motivations, tools, and techniques” as the United States and other nations continue to design and implement strategies to degrade its capabilities and influence.

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38 For example, Mike Giglio and Munzer al-Awad, “How to Lose your Mind to ISIS and then Fight to Get it Back,” BuzzFeed News, April 13, 2016.

39 Joseph L. Votel, “Understanding Terrorism Today and Tomorrow,” *CTC Sentinel* 8:7 (July 2015).

