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WHY DO AMERICANS GO ABROAD TO FIGHT IN FOREIGN CONFLICTS?

by

Alphonso Harris

June 2018

Thesis Advisor:	Mohammed M. Hafez
Second Reader:	Daniel T. Cunningham

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Why do Americans travel abroad to fight in civil conflicts? Since proclaiming the caliphate in 2014, the Islamic State (ISIS) has been recruiting men and women to the battlefields of Syria and Iraq from countries around the world. This study explores why American men and women volunteered to join ISIS and leave behind their families, their friends, and the comforts of American society. The profiles reviewed in the thesis were built from open-source documents. Three drivers were explored to explain this phenomenon: integration deficit, social media, and network connections. This study concluded that bidirectional social media use and social network connections were present in most of the cases surveyed.

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WHY DO AMERICANS GO ABROAD TO FIGHT IN FOREIGN CONFLICTS?

Alphonso Harris
Lieutenant Junior Grade, United States Navy
BS, Excelsior College, 2011

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

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NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL
June 2018

Approved by: Mohammed M. Hafez
Advisor

Daniel T. Cunningham
Second Reader

Mohammed M. Hafez
Chair, Department of National Security Affairs

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ABSTRACT

Why do Americans travel abroad to fight in civil conflicts? Since proclaiming the caliphate in 2014, the Islamic State (ISIS) has been recruiting men and women to the battlefields of Syria and Iraq from countries around the world. This study explores why American men and women volunteered to join ISIS and leave behind their families, their friends, and the comforts of American society. The profiles reviewed in the thesis were built from open-source documents. Three drivers were explored to explain this phenomenon: integration deficit, social media, and network connections. This study concluded that bidirectional social media use and social network connections were present in most of the cases surveyed.

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. MAJOR RESEARCH QUESTION

Chicago native Mohammed Hamzah Khan along with his brother and sister organized a trip to join the jihad in Syria. The nineteen-year-old saved for travel expenses, wrote letters to his parents, then left Chicago for a new life.[1] However, he did not make it. The FBI intercepted him at O'Hare International airport before he boarded the plane. This American and 124 others since 9/11 have left the United States as foreign fighters.[2] Since 2011, over 150 Americans have been charged with offenses relating to providing the Islamic State (ISIS) with material support in conjunction with their travel abroad.[3]

Why do Americans travel abroad to fight in civil conflicts? From the time ISIS proclaimed the caliphate, the Islamic State has recruited over 40,000 men and women to the battlefields of Syria and Iraq from 100 countries around the world.[4] Estimates indicate that the West provided over 5,000 fighters during that time period.[5] The Islamic State, from thousands of miles away, has found a way to appeal to Americans and Europeans. This is particularly puzzling in the United States because American Muslims, unlike their European counterparts, are by and large well educated, employed, and integrated into society.[6] What explains why 124 have decided to join ISIS abroad?

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[1] Peter Bergen, *United States of Jihad: Investigating America's Homegrown Terrorists*, First edition (New York: 2016), 6.

[2] Brian Michael Jenkins, *When Jihadis Come Marching Home: The Terrorist Threat Posed by Westerners Returning from Syria and Iraq*, PE-130-1-RC (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2014), https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE100/PE130-1/ RAND_PE130-1.pdf.

[3] Mark Berman," For Americans Who Joined, ISIS Didn't Meet Hype," *Washington Post*, February 9, 2018.

[4] Chas Danner, "Report: ISIS Has Recruited as Many as 30,000 Foreigners in the Past Year," *New York Magazine*, September 27, 2015.

[5] Danner, "Report: ISIS."

[6] Farid Senzai, "*Engaging American Muslims: Political Trends and Attitudes*," Institute For Social Policy and Understands, April 2012, https://www.ispu.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/ ISPU_Report_Political_Participation.pdf.

B. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH QUESTION

The two most important reasons to study foreign fighters are the threat they pose to America's security and interests abroad—including the security and interests of America's allies—and the inherent danger of their return home as seasoned veterans of extremist causes. Since 9/11, United States citizens have left or attempted to leave participate in civil conflicts. The number we are concerned with is those who have left or attempted to leave the United States to aid the Islamic State. These militants are used as suicide bombers, propaganda agents, and general fighters for extremist organizations, such as Moner Mohammad Abu Salha, an American who was used as a suicide bomber in Syria in the name of al-Nusra front. Moner was motivated by lectures from Anwar al-Awlaki, the radical cleric. The radicalization of Abu Salha led to his suicide attack, in which he drove a truck filled with explosives into a restaurant filled with agents of the Syrian government.[7] U.S. laws and interests prohibit support for anti-American extremists abroad. Providing Material Support to Terrorists, 18 U.S.C 2339A, is a law originally enacted in 1994 then expanded in 1996 to include providing property, money, lodging, training, and/or expert advice or assistance.[8] Therefore, the U.S. strategy to stabilize Iraq and other conflict zones is threatened by support for ISIS from its own citizens.

Radicalization within the United States is not a new problem, but the potential for returning foreign fighters makes the threat even more menacing. "It is estimated that one out of every nine foreign fighters are likely to conduct a 'blowback' attack in their home country after returning from fighting abroad."[9] For example, in the case of France and

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[7] Robert Windrem, "American Suicide Bomber Says He Was Watched by FBI, Inspired by Awlaki," NBC News, August 27, 2014, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/investigations/american-suicide-bomber-says-he-was-watched-fbi-inspired-awlaki-n190606.

[8] "Legal information Institute," Cornell Law School, April 24, 2018, https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/18/2339A.

[9] The term "blowback" is used to describe the dangers of foreign fighters returning to their origin country after being radicalized, mobilized, and trained; Thomas Hegghamer, "Should I Stay Or should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists' Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting," *The American Political Science Review* 107, no. 1 (2013): 1–15.

Belgium, the terrorists are homegrown lone actors who had traveled to Syria and back.[10] Therefore, understanding the underlying motivations and causal drivers of American foreign fighters is a pressing security concern. This thesis contributes to existing efforts to counter this form of violent radicalization.

C. LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature on foreign fighters initially focused on profiling terrorism suspects. Law enforcement focused on trying to identify each terror suspect as an individual. This continued until the rise of the Islamic State.[11] "Leaderless jihad, is a tactic terrorist groups began by encouraging lone attackers came with mobilizing Muslims to attack wherever they were."[12] This was the first wave of terrorism.[13] The second wave of terrorism mobilized foreign fighters from around the world to the battlefield.[14] The United States initially did not have this problem.[15] Something changed, and Americans began to identify with the civil conflict in Iraq and Syria leading to the Last Wave and the rise of the foreign fighters from the United States.

1. Evolution of Homegrown Terrorists

Terrorism has evolved since 9/11. Terrorist groups organized large-scale attacks, motivated lone wolves to attack within their countries, compelled foreign fighters to travel abroad in support of the caliphate, then returning to their origin country to inflict significant harm on the populous. After the fall of al-Qaeda, terrorist leaders learned the

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[10] Jay Newton-Small, Paris Attacker Is an example of France's Homegrown Terrorists, *TIME*, November 16, 2015, http://time.com/4113864/paris-attacks-isis-homegrown-terrorism/.

[11] Bergen, *United States of Jihad*, 67.

[12] Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

[13] Lorenzo Vidino, Francesco Marone, and Eva Entenmann, *Fear They Neighbor Radicalization and Jihadist Attacks in the West*, The George Washington University, https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/FearThyNeighbor%20RadicalizationandJihadistAttacksintheWest.pdf, 30.

[14] Spencer, Richard and Neil Connor, "ISIL's Foreign Recruits Double in a Year: Report; Up to 31,000." National Post, Dec 09, 2015. http://libproxy.nps.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com.libproxy.nps.edu/docview/1747222742?accountid=12702.

[15] Bergen, *United States of Jihad*, 10.

weaknesses in top-down organization.[16] Abu Mohammed al Adnani in the speech *Indeed Your Lord is ever Watchful* calls for the *muwahid* (singular person who believes in the oneness of Allah) to respond to the air strikes against Muslims by attacking the unbelievers wherever they are.[17] Next, terrorism evolved again, which led Americans to radicalize and attempt to travel abroad and provide material support to the Islamic State in various ways. As a consequence, trained foreign fighters then return to the U.S. after the diaspora created by the joint effort to eradicate the Islamic State from the Middle East. An estimated 1 in 9 foreign fighters return to the United States.[18]

Scholars like Lorenzo Vidino, Mohammed Hafez, and Thomas Hegghammer have been integral in framing the scope of influence foreign fighters have in the conflict in Iraq and Syria. Lorenzo Vidino and Francesco Marone frame homegrown terrorism as a whole, looking at all known foreign fighters and their migration patterns.[19]Vidino and Marone indicate that in 2015, the highest number of foreign fighters who participated in the Syrian civil war came from Tunisia.[20] In the West, France led the way with 1,700 while the United States had 150.[21] Reynolds and Hafez look at foreign fighters through a smaller scope, like the United States and Germany. While the number of U.S. foreign fighters is small, scholars like Bergen believe that number will increase as the fight against the Islamic State intensifies.[22] The economic effect of preventing homegrown terrorism has steadily increased since 9/11. "The FBI seeks $1.9 billion to focus on counterterrorism and its intelligence division seeks 1.6 billion to prevent, disrupt, and defeat terrorist operations before they occur. Additionally, the Justice Department seeks

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[16] Bergen, *United States of Jihad*, 67.

[17] Vidino, Marone, and Entenmann, *Fear They Neighbor* 7.

[18] Thomas Hegghammer, "Should I Stay Or should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists' Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting," *The American Political Science Review* 107, no. 1 (2013): 1–15.

[19] Vidino, Marone, and Entenmann, *Fear They Neighbor*, 98.

[20] Vidino, Marone, and Entenmann, 98.

[21] Sean Reynolds and Mohammed Hafez, "Social Network Analysis of German Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, (July 2017): 1–26, https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2016.1272456.

[22] Bergen, *United States of Jihad*, 67.

$14 million to target and interrupt homegrown threats."[23] As deadly attacks like San Bernardino and Orlando happen, the cost of prevention will inevitably increase.

2. First Wave of Terrorism against the United States

Jihadist terrorism in America began with the threat emanating from outside actors wishing to do harm within U.S. borders. "In 1993, a bomb exploded in the basement of the World Trade Center, killing six and injuring thousand's others."[24] Ramzi Yousef, a non-American, was held responsible.[25] Ahmed Ressam, in a 1999 foiled attempt, planted a bomb in Los Angeles International Airport on New Year's Eve as a part of the millennium attack plots.[26] "On September 11, 2001, non-American hijackers crashed two commercial jets into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center; two more non-Americans hijacked jets and crashed into the Pentagon and a field in rural Pennsylvania. The total dead and missing numbered 2,996."[27] The al-Qaeda terrorist group took responsibility for this attack.

Beginning on 9/11 the terrorist threat evolved by changing focus on encouraging social and recruitment networks to send fighters abroad to fight in foreign conflicts or train in camps for major operations. For instance, Omar Shafik Hammami, an American citizen, was a member and leader of al-Shabaab. David Coleman Headley was American and conspired with Lashkar-e-Taiba in plotting the 2008 Mumbai attacks.

3. Second Wave of Terrorism

Following the mid- to late-2000s, especially since the rise of ISIS, the mobilization strategy has evolved again to encourage lone actor attacks, which Marc

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[23] Jon Greenberg, "Does Homeland Security put more money into climate change than stopping online terrorism recruiting?," *Politifact*, May 14, 2015, http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2015/may/14/michael-mccaul/does-homeland-security-put-climate-change-above-on/.

[24] U.S. Fire Administration, *The World Trade Center Bombing: Report and Analysis*, USFA-TR-076 (Washington, DC: FEMA), https://www.usfa.fema.gov/downloads/pdf/publications/tr-076.pdf.

[25] U.S. Fire Administration.

[26] *9/11 Encyclopedia*, "World Trade Center, September 11," https://search-credoreference-com.libproxy.nps.edu/content/entry/abcne/world_trade_center_september_11/0 accessed on June 18, 2018.

[27] *9/11 Encyclopedia*, "World Trade Center, September 11."

Sageman terms as leaderless Jihad.[28] Peter Bergen, in his book, *United States of Jihad*, chronicles a number of American lone wolf attackers.[29] In Little Rock, Arkansas, Abdulhakim Muhammed shot two military soldiers outside a military recruiting center. In 2009, Nidal Hasan, a U.S. Army major, fatally shot 13 innocent American citizens and injured more than 30 others at the Fort Hood Army base in Texas. In 2015, Syed Rizwan Farook and Tashfeen Malik killed 14 people and injured 20 more when they began shooting at a holiday party at the Inland Regional Center in San Bernardino.

Radicalization is defined as the process of embracing an extremist belief ideology which is a byproduct of marginalization.[30] Scholarship has given many reasons for radicalization throughout history. Causes have been attributed to political discontent, religious conversion, peer relationships, alienation, and online radicalization. Literature on the homegrown threat specific to the United States has used all of these to explain the phenomenon.

A number of homegrown attackers have identified political discontent as a reason for their actions against the U.S. Their discontent centers around American foreign policy in Iraq, Afghanistan and now Syria. These lone actors view the Middle East as a holy land and find American extended presence there disruptive.[31]As individuals, they have been commanded by the writings of Bin Laden, Anwar al-Awlaki, and Abu Mohammed al Adnani to strike at the first opportunity.[32]Abu Mohammed al Adnani illustrated this by calling Muslims to action with the following message:

> So O muwahhid, do not let this battle pass you by wherever you may be. You must strike the soldiers, patrons, and troops of the tawāghīt. Strike their police, security, and intelligence members, as well as their treacherous agents. Destroy their beds. Embitter their lives for them and busy them with themselves. If you can kill a disbelieving American or European—especially the spiteful and filthy French—or an Australian, or a Canadian, or any other disbeliever from the disbelievers waging war, including the

[28] Bergen, *United States of Jihad*, 124.

[29] Bergen, 56–84.

[30] Vidino, Marone, and Entenmann, *Fear They Neighbor*, 78.

[31] Vidino, Marone, and Entenmann, 30.

[32] Vidino, Marone, and Entenmann, 30.

> citizens of the countries that entered into a coalition against the Islamic State, then rely upon Allah, and kill him in any manner or way however it may be. Do not ask for anyone's advice and do not seek anyone's verdict. Kill the disbeliever whether he is civilian or military, for they have the same ruling. Both of them are disbelievers. Both of them are considered to be waging war [the civilian by belonging to a state waging war against the Muslims]. Both of their blood and wealth is legal for you to destroy, for blood does not become illegal or legal to spill by the clothes being worn. The civilian outfit does not make blood illegal to spill, and the military uniform does not make blood legal to spill. The only things that make blood illegal and legal to spill are Islam and a covenant (peace treaty, dhimma, etc.). Blood becomes legal to spill through disbelief. So whoever is a Muslim, his blood and wealth are sanctified. And whoever is a disbeliever, his wealth is legal for a Muslim to take and his blood is legal to spill. His blood is like the blood of a dog; there is no sin for him in spilling it nor is there any blood money to be paid for doing such.[33]

D. THE RISE OF THE AMERICAN FOREIGN FIGHTER

Jaelyn Young and Muhammed Dakhlalla are two of many American Foreign Fighters who have attempted to go abroad.[34] Emma Green chronicles these two, who were a couple who married in an Islamic ceremony and desired to spend their honeymoon joining ISIS on the battlefield.[35] Their story is especially important to understanding motivations that lead to Americans traveling abroad.[36] After Muhammed was caught, he maintained that he was not motivated by ideology but the connection he had for Jaelyn. Jaelyn on the other hand had went through a reconversion process that led her to a more radical form of Islam. Both were academically gifted students in college at Mississippi State University. These young students used social media as a way into life of a foreign fighter.

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[33] Robert Spencer, "Islamic State: "We will conquer your Rome, break your crosses, and enslave your women, by the permission of Allah," Jihad Watch, September 2014, https://www.jihadwatch.org/2014/09/islamic-state-we-will-conquer-your-rome-break-your-crosses-and-enslave-your-women-by-the-permission-of-alla.

[34] Emma Green, "How Two Mississippi College Students Fell in Love and Decided to Join a Terrorist Group," *The Atlantic*, May 2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/05/mississippi-young-dakhlalla/524751/.

[35] Bergen, *United States of Jihad*, 15.

[36] Green, "How Two Mississippi College Students Fell in Love."

Literature on foreign fighters has not sufficiently provided empirical evidence to accompany hypotheses. Thomas Hegghammer provides evidence to explain why some jihadists stay at home and attack while others travel abroad.[37] In his assessment, three themes emerge that help develop hypotheses about radicalization: opportunity, training, and norms. He suggests that militants go where it is easier to go to the location easiest for travel. Next, recruits train abroad to increase opportunity in participating in a larger more important attack. Lastly, militants prefer to travel abroad because they deem participation in a civil conflict as more legitimate.

E. POTENTIAL EXPLANATIONS AND HYPOTHESES

Literature on radicalization and foreign fighters presents three potential hypotheses, all of which are reasons for radicalization leading to participation in civil conflict. However, most of the literature focuses on the phenomenon from countries other than the United States. This thesis examines this literature to gain a comprehensive understand of foreign fighters in the modern era. Specifically, this study will test if these hypotheses can be used to explain the 124 subjects who traveled or attempted to travel to Syria and Iraq from the United States.

1. Integration Deficit

Integration deficit is a phenomenon that occurs when a group fails to achieve average social and economic levels within a particular country.[38] If the integration deficit is the causal driver of foreign fighter recruitment, then we should expect to see most of the 160 American foreign fighters to be experiencing problems of integration, employment, and low socio-economic status. The Center for Immigration Studies (CIS) has examined Middle East immigration habits, defining the Middle East as Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Turkey, the Levant, the Arabian Peninsula, and Arab North

[37] Thomas Hegghammer, "Should I Stay or Go?" 1–15.

[38] Vidino, Marone, and Entenmann, *Fear They Neighbor*, 78.

Africa.[39] Since 1970, the Middle East population in the United States has exploded from 200,000 to just over 1.5 million in 2000. Since 2000 over 73% of Middle Eastern immigrants to the United States were Muslim.[40] The CIS study characterized Muslim immigrants as one of the most educated immigrant groups in the United States.[41] While they are some of the most educated, a significant share of the group lives in poverty. One in five Middle Eastern immigrants live in poverty compared to one in ten native-born Americans.[42]Oxford Analytica states, "The Muslim population is concentrated at the higher and at the lower ends of the income and educational scales, with a relatively small middle-class group in between."[43] At the same time, integration in the U.S. is shown through the lack of segregation of Muslims. Muslim immigrants are highly dispersed.[44] The only city made up of more than 30% Muslim is Dearborn, Michigan.

2. Online Radicalization

Online radicalization has two forms. Unidirectional radicalization occurs through forums, blogs, and YouTube. In this form of radicalization, a user accesses online content and radicalized without any other motivators. Bidirectional online radicalization is when a person is in contact with a recruiter and is being radicalized through that communication. Radicalizations tactics rely on multiplying the attention gained from a small or singular act.[45] Klausen states, "For example, the Islamic State forced two journalists to wear orange jumpsuits like the prisoners in Guantanamo Bay showing an

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[39]Steven Camarota, "Immigrants from the Middle East A Profile of the Foreign-born Population from Pakistan to Morocco," Center for Immigration Studies, August 2002, https://cis.org/Immigrants-Middle-East.

[40] Camarota.

[41] Camarota.

[42] "Muslim Integration A Bar To Extremism," Oxford Analytica, October 9, 2006, https://www.forbes.com/2006/10/06/muslim-integration-stops-extremism-biz-cx_1009oxford.html#62c0b15b7b6d.

[43] Camarota, "Immigrants from the Middle East."

[44] Camarota.

[45] Jytte Klausen, "Tweeting the Jihad: Social Media Networks of Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 38:1, (DEC 2014): 1–22, https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2014.974948.

act of retribution against the treatment of Muslims by America."[46] The internet multiplies the effect by unidirectional means.

Jytte Klausen illustrates the bidirectional influence in her study.[47] Klausen's research showed that Twitter is used by the Islamic State for recruitment and indoctrination while YouTube was used for file sharing by the same party. The subject of tweets coming from the Syrian warzone centered around religious instruction, battle reports, threats to the west, and personal communication.[48] This research does not compare other possible hypotheses which could explain Muslim radicalization and mobilization. If online unidirectional radicalization is the main causal driver of foreign fighter recruitment, then we should expect to see that most American foreign fighters travel abroad as lone wolves. Clustered travel indicates bidirectional online radicalization which would also signal that there is a social network influence. In bidirectional radicalization, travelers are interacting with other people. Interaction through social media, in a cluster situation shows that social media is being used as a communication and trust building tool instead of a medium to radicalization.

Networks provide an important "pull" mechanism for prospective foreign fighters.[49] Hafez asserts that individuals are likely to derive necessary attributes leading to mobilization from pre-existing networks.[50] Hafez and Reynolds have found that in the West, specifically Germany, peer to peer networks are a driving force to mobilization in civil conflicts abroad.[51] In Sean Reynolds's research of studying homegrown terrorism in Germany he showed that 71 of the 99 tested foreign fighters were connected to another foreign fighter before leaving Germany. Additionally, 32 fighters had contact with recruiters prior to departure, in comparison to 16 people recruited through social media

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[46] Jytte Klausen, "Tweeting the Jihad," 1–22.

[47] Reynolds and Hafez, "Social Network Analysis," 1–22.

[48] Jytte Klausen, "Tweeting the Jihad," 1–22

[49] Reynolds and Hafez, "Social Network Analysis," 4.

[50] Reynolds and Hafez, 1–22.

[51] Reynolds and Hafez, 1–22.

means. Social Network Connections were found to be the dominant force leading to mobilization.

Peer to peer network research focus on push and pull factors of radicalization. David Malet wrote on the pull factors which is the recruitment messages by extremist organizations.[52] These pull factors are not exclusive to the Islamist phenomenon. The push factors are those that propel the actors to radicalize and go abroad. Peer to peer networks, social media and alienation are theorized to push actors abroad.[53] Research using social network analysis has shown strong support for the social network hypothesis as a push factor leading to radicalization. This study examines the empirical applicability of this beyond Germany by applying these ideas to the homegrown threat in the United States.

F. RESEARCH DESIGN

This study through empirical evidence aims to understand causal mechanisms for the foreign fighter phenomenon within the United States. Additionally, the secondary aim is to build a scholarly database of the characteristics which may push Islamist foreign fighters to travel from the United States to Syria and Iraq. Other contributors have built profiles on fighters from Germany, Great Britain, and Italy.[54] Also, the intent of the project is to reveal similarities and variances in how foreign fighters are mobilized across. Through data collection the study is able to connect patterns. The patterns are then places within the hypotheses to provide clarity.

Data for this research was acquired from George Washington University's "Program on Extremism."[55] They compiled 160 names of Americans that traveled or attempted to travel abroad to fight for the Islamic State. These names are based on convictions and accusations of material resources being provided to an enemy of the

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[52] David Malet, *Foreign Fighters : Transnational Identity in Civil Conflicts*, 205.

[53] Reynolds and Hafez, "Social Network Analysis," 1–22.

[54] Reynolds and Hafez, 1–22.

[55] "The Cases Program on Extremism," The George Washington University, accessed May 15, 2018, https://extremism.gwu.edu/cases.

United States. Everyone accused with this crime has been thoroughly documented, including individuals' social network relationships and physical characteristics (i.e., attributes).

We compiled profiles of American foreign fighters by creating detailed dossiers on 120 people who have traveled or attempted to travel to Iraq and Syria. As an ongoing study on foreign fighters, we will use the characteristics collected by Sean Reynolds on German foreign fighters.[56] It provides the foundation of the analysis so that patterns are made clear. All available data of the following categories will be collected.

- First Name
- Last Name
- Full Name
- Gender
- Age
- Informant
- Public Tip
- Community and or Family Tip
- Marital Status
- Citizenship Status
- Charged or deceased
- Year Charged
- State Charged

[56] Reynolds and Hafez, "Social Network Analysis," 22.

- Last residence state
- Ties with Awlaki
- Contact with foreign militant
- Overseas military training
- US military experience
- Social media used
- Targeted Israel
- Religious Convert

These characteristics have the three hypotheses discussed above embedded within them. The patterns and links highlight the hypothesis that is most prominent which provides empirical evidence for the reason Americans travel abroad to fight in foreign conflicts.[57] The biographical data will have a statistical representation which the data associated with social networks (times and roles) is imported to a visual analytics program for further analysis. Citizenship status, gender, age, and marital status provide insight on travelers' level of integration. Secondly, social media mobilization can be analyzed through the number of travelers who used social media with and without ties familial, kin, or friendship relations. Network mobilization was analyzed through Ties with Awlaki, contact with foreign militant, and overseas military training.

G. THESIS OVERVIEW AND DRAFT CHAPTER OUTLINE

Chapter II of this thesis provides an overview of the history of foreign fighters. The overview is a brief history of foreign fights and American involvement in foreign conflicts in the modern period. The focus will narrow to the United States and compare trends that are related to the way foreign fighters have been targeted and recruited.

[57] Reynolds and Hafez, 22.

Chapter III provides results from the data collection. This chapter also describes the analysis of each hypothesis and related findings, reveals gaps in the study and shortfalls of research and data collection. It also provides visualizations which detail the results of the analysis.

Chapter IV is the conclusion and recommendation for those who want to expand the research.

II. BRIEF HISTORY OF FOREIGN FIGHTERS IN MODERN MUSLIM CONFLICTS

This chapter provides context to the foreign fighter phenomenon within the United States. To appropriately do so, this chapter categorizes this history in four waves of foreign fighter participation: Afghanistan, Bosnia and Chechnya, Iraq, and Syria. The participation of American foreign fighters was scant during two out of four of these waves but the history provides context as to what lead to American participation. To properly examine the foreign fighter history, it is important to not only provide historical context but also provide background on important actors who pushed the movement forward.

The first wave of foreign fighters in the modern period started with prominent actors like Sheik Abdullah Yusuf Azzam. Sheik Azzam provided the narrative and motivation to use foreign fighters and mobilize them beginning in Afghanistan. His importance is rooted in his ability to make civil conflicts appeal to the greater Muslim community. He used his influence to mobilize Muslims to civil conflicts of the modern period. Thomas Hegghammer notes the force-multiplying potential groups gain through shaping their narrative. "The fighters' force-multiplying potential and military experience allowed them to change the nature of conflicts from national to supranational by situating local grievances within a pan-Islamic jihadist narrative."[58] David Malet highlights some causes for the supranational response to local conflicts.[59] He notes the malleable narrative of an oppressed identity group which requires participation from abroad to have a chance at liberation. Sheik Azzam provided the caravan narrative that took Muslim fighters from one conflict to the next multiplying the force and adding to the level of experience in each conflict thereafter.

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[58] Thomas Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad," *International Security* 35, no. 3(Winter 2010): 56.

[59] David Malet, "Why Foreign Fighters?: Historical Perspectives and Solutions," *Orbis* 54, no. 1 (2009): 97.

A. FIRST WAVE

Prior to the intentional recruitment of foreign fighters in the modern period, they came through humanitarian efforts. The fight in Afghanistan in 1979 had a unifying effect internationally against communist aggression in that region. The Soviet presence and actions in Afghanistan was so alarming that states began to send fighters as aid against the Soviet Union. Specifically, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United States sent material resources and volunteers to Afghanistan. Instead of a full-scale war states used Afghanistan to fight a proxy war by training and arming ethnic Pashtun insurgents.

Abdullah Azzam contributions include the foreign fighter recruitment ideology and he established important networks within Pakistan and Afghanistan leading to the genesis of al-Qaeda, Hamas, and Lashar-e-Taiba.[60] Azzam learned Islamic law and philosophy by studying at schools in Damascus and at Al-Azhar University in Egypt.[61] In Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, as an instructor, he taught Osama bin Laden.[62] In 1979 he traveled to Pakistan and created the Maktab al-Khadamat.[63] It was from this office that he and bin Laden funded thousands of foreign fighters with plane tickets and organized their arrival. His ideology, all Muslims should fight a global jihad as a "caravan" going from one conflict to the next. He traveled around the world including the United States preaching this.

Ideology fueled the mobilization of foreign fighters and support through financial and material resources deepened the network made up of financiers, foreign fighters, supporters, and Islamist. The billions of dollars in aid and galvanizing leaders like Sheik Azzam helped to establish a long-term blueprint to recruit and use foreign fighters. Safe houses and support bases were established on the border of Pakistan and Afghanistan.[64]

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[60] "Abdullah Azzam," Counter Extremism Project, accessed on May 15, 2018, https://www.counterextremism.com/extremists/abdullah-azzam.

[61] Counter Extremism Project, "Abdullah Azzam."

[62] Counter Extremism Project.

[63] Counter Extremism Project.

[64] Brian Glyn Williams, "On the Trail of the 'Lions of Islam': Foreign Fighters in Afghanistan and Pakistan, 1980–2010," *Orbis* 55, no. 2 (2011): 216–39.

As part of a systematic plan to arm non-state actors, foreign fighter participation began to be state sponsored. The participation by Arab foreign fighters ballooned in the 1980s. This participation included Abdullah Azzam who moved to Pakistan during this period to be close to the Afghan jihad. Originally he took a teaching position then departed to focus all his time and energy to the jihad.[65]Through his efforts, he transformed the Afghan jihad into an Islamic cause which concerns all Muslims.

In Azzam's writings he clarifies his beliefs that if a non-Muslim infringes on the land of a Muslim then jihad becomes a global obligation. Through this reasoning more than state sponsored foreign fighters were mobilized.[66] Brian Williams states "In addition to this U.S.-Saudi-Egyptian-Pakistani funded covert operation, it is important to note, there was also a grass-roots, mosque-based movement in the Middle East and Pakistan that drew tens of thousands of adventurers and fanatics to the jihad in Afghanistan." These non-state actors along with foreign fighters were united under the goal of driving out "*kufurs*" from Muslim land.[67]

Azzam's authority and legitimacy was important in establishing the framework of a transnational jihad.[68] In his first fatwa, he answers the question of whether the Afghan conflict is an actual jihad. He answers "yes" and in this fatwa adds credence by stating that Sheik Abdul Aziz bin Bazz had agreed with his assertion. By adding the word of one of the highest religious authorities in Saudi Arabia at the time Azzam was able to give legitimacy to the notion of a global call to arms.

In his second work, he stated the reasons for Muslims to join the "Caravan."[69] The eight reasons as follows: "In order that the disbelievers do not dominate, due to the

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[65] Sheikh Abdulah Nassah al Waan to Sheikh Abdullah Azzam, "Defense of the Muslim Lands" accessed February 20, 2018, https://archive.org/stream/Defense_of_the_Muslim_Lands/Defense_of_the_Muslim_Lands_djvu.txt.

[66] Williams, "On the Trails of the Lions of Islam," 216–39.

[67] Arabic word for unbeliever.

[68] Sebastian Schnelle, "Abdullah Azzam, Ideologue of Jihad: Freedom Fighter or Terrorist?" Journal of Church and State 54, no. 4 (October 1, 2012): 625–647, http://search.proquest.com/docview/1197641036/.

[69] Schnelle, 625–647.

scarcity of men, fear of hell-fire, fulfilling the duty of Jihad and responding to the Call of the Lord, Following in the footsteps of the Pious Predecessors, Establishing a solid foundation as a base for Islam, Protecting those who are oppressed in the land, and hoping for martyrdom and a high station in paradise."[70] Once it was established that believers should join the caravan, the choice is not temporal. This means that once the conflict in Afghanistan was over believers should and would look for a new Caravan because Muslim land is being infringed upon in a different location and there is a scarcity of men there.

In February of 1989 the Soviet Union departed Afghanistan and took with it the reason for the jihad in that location. The reason for jihad had been established and legitimized by Azzam. The war was technically over so by the ideology of the caravan they looked for another location where Muslim land was being infringed upon. Therefore, foreign fighters departed that location and followed peers and leaders to different places.[71] Some foreign fighters followed Bin Laden, who became a financier of terrorist groups and organizer of terrorist plots. A majority of foreign fighters went home, some stayed and were used by the Pakistani Inter-Services-Intelligence (ISI), and a small number went on to Bosnia.

B. SECOND WAVE

After the war in Afghanistan, foreign fighters looked for places to take their training and vigor for contribution. The fall of the Soviet Union provided a location for these foreign fighters to take their material and financial networks. Three separate groups sought independence which was influenced by that of Slovenia and Croatia. The Catholic Croats, Orthodox Christian Serbs, and Muslim Bosniaks made up the largest groups seeking autonomy.[72] In 1992 when Bosnian Serbs declined to accept separation from Serbia took up arms against the Bosnian Muslims.

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[70] Schnelle, 625–647.

[71] Williams, "On the Trails of the Lions of Islam," 216–39.

[72] Maria G. Donnelly, Thomas M. Sanderson, and Zach Fellman, "Foreign Fighters in History," Center For Strategic International Studies, accessed June 19, 2018, 6, http://foreignfighters.csis.org/history_foreign_fighter_project.pdf.

In 1992 Muslims accounted for 43.7 percent of Bosnia's 4.4 million inhabitants which voted to separate from Yugoslavia.[73] However, Bosnian Croats did not want independence Aleksa Djilas wrote in that same year. He surmised that the Croats did not want to be part of Bosnia they simply wanted to unite with Croatia. While the Serbs wanted to unite with Serbia and both groups only wanted secession from Yugoslavia.[74] The Muslims were the only group with desire for self-determination which were outnumbered by the other two groups.

Muslims, being less in numbers in this area while adding the transnational Islamic rhetoric sermonized by Sheik Azzam led to an understandable intervention in Bosnia. Additionally, the crimes against civilians and the religious barbarisms made the territory especially salacious for veteran foreign fighters. In 1992, the foreign fighter participation began slowly like in Afghanistan under that ruse of humanitarian assistance. This was until an associate of Bin Laden, Sheikh Abu Abdel Aziz Barbaros established a unit to move foreign fighters from Peshawar to Bosnia. The same organizations and networks that provided financial resources to Afghanistan did so to fighters in Bosnia.[75] Donnelly explains that in the United States, Islamic organizations provided funds to the fighters, passed out leaflets, and encouraged Muslims to travel to Bosnia for the Jihad. This is where we begin to see more participation by Americans and American organizations in foreign conflicts.

In the Bosnia conflict, like Afghanistan, the theme of training foreign fighters in combat and religion is repeated and amplified. Foreign Fighters who had little experience in either would first be indoctrinated into a camp prior to battle. This shows an early long-term investment in foreign fighters which due to the Serbian military's ethnic cleansing provided more foreign fighters. This also shows an understanding of the top of the organization that foreign fighters, if trained could recruit foreign fighters. The initial investment also shows an understanding of the value that a trained foreign fighter could

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[73] Aleksa Djilas, "The Nation that wasn't: the roots of the Bosnian conflict," *The New Republic*, 207, no. 13 (September 1992): 25.

[74] Djilas, "The Nation that Wasn't," 25.

[75] Donnelly, Sanderson, and Fellman, "Foreign Fighters in History," 6.

provide. The value is in the current conflict, the fighter's ability to influence peers once returning home, and his experience while fighting in future conflicts.

The transnational jihad narrative has obvious roots with Sheik Azzam and Afghanistan. Simultaneously, the supporters of the jihad are similar.[76] Although the number of foreign fighters in Bosnia widely vary, the range from a number of sources is 500–5000. Religious clerics throughout the middle east in countries like Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen endorsed and provided support for the Jihad. This provided a continued vigor that surpassed geographic borders adding to the narrative of transnational jihad. Muslims should aid in the fight with Muslims against oppression.

The Dayton Peace Accords in December 1995 successfully ended the warfare role of foreign fighters in Bosnia.[77] The Accords required the foreign fighters to vacate the country within 30 days. The fighters had fought with zeal and with that they took it North to the fight in Chechnya. The fight in Bosnia and the move to Chechnya shows the importance of networks in the decision-making process of a foreign fighter. These fighters had been living, eating, and praying with the same people for years. Once the decision had been made to move to a different fight in another location those fighters moved along with their social network.

A small but important conflict in the foreign fighter context took place in Chechnya. By this time, fighters who had been trained in either Afghanistan or Bosnia had extensive battle experience. This made the foreign fighters effective and flexible even in small numbers. The ethno-religious struggle rooted in political turmoil provided another battleground for Azzam's transnational Jihad. The low numbers of Muslims and their desire for self-determination provided the legitimacy necessary to attract fighters and foreign resources.

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[76] Williams, "On the Trails of the Lions of Islam," 216–39.

[77] Donnelly, Sanderson, and Fellman, "Foreign Fighters in History," 8.

The Chechnya example shows how in small numbers foreign fighters can have a large impact in a resistance.[78] The relationship foreign fighters build with indigenous people is an asset a foreign fighter brings to each conflict of their participation. Contrary to a foreign military providing material support. Soldiers typically do not integrate into society. Therefore, they continue to be outsiders throughout the battle. However, as for foreign fighters they more easily integrate into society and adopt the effective guerilla tactics being used by the resistance. The experience which arrived with this wave of foreign fighters made it easier for them to integrate and assimilate.[79]This is in stark contrast to early Arab foreign fighters in Afghanistan which clashed with the beliefs of Sufi Afghan locals.

Leaders in the North Caucasus began to reach out to preachers and financiers in the Middle East during the 1980s. The establishment of networks from the North Caucuses to the Middle East is the avenue that kept the door open to foreign fighters. The Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP), All-Union IRP, Akhmed Atayev, Islam Khalimov, and Abbas Kebedov all were cruicial in establishing these links to the Middle East. Although, the parties are not ideologically aligned their networks to the Middle East still plan an important role within the conflict.

The ties between the North Caucuses, Middle East, and Islam is centuries old. Many Chechens were assimilated into other Muslim societies throughout the Middle East.[80] Jordan had an especially large Chechen Muslim populist. From those ties, a veteran from the anti-Soviet fight in Afghanistan migrated back to Chechnya. Fathi Mohammed Habib, an electrical engineer who migrated to Afghanistan for the jihad in 1982. At this time, his heart did not allow him to fight but he aided the Afghan warlord Abdul Rasul Sayyaf. When travel restrictions eased Fathi moved back in 1993 and there

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[78] Cerwyn Moore, and Paul Tumelty, "Foreign Fighters and the Case of Chechnya: A Critical Assessment," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 31, no. 5 (April 11, 2008): 412–433.

[79] Williams, "On the Trails of the Lions of Islam," 216–39.

[80] Cerwyn Moore and Murad al-Shishani, "Chechnya and Jordan: An Unquestioned Relationship," *Prague Watchdog*, accessed May 10, 2018, at http://www.watchdog.cz/index.php.

he established a Salafi Islamic group.[81] This veteran then became one of the preeminent figures in the foreign fighter presence due his ties to Islam, the Middle East, and Chechnya itself.[82] The group he organized called and received around ninety Jordanian Chechen and Chechens.

The network Fathi brought to Chechnya included Emir Khattab.[83] After his arrival to Chechnya the Muslim fighters began to resemble more of a military structure. This small group under his command operated on the border which included mujahedeen who believed they were fighting for the country's Islamic independence.[84] Khattab's military knowledge came along with the knowledge to use media. He began to use footage of the fight and spread it through his own network on CDs and the internet. This was to gain support in Europe and the Middle East.

Emir Khattab operated with ease within Chechen borders while he provided religious and weapon instruction to new fighters who needed training.[85] Despite tensions with Islamists he was never called upon to leave the country. This signified his influence within the networks operating in Chechnya and the status his religious affiliation afforded him. His tolerance for variations of Islam made him especially important.[86] His flexibility with ways of Sufi's made him an easier leader to follow. His thoughts on Jihad showed its necessity but it did not share the fever lower level fighters had for attacking foreign powers.[87] His doctrine saw Jihad within Chechnya as a central location that the jihad could grow from.

Khattab's network within Chechnya and outside of it was linked by Russia and the United States to al-Qaeda within Afghanistan.[88] Khattab admitted to meeting Bin

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[81] Moore and Tumelty, "Foreign Fighters and the Case of Chechnya,"416.

[82] Moore and Tumelty, 416.

[83] Angelo Rasanayagam, *Afghanistan: A Modern History* (New York: IB Tauris, 2005), 103.

[84] Moore and Tumelty, "Foreign Fighters and the Case of Chechnya," 417.

[85] Moore and Tumelty, 416.

[86] Moore and Tumelty, 421.

[87] Moore and Tumelty, 419.

[88] Moore and Tumelty, 420.

Laden as a young Jihadi. Despite his meeting of Bin Laden, it seems that his connection to Bin Laden was informal. However, with an informal connection to Al Qaeda while operating with differing ideologies followers of Khattab still later joined Al Qaeda.[89] Khattab used with rigor media and welcomed financing from the gulf. He did not support internationalizing the Chechen conflict. His tactics showed a top-down approach to operations. His network abroad grew in importance overtime while the need to vet foreign fighters increased.[90] Due to lack of resources and strength in numbers Khattab operated through his network a vetting process in Afghanistan to make sure that the foreign fighters sent to the Chechnya fight had skills necessary to forward the mission.

Foreign powers did much to establish the importance Chechnya had to the greater networks conducting terrorist acts.[91] This theory was originally established by Russia then later picked up by the United States.[92] Russia released a number of documents showing the connection between leaders like Khattab and operatives in Afghanistan. Colin Powell in an address to the UN linked Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's group to Chechnya's foreign fighters. Powell connected Abu Atiya to Zarqawi. Abu Atiya was assumed to be Zarqawi's Jordanian representative who had operated in Chechnya since 1999.[93] The linkages came with pressure by the U.S. on the Saudi Arab leadership who had been a source of funding. This pressure led to the Chechen fighters becoming financially pressed.

Abu Haf was appointed as the third leader of the Chechnya foreign fighters in 2004. Colin Powell also stated that Atiya was Abu Haf's deputy in Chechnya.[94] Abu Haf, after this speech became infamous and through his Jordanian nationality and his connection to Zarqawi he established new funding networks. Zarqawi showed his support

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[89] Moore, and Tumelty, 424.

[90] Stewart Bell, *The Martyr's Oath: The Apprenticeship of a Homegrown Terrorist* (Canada: Harper Collins, 2005), 111.

[91] "Defense Intelligence Report Details Al Qaeda's Plans For Russia, Chechnya And WMD," Judicial Watch, November 16, 2004, http://www.judicialwatch.org/cases/102/dia.pdf.

[92] Defense Intelligence Report.

[93] Moore and Tumelty, "Foreign Fighters and the Case of Chechnya," 422.

[94] Moore and Tumelty, 422.

to Abu Haf through internet video which increased his profile. By this time, the ideology of the Chechnya foreign fighters had transformed and Haf aligned himself completely with Al-Qaeda ideology.

Overall, the first Chechen War attracted between 200–300 fighters who stayed in Chechnya after the war. During the Second Chechen War foreign fighter numbers increased.[95] This was due to the relax of travel restrictions. The latter number also represents the peak of foreign fighter involvement throughout both wars. Foreign Fighters were still mainly made up of Arabs although American organizations provided financial support.

C. THIRD WAVE

The third wave of foreign fighters was important because, they carried out most of the suicide attacks inflicting damage on the Iraqi Shia and the U.S. military. Michael Weiss explains the power vacuum left by the United States in 2003, through the invasion of Iraq, the United States removed Saddam Hussein from power. The invasion into Iraq left a power vacuum. In addition to the power vacuum the move left a large number of military professionals without work or pensions. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's existing network. Michael Weiss, in "The Army of Terror," writes about the importance of networks in the establishment of al Qaeda in Iraq, ISI, and eventually the Islamic State.[96] The network, for al-Baghdadi and other high ranking military officials began at the Islamic University in Baghdad.[97] The requirements of those attended were that each individual must be vetted and have familial or friendship ties to the Baath Party.

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[95] Murad Batal al Shishani, "Abu Mus'ab Al-Suri and the Third Generation of Sala-Jihadists," *Terrorism Monitor* 3, no. 16 (August 15, 2005), https://jamestown.org/ program/abu-musab-al-suri-and-the-third-generation-of-sala -jihadists/.

[96] Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror*, 2nd ed. (New York: Regan Arts, 2016).

[97] Weiss and Hassan.

The networks operating within Iraq brought in over 100 foreign fighters across the border, daily.[98] Most of the foreign fighters operating in Iraq came by way of Damascus. The number of foreign fighters reached its zenith at 4,000–5,000.[99] It was reported by General Petraeus, the Commander of Multinational Forces, that 80–90% of the attacks were carried out by foreign fighters.[100] He states "Records acquired and analyzed indicated that 41 percent of foreign fighters came from Saudi Arabia, while 18.8 percent came from Libya. Smaller percentages of fighters came from Syria, Yemen, Algeria, Morocco, and Jordan were also identified."[101] Data also indicated that of those fighters surveyed the average age was between 24–25 years old.[102] Additionally, those who were less experienced militarily, the bulk of them were students or young professionals.

Zarqawi's terror network was organized and operated from Syria. His network was part of a transnational group of revolutionary Islamists. This group of Islamists were an extreme faction of Sunni Islam named, jihadi Salafists. Salafism is part of a strand of Islam that seeks to emulate the virtues of piety and leadership from the prophet Mohammed and his rightly guided companions.[103] In the modern period, Salafism is characterized by five features. Mohammed Hafez summarizes the features by stating "First, it places immense emphasis on the concept of tawhid (unity of God, or monotheism). The second feature of contemporary jihadi Salafism is its emphasis on God's sovereignty. Third pertains to the strict constructionist jurisprudence and rejection of innovations. Salafism places immense importance on the permissibility and necessity of takfir, which declares that a Muslim is outside of the creed based on transgressions.

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98 Mohammed Hafez, *Suicide Bombers in Iraq*, (Washington D.C.*:* United States Institute of Press Peace, 2006), 32.

99 Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters," 60–61.

100 Brian Fishman and Joseph Felter, *Al-Qa'ida's Foreign Fighters in Iraq: A First Look at the Sinjar Records* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, December 2007), 7–8, https://www.ctc.usma.edu/ posts/al-qaidas-foreign-fighters-in-iraq-a- first-look-at-the-sinjar-records.

101 Fishman and Felters, 7–8.

102 Donnelly, Sanderson, and Fellman, "Foreign Fighters in History," 17.

103 Hafez, *Suicide Bombers in Iraq*, 32.

Lastly, Salafis believe that jihad is an Islamic obligation against infidel regimes that do not rule according to God's laws."[104]

The features of Salafism in the modern world are important for context on how jihadi groups justify their actions against Muslims and non-Muslims.

Jihadi Salafis are also foreign fighters. In Iraq, they initially served under the Mujahidin Brigade in Muhammad's Army and al-Tawhid wal-Jihad which later became AQI. Foreign Fighters, sponsored by AQI came from Italy, Germany, and Syria. Most of these jihadi Salafist despite the small numbers went to Iraq with very important skills. Skills included manufacturing of explosives and fighting experience gained from other jihadi conflicts around the world.

In Iraq, the political and doctrinal differences between Zarqawi and Zawahiri became more splintered. Zarqawi focused his energy on the Shia and fueled sectarian tensions. His focus was on the establishment of the Caliphate. Zawahiri advised Zarqawi to delay the declaration of the Islamic state and to stay away from sectarian violence. The sectarian violence was intricate to AQI and Zarqawi's mission. In 2005, AQI released a document titled "Why Do We Fight, and Whom Do We Fight?"[105] The goals include to restore the caliphate, reject rule by the Shia, oppose democracy, and counter the falsehoods propagated by evil scholars. AQI and Zarqawi's goals indicate the reason why they used the sectarian violence and jihadi networks to expand to Syria.

D. FOURTH WAVE

Despite the differences in numbers, the Syrian conflict at its height attracted more than 5,000 foreign fighters.[106] This number despite any variation is more than the number of foreign fighters recorded in any other previous conflict. The roots of the Syrian civil war traces back to Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation in Tunisia. This act set off the Arab Spring throughout the middle east. In Syria, as a response to protests a

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[104] Hafez, 38.

[105] Hafez, 84.

[106] Thomas Hegghammer, "Syria's Foreign Fighters," The Middle East Channel, December 9, 2013, http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/12/09/syrias-foreign-fighters/.

crackdown took place which resulted in a number of human rights violations by the Assad regime.[107] These actions set the stage for the Syrian civil war and the eventual call to arms for foreign fighters.

In 2011 Syria, a peaceful protest was interrupted by security forces opening fire on the crowd. The result was a call for Assad to step down. In contrast, a harsh crackdown erupted in which resulted in numerous human rights violations. Assad furthered the legitimacy for the crackdown when he released prisoners linked to Al-Qaeda. Assad used the high numbers of Al-Qaeda prisoners to legitimize his use of force and link it to a state organized counter-insurgency effort. Those prisoners released in Syria, during 2012 broke more than 500 other prisoners out who had been detained during the Iraq War.[108] Maria Donnelly notes that those prisoners formed the core of al Qaeda in Iraq. Assad then used this instability on his borders to crackdown even further. He grouped all protesters as terrorists and violently defended his regime. In Chapter III, the study expands on the American participation during the fourth wave.

[107] Donnelly, Sanderson, and Fellman, "Foreign Fighters in History," 20.

[108] Donnelly, Sanderson, and Fellman, 8.

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III. AMERICAN FOREIGN FIGHTERS: A MICRO-LEVEL ANALYSIS

The purpose of this chapter is to analyze the factors that drove 120 American foreign fighters to ISIS. This analysis begins to examine three hypotheses outlined in the introduction. The 120 profiles were built from open source documents. The information gathered by law enforcement during investigations is largely classified. Therefore, for analysis in academic research open source documents leaves a lack of consistency in the data collection.

This chapter will describe the methodology used in collecting the data and the demographic patterns which resulted from analysis. Next, the chapter reveals the extent to which the hypotheses are supported by the analysis. The foreign fighter profiles are taken from travelers active in the last five years, From January 2012 to January 2018. The characteristics selected for interpretation were selected to analyze integration into American society, social media radicalization, and the extent of the role peer to peer connections played in foreign fighter mobilization.

A. METHODOLOGY

George Washington University's program on extremism provides a list of 160 names of foreign fighters.[109] The associated cases provided a starting point for gathering biographical data. Boundaries were placed on the overall dataset which led to a reduction in the number of travelers from 160 to 131. Boundaries included the five years between 2013 and 2018 and travelers going to or intending to go to Syria and Iraq. Once the data was gathered, pivot tables were created in Microsoft Excel. The visualizations created through the pivot tables are used to depict correlation between the characteristics. The visualizations help to analyze and test the hypotheses discussed in Chapter I.

The original 160 travelers were reduced for 3 reasons. First, travelers that did not fall within the 5-year period were not included. Second, travelers who traveled to

[109] "The Cases Program on Extremism," The George Washington University, accessed May 15, 2018, https://extremism.gwu.edu/cases.

locations other than Syria and Iraq were not included. This lead to the subset of 131. Lastly, lack of the data needed to build complete profiles with all 22 chosen characteristics reduced the number of profiles to 120. Data was gathered using the GWU Program on Extremism court case database,[110] news articles, and books.

B. DEMOGRAPHIC DATA OF THE 120 FOREIGN FIGHTERS

The following 8 characteristics were selected from the 22 characteristics surveyed because they best correlate to the hypotheses. Before turning to an examination of the hypotheses, this analysis provides brief descriptions of the dataset and how it pertains to key characteristics of American fighters.

(1) Age

The data on age revealed that 42 of 104 foreign fighters were age 20–24 at the time of travel or travel attempt. The next largest group of 15–19 and 25–29 had 19 and 14 travelers respectively. Of the 120 actors, 16 of their ages were unknown.

(2) Marital Status

Marital status results indicated that 32 of 120 actors' marital status was unknown. Of the foreign fighters, 59 were unmarried and 22 were married.

(3) Citizenship Status

Of the 120 actors; 101 actors had information pertaining to their citizenship status while 19 were unknown. Of the 106 actors 63 were U.S. born citizens, 19 were naturalized citizens, 12 were permeant residents, three were asylum seekers, one was an Iraqi citizen, and one was on a nonimmigrant visa.

[110] "George Washington University.

(4) Last Residence State

Of 120 actors 21 of them had unknown last residence states. Of 99 actors, seven were from Virginia, nine were from California, 13 were from New York, and 13 were from Minnesota.

(5) Contact with foreign militant

Of the 120 actors, for19 of them, contact with foreign militants is unknown. Of the 101 actors, two may have had contact with a foreign militant and 59 did not have contact with foreign militants. A foreign military contact had a connection with 40 actors.

(6) Overseas military training

Of the 90 of 102 actors did not receive overseas military training. Overseas military training information was unknown for 18 actors.

(7) U.S. military experience

Of the 95 of 103 actors did not have U.S. military experience while eight had U.S. military experience.

(8) Social media used

Social media was used by 84 of the 103 actors. Social media was not used by 19 actors and information was unknown for 17 others.

1. Integration Deficit

Data pertaining to integration deficit revealed that, by itself, does not appear to be a motivating factor for mobilization as a foreign fighter. Specifically, a focus on characteristics such as, marital status, citizenship status, age, and state resided in prior to mobilization, suggests that a lack of integration (i.e., being a social “outside”) is not a primary contributor to Americans becoming foreign fighters.

Marital status is an indication of institution use. Marriage is a recognized institution in the United States that reflects integration into society. Consequently, one would expect, at least according to integration deficits that a majority of American

foreign fighters would be unmarried. Marriage indicates integration into American society on the micro level. First, the act of getting married is the first level of institution use. Then the next level of integration occurs through reporting the marriage to other institutions within the U.S. system. Figure 1 shows the number of travelers who used this institution. Over 24% of foreign fighters used the institution of marriage as shown in Figure 1. This indicates that over half of the foreign fighters studied were not integrated into society.

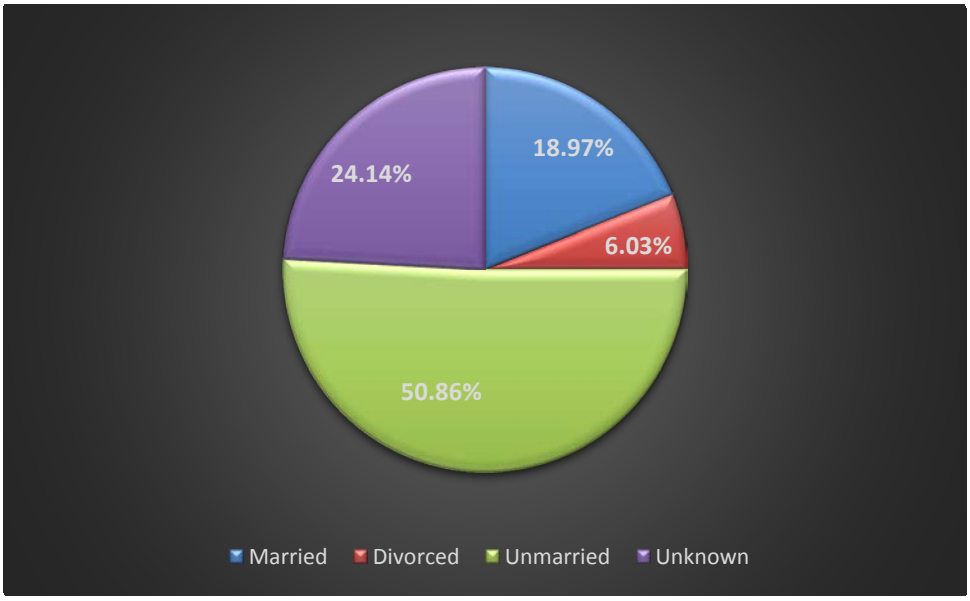

Figure 1. Marital Status of Foreign Fighters (2012–2017)[111]

As a U.S. citizen, individuals are exposed to more American institutions. Integration in a society is about utilizing institutions within that society. Institutions include schooling, taxation, and security services. Two parties are involved in the integration process. The receiving society and its institutional structure and the way this structure interacts with newcomers dictates the level of integration for the immigrant. However, an American citizen indoctrinated into these institutions from a young age would be more integrated into society than an immigrant. Of 120 travelers 106 were U.S.

[111] Source: George Washington University.

citizens. The high number of U.S. citizen travelers indicate that citizenship does not mean integration.

Age is an important indicator of social integration. Olof Aslund and Anders Bohlmark argue that there are ties between age at migration and success of integration.[112] In this study, the majority of subjects were U.S. citizens. This means that foreign fighters who are U.S. citizens would be more integrated into society than migrants. Therefore, in the context of integration deficit, individuals with the least amount of time with interaction with the institutions would face a larger deficit. Of the 120 subjects, only 16 were immigrants to the United States. Consequently, the argument of "Age at Migration and Social Integration" only applies to a small number of travelers. The argument is that the older the migrant, the more difficult integration. However, age of migration is unknown for 16 non-American travelers. The largest group of foreign fighters come from the 15–29-year-old age group. The young age of these foreign fighters indicates a lack of integration.

Alternatively, the argument from age of migration suggests that the longer a migrant is in the society the more integrated they become.[113] Despite the low number of migrants analyzed, this argument was applied to American foreign fighters. Americans by virtue of being exposed to society much longer than an immigrant should be more integrated in society. However, do to the high numbers of American foreign fighters we conclude that integration deficit is too subjective of an explanation based on the characteristics surveyed. Figure 2 depicts the age groups of the travelers.

[112] Olof Aslund, Anders Bohlmark, and Oskar Skans, "Age at Migration and Social Integration," IZA Disscussion Paper Series No. 4263, June 2009, http://ftp.iza.org/dp4263.pdf.

[113] Aslund, Bohlmark, and Skans.

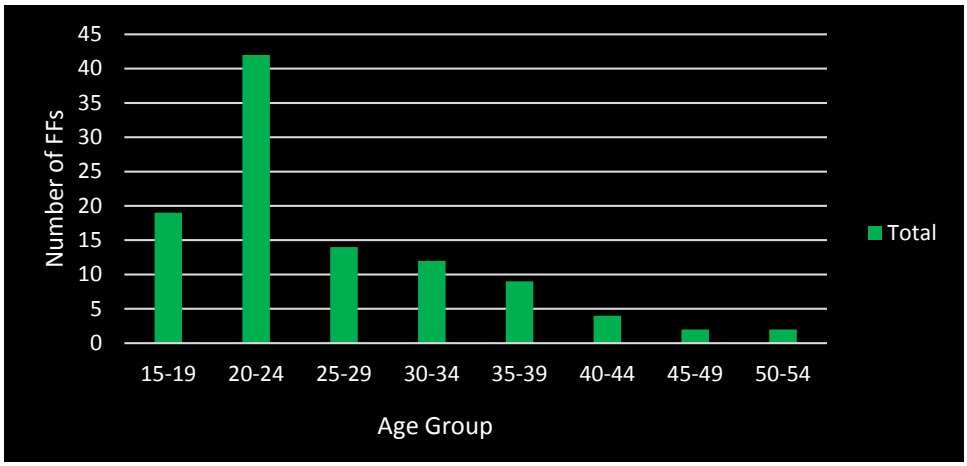

Figure 2. Age Groups of U.S. Foreign Fighters (2012–2017)[114]

The data associated with "last state resided" indicates whether a foreign fighter resided in a state with a large Muslim population. However, this data alone does not show the level of integration of each potential foreign fighter. States which had a higher percentage of Muslims did show a larger number of travelers. But we cannot know how integrated these individual fighters were prior to their mobilization, either within the Muslim community or the larger society. Actors who believe in extreme versions of Islam, no matter the number of Muslims present in a community, may feel alienated. Figure 3 is a chart by the Pew Research Center showing the percentage of the population that is Muslim in each state. This figure is meant to depict that states with greater than average Muslim populations also had a high number of foreign fighters. As a result the study cannot conclusively conclude that integration will take place in a state with a high Muslim population.

[114] Source: George Washington University, "The Cases Program on Extremism."

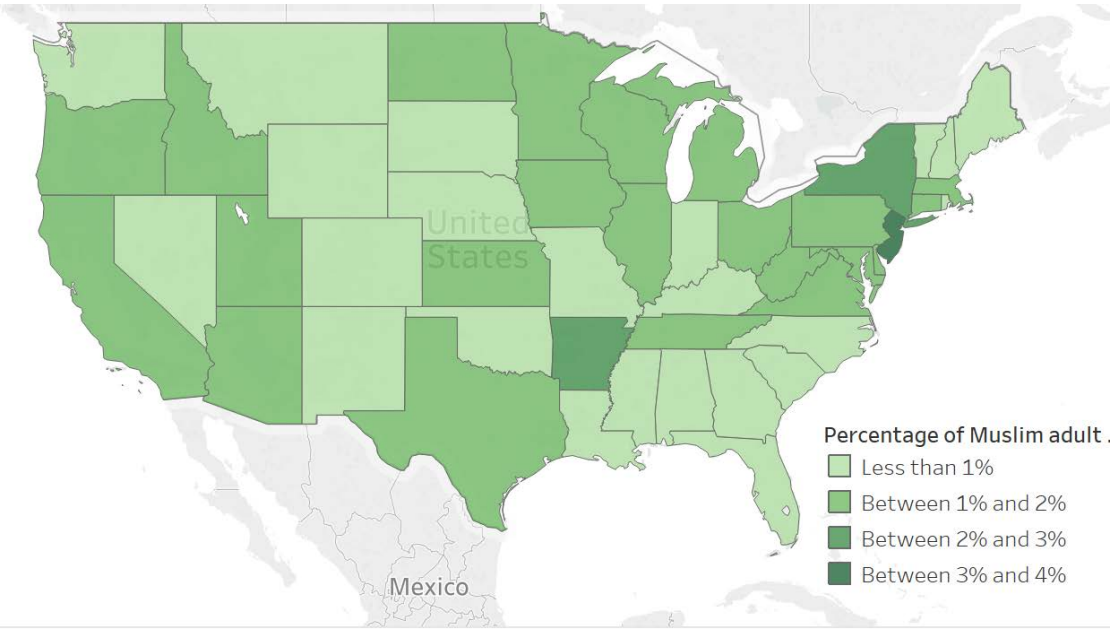

Figure 3. Pew Research Center Study on Muslim Population in Each State[115]

2. Social Media

Through research of current literature, the hypothesis emerged that social media is the causal factor in cases of "lone wolf" travelers. The form of social media most often connected with lone wolf travelers is the unidirectional form of radicalization highlighted in Chapter I. Scholars expect a certain role for social media. They expect it to function as a pull factor, an ideological driver.[116] Moreover, the data reveals that it also serves a second function, namely in the bidirectional context, as a practical travel and relationship building tool.

Analysis indicated approximately 70% travelers used social media. However, a low number of lone wolf travelers were present in the dataset. Also, the high number of social media users indicated that social media was being used for more than mobilization and self-radicalization. The high number of social media users indicates that social media

[115] Source: Benjamin Wormald, "Religious Landscape Study," Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project. May 11, 2015, http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/religious-tradition/muslim/.

[116] Reynolds and Hafez, "Social Network Analysis," 3.

was being used as a practical tool to coordinate travel plans, interact with a greater jihadi community, and build trust. Figure 4 visually depicts social media use and other types of connections. The data in Figure 4 details three different type of relations. The data shows that foreign fighters can be involved in more than one type of relation.

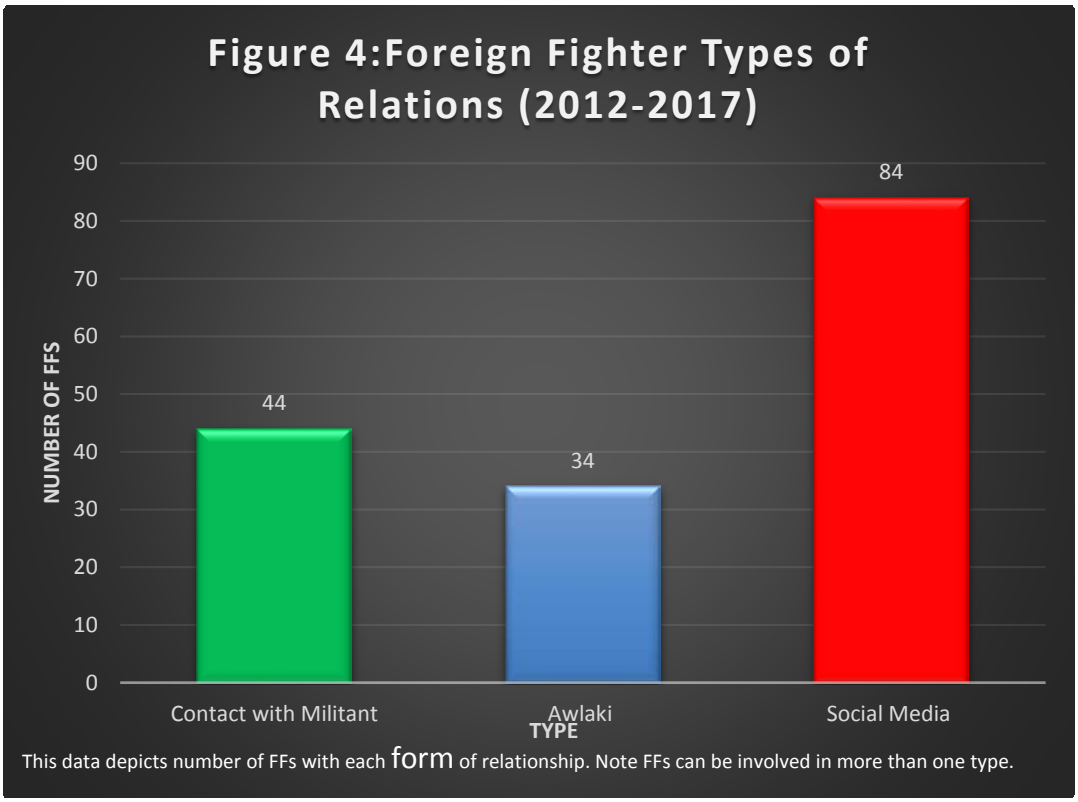

Figure 4. Foreign Fighter Types of Relations (2012–2017)[117]

Social media can be used in multiple ways. First as a driver of radicalization then as a practical tool to enhance network connections. The first way social media leading to radicalization is captured through the story of "MO."[118] His profile is important because after apprehension, his thoughts and motivations were detailed through interviews.[119]The

[117] Source: George Washington University, "The Cases Program on Extremism."

[118] Alexander Hitchens, Seamus Hughes, and Bennett Clifford, "The Travelers: American Jihadists in Syrian and Iraq," Program on Extremism, February 2018, https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/TravelersAmericanJihadistsinSyriaandIraq.pdf 55.

[119] Hitchens, Hughes, and Clifford, 55.

detailed account of this traveler's motivations and intentions during this period provide support for social media driver to radicalization in conjunction with other motivating factors. In 2013, while he was attending college, he was shown to a film by Theo van Gogh which depicted a woman wearing a see-through *burqa* with verses from the Quran tattooed on her body.[120] Mo, in his own words discussed the anger and shock at this depiction. To his dismay, he felt alone, due to the lack of reaction by his fellow students.[121] This pushed him to learn more and search for a better more Muslim environment. Mo considered his main source of learning was online and credits the work of recruiter al-Awlaki impactful. From this he began his search for a place he could live under Muslim law and leave a place where *haram* things were easily accessed.[122] "Lone wolves" even without network support still use social media to interact with someone.

3. Network Connections

Analysis of social ties revealed that network connections play a significant role in mobilization. The numbers of travelers with ties to foreign fighters or militants on social media show that there are numerous ways to establish connections, get information about jihadist activities and propaganda, and build trust. The majority of the travelers included in this thesis had connections to other militants, people who desired to travel to Syria or Iraq.

Within the years captured in this study a number of factors affected how travelers moved from the United States to the battlefield. For instance, travel guides, ISIS recruiters, militant familial connections, and friendship ties all aided in travel. In a few instances these same ties provided obstacles to travel.[123]

Equally as important was the connection between travelers, Awlaki (although he died in 2011), and militants. Awlaki, a Muslim preacher and recruiter who was important in establishing a network which from it a number of foreign fighters traveled to Syria and

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[120] Hitchens, Hughes, and Clifford, 55.

[121] Hitchens, Hughes, and Clifford, 57.

[122] Haram: things not allowed in Islam.

[123] Hitchens, Hughes, and Clifford, "The Travelers," 39.

Iraq. Although this connection was established prior to his death and prior to travel it is important to note the connections made with recruiters and foreign militants. This suggests that while contact with Awlaki was online, accessing sermons only, over 21% of travelers sought additional connections. Figure 4 indicated that even travelers who used social media and had a connection with Awlaki also had other network peer to peer connections. This shows that multiple drivers motivate Americans to travel abroad.

Over 88% of Foreign Fighters had relationships with other foreign fighters prior to mobilization. The connection between social network and mobilization is clearly conveyed in Figure 5. Figure 5 indicated that fewer that 12% of travelers mobilized without a connection to other foreign fighters. The data does distinguish how ties are established and maintained among the 88% of travelers who have connections.

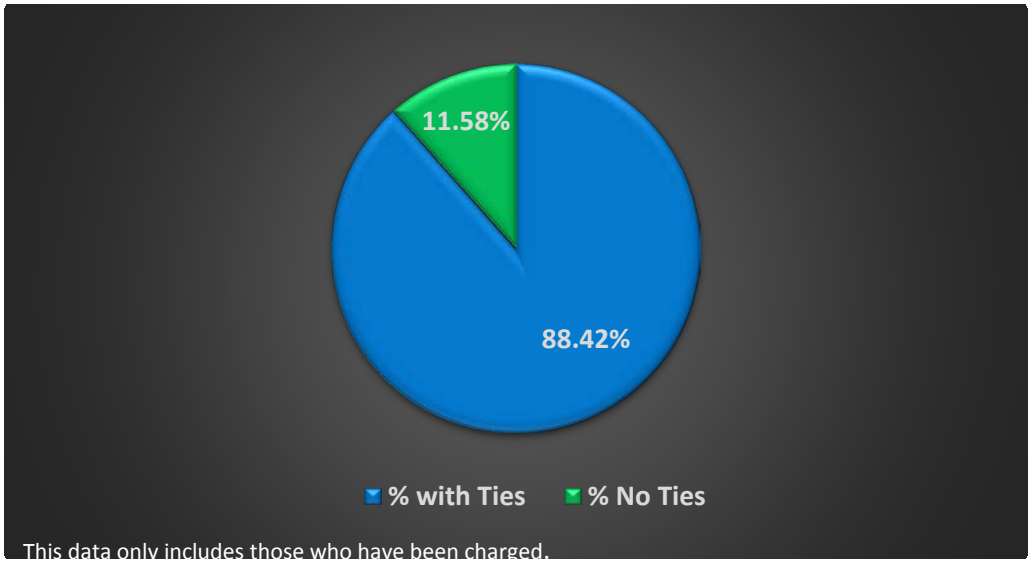

Figure 5. Percentage of Foreign Fighters with Relationships (2012–2017)[124]

Small clusters of foreign fighters displayed different types of connections leading to their mobilization. For instance, in Minnesota a mixture between family and friend ties led to about a dozen individuals to radicalize between 2013 and 2017.[125] On a larger

[124] Source: George Washington University, "The Cases Program on Extremism."

[125] Hitchens, Hughes, and Clifford, "The Travelers," 39.

scale, from the years of 2007 to 2013 at least 41 individuals from the same city traveled to participate in the civil conflict in Somalia, which suggests that a broader social network may have been at play.

Through family and friend connections, travelers reach back to recruit others.[126] This is evident through Abdifatah Ahmed and Douglas McCain who traveled from Minnesota to Syria and used social media to reach back to family and friend connections within the United States.[127] McCain, who was an American, citizen had an earlier connection with Troy Kastigar. Troy was an American who had traveled and been killed while fighting for al-Shabab. Troy provided a symbol for his stateside connections of the possible success of traveling abroad. First, his example showed that there was fame in death while fighting for a Jihadi group. Second, he showed that an American could successfully travel abroad and fight with one of the ideologically extreme groups. Figure six depicts the depth of friendship connection within the Minnesota cluster. This cluster also shows that they connections are kept and strengthened through social media signifying that two of the three drivers motivate Americans to travel abroad. Figure 6 is a representation of the friendship ties within the Minnesota cluster. Major Marcelle Burroni contributed the Social Network Analysis and the data of actors outside of the five years this study surveyed.[128]

Figure 6 is a depiction of 41 individuals who are U.S. citizens, from Minnesota, Muslim, and connected through familial ties. Persons on the outside of the social web are less connected than individuals closer to the center. In green are the friendship ties, red are codefendants, and purple depicts familial ties.

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[126] Hitchens, Hughes, and Clifford, 39.

[127] Hitchens, Hughes, and Clifford, 39.

[128] Social network analysis provided by Major Marcelle Burroni.

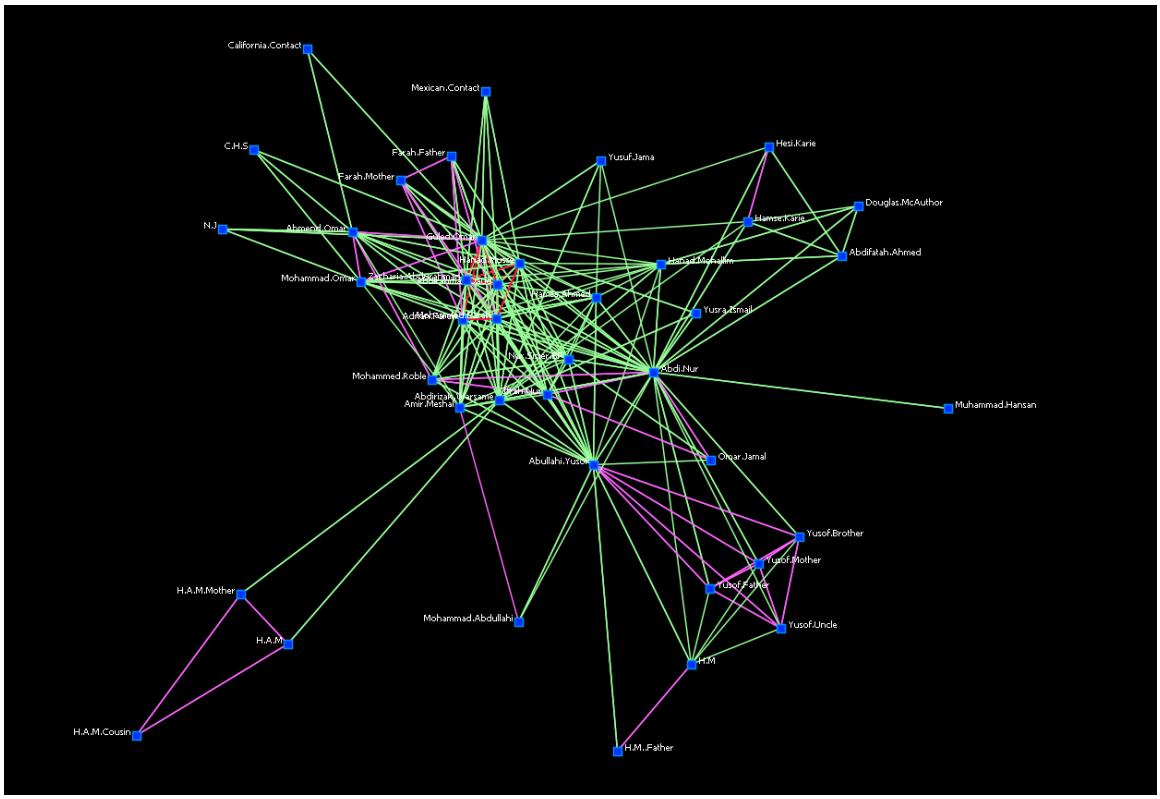

Figure 6. Social Network Analysis of Friendship Ties in Minnesota Foreign Fighters[129]

4. Hypotheses Converge

Results of analysis of 120 American foreign fighter suggest that generally, at least two of the three drivers identified in the hypotheses are present for most of the cases. Actors surveyed have a combination of social media use, integration deficit, or network connections. In Chapter IV, the ways these drivers work together will be discussed in further detail.

[129] Major Marcelle Burroni conducted the social network analysis and contributed the image. Data was contributed by LTJG Alphonso Harris, Jr., and Major Danielle Burroni.

IV. CONCLUSION

A. INTRODUCTION

This thesis analyzed empirical data from open source documents, court cases, and from the George Washington University database to better understand why over 120 American foreign fighters radicalized then mobilized to travel to Iraq and Syria in support of ISIS. This project contributes through demonstrating the importance of social networks. Additionally, it sheds light on the larger role social media is playing in establishing and strengthening traditional social networks. Despite fear of the United States, the danger of self-radicalization purely through online means remains rare. Lastly, this thesis showed that integration deficit and social media exclusively do not explain mobilization of U.S. citizens.

B. HYPOTHESIS EVALUATION

1. Hypothesis 1: Integration Deficit

The purpose of this hypothesis proposed that less integrated Muslims in the United States were more likely to radicalize and mobilize. It predicted that the bulk of foreign fighters leaving the U.S. would be those without personal ties, education, and employment.

Empirically proving integration deficit on foreign fighters leaving from the United States was difficult for two reasons. First, the open source data pertaining to education level and employment was not readily available. Second, data that could support an integration deficit hypothesis did not explicitly correlate with integration. An argument was made in this study for a correlation between marriage, Muslim population in the last state resided, and degree of integration.

The data presented in Chapter III does show poor integration in the foreign fighters who traveled to Iraq and Syria. Foreign fighters who mobilized during the age of 15–29 would be less integrated than older travelers. Lack of education and employment data is a large gap in the test of this hypothesis. Therefore, the lack of data, mixed

outcomes of the results, and the subjective component in testing integration deficit, this thesis cannot decisively assess the hypothesis that integration deficit is a motivation in mobilizing foreign fighters.

2. Hypothesis 2: Social Media Radicalization

Hypothesis 2 examined the influence of social media had on radicalization and mobilization. The study did find evidence that social media along with a network connection led to a high number of mobilization. Literature suggests that lone wolves would be the result of unidirectional social media radicalization alone. As explained in Chapter I, lone wolves are foreign fighters that used social media, radicalized, then mobilized without further contact. However, after analysis of 120 biographies, few were lone wolves.

Alternatively, the data indicated that 84 of 103 foreign fighters used social media and an equally large amount had network connections outside of social media. This indicated a broadening of social media use which led to network connections through social media. This data is important because it correlates to the young age of foreign fighters. The young age of foreign fighters in addition with the high social media use indicates that younger foreign fighters look for other means to establish and build connections with foreign militants when they are seeking to go abroad. Jytte Klausen in *Tweeting the Jihad* suggests that the control militants have over communication of new recruits show that outreach to familial and kinship ties are targeted.[130]

3. Hypothesis 3: Social Network Mobilization

Hypothesis 3 tested the effect social networks had on radicalization and mobilization of foreign fighters. Prior to analysis, the expectation was to find clusters of travelers from the same geographic location with familial, kinship, or friendship ties. The clustering associated with foreign fighter mobilization would indicate a strong relationship between social network connections and mobilization.

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[130] Jytte Klausen, “Tweeting the Jihad,” 1–22.

The results of the study indicated an overwhelming number of foreign fighters with network connections. In the instance of small and large groups, network connections were prominent motivations. Over 88% of the foreign fighters surveyed had a connection with a foreign militant outside of social media. As discussed in Chapter III, the bloc mobilization is a recognized phenomenon in the United States as well as Germany. The large clusters in Minnesota and New York indicate the importance of familial and social network ties. Small clusters like in Chicago and Mississippi also indicate that despite information that is available on the internet pertaining to travel abroad, social network connections are an important force that motivates actors to take the step to travel.

C. FOLLOW-ON RESEARCH

An important implication in this research is the detour it makes from the existing literature concerning the role social media plays within the United States on the radicalization and mobilization process. This thesis demonstrated that social media is a catalyst for younger foreign fighters to establish and build connections. This raises the question of how foreign fighters will look to communicate as social media begins to be seen as susceptible to monitoring. Further research might investigate how quickly new recruits and foreign fighters move away from certain social media applications.

An additional research area is to look deeper into integration deficit using classified sources. Classified sources may be able to reveal more consistent information in the areas of education and employment status. These characteristics along with marital status and last state resided may be able to remove more bias and subjectivity associated with data pertaining to integration deficit.

Moving forward, a recommendation to law enforcement looking to limit the number of foreign fighters who are successfully able to travel aboard is to allow travelers to believe that social media is still a viable avenue for communication and planning. Additionally, law enforcement should as much as lawfully possible monitor the connections of travelers. Additionally, it is recommended that law enforcement provide a counter narrative to recruiting propaganda. The narrative should include 3 things, consequences endured by the family members left behind to deal with the shame and

stigma associated with a high profile criminal act. Second, limit the us(U.S.) versus them(Muslims) narrative that perpetuates the higher levels of government. Last, use disillusioned returning fighters visually detail their first-hand experiences killing fellow Muslims a negative experience. The policy recommendations should be considered as an alternative to force moving forward.

SUPPLEMENTAL. AMERICAN FOREIGN FIGHTERS DATABASE

The supplemental material includes all information collected in an attempt to analyze the three hypotheses from Chapter I. Information contained in this database encompasses all data that could be collected consistently while looking through case files and other open source documents. The database contains names of foreign fighters, biographical data, and social network information. To retrieve the database, contact the Dudley Knox Library at the Naval Postgraduate School.

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