



NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL

MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA

THESIS

(UN)CONVINCED TO KILL

by

Morgan M. Minor

September 2018

Co-Advisors:

David W. Brannan (contractor)
Shannon A. Brown

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REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE			<i>Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188</i>	
Public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instruction, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302, and to the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reduction Project (0704-0188) Washington, DC 20503.				
1. AGENCY USE ONLY (Leave blank)	2. REPORT DATE September 2018	3. REPORT TYPE AND DATES COVERED Master's thesis		
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE (UN)CONVINCED TO KILL			5. FUNDING NUMBERS	
6. AUTHOR(S) Morgan M. Minor				
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Naval Postgraduate School Monterey, CA 93943-5000			8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) N/A			10. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY REPORT NUMBER	
11. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES The views expressed in this thesis are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of Defense or the U.S. Government.				
12a. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release. Distribution is unlimited.			12b. DISTRIBUTION CODE A	
13. ABSTRACT (maximum 200 words) Miscategorization of perceived enemies has plagued the United States since September 11, 2001. With the rise and decline of the Islamic State, this thesis seeks to determine how preparations to handle those suspected of terrorism have changed. Since the Islamic State entered the Western psyche, American foreign fighters have left home only to return from the battlefield disillusioned. Informed by needs theories, this thesis explores idiosyncratic radicalization trajectories of American foreign fighters between 2011 and 2017. Eight foreign fighter cases are examined to determine the individual causes of radicalization and defection. It is evident that the U.S. may be miscategorizing returnees. Through empathetic inquiry, this research found that many Americans traveled to Syria and Iraq to fulfill moral needs, rather than out of bloodthirst. Despite moral reasoning and eventual moral objection to acts witnessed in the self-proclaimed caliphate, misadventures have continually been met with prosecution. Hard power remains the U.S. defacto returnee policy. Consideration of the benefits of soft power in counterterrorism strategies has been largely neglected by U.S. authorities. It is recommended that categorization and treatment of returning American foreign fighters be reevaluated. Soft power may prove an indispensable tool in curtailing the threat of long-term, generational terrorism on U.S. soil.				
14. SUBJECT TERMS radicalization, foreign fighters, Islamic State, defector(s), returnee, counterterrorism, deradicalization, disengagement, transnational terrorism, risk assessment, categorization			15. NUMBER OF PAGES 125	
			16. PRICE CODE	
17. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF REPORT Unclassified	18. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF THIS PAGE Unclassified	19. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF ABSTRACT Unclassified	20. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT UU	

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(UN)CONVINCED TO KILL

Morgan M. Minor
Supervisory Intelligence Analyst, Fusion Center, West Virginia Intelligence
BA, Bethany College, 2012

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

**MASTER OF ARTS IN SECURITY STUDIES
(HOMELAND SECURITY AND DEFENSE)**

from the

**NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL
September 2018**

Approved by: David W. Brannan
Co-Advisor

Shannon A. Brown
Co-Advisor

Erik J. Dahl
Associate Chair for Instruction,
Department of National Security Affairs

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ABSTRACT

Miscategorization of perceived enemies has plagued the United States since September 11, 2001. With the rise and decline of the Islamic State, this thesis seeks to determine how preparations to handle those suspected of terrorism have changed. Since the Islamic State entered the Western psyche, American foreign fighters have left home only to return from the battlefield disillusioned. Informed by needs theories, this thesis explores idiosyncratic radicalization trajectories of American foreign fighters between 2011 and 2017. Eight foreign fighter cases are examined to determine the individual causes of radicalization and defection. It is evident that the U.S. may be miscategorizing returnees. Through empathetic inquiry, this research found that many Americans traveled to Syria and Iraq to fulfill moral needs, rather than out of bloodthirst. Despite moral reasoning and eventual moral objection to acts witnessed in the self-proclaimed caliphate, misadventures have continually been met with prosecution. Hard power remains the U.S. defacto returnee policy. Consideration of the benefits of soft power in counterterrorism strategies has been largely neglected by U.S. authorities. It is recommended that categorization and treatment of returning American foreign fighters be reevaluated. Soft power may prove an indispensable tool in curtailing the threat of long-term, generational terrorism on U.S. soil.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

I.	INTRODUCTION: FOREIGN FIGHTERS RETURNING FROM SYRIA AND IRAQ	1
A.	PROBLEM STATEMENT	1
B.	RESEARCH QUESTION	4
C.	LITERATURE REVIEW	4
1.	Radicalization Trajectories	5
2.	Needs Based Theories	7
3.	Disillusioned vs. Content	8
4.	Deradicalization vs. Disengagement.....	10
5.	Historical Disengagement.....	12
6.	Conclusion	14
D.	LIMITATIONS	14
II.	VILIFICATION OF THE ENEMY: THE FAULT OF THE DISTANCING MECHANISM	17
A.	CLASSIFYING AND CONTAINING THE ENEMY	17
B.	A HISTORY OF <i>DO NOT PASS GO</i> POLICY	21
III.	CONVINCED: THE BEGINNING OF THE JIHADI LIFE-CYCLE	29
A.	RADICALIZATION: ONE SIZE FITS ONE	29
B.	FOREIGN FIGHTERS: THE CONVINCED.....	32
C.	AMERICAN FOREIGN FIGHTERS.....	35
D.	MORALITY OF UTOPIAN DREAMS.....	48
IV.	UNCONVINCED: THE LONG MARCH HOME	51
A.	“HOME”	51
B.	FOREIGN FIGHTERS RETURNEES	52
C.	UNCONVINCED	60
D.	AMERICA’S RETURNEES	61
E.	HARSH REALITY OF UNFULFILLED BASIC NEEDS	71
V.	BREAKING THE CYCLE	75
A.	AN ALTERNATIVE RETURN NARRATIVE FOR BILAL ABOOD	75
B.	A PRESCRIPTION FOR THE UNCONVINCED	77
C.	A GROWING NEED FOR DERADICALIZATION	81

D.	CHALLENGES, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	83
E.	FUTURE RESEARCH.....	85
1.	Community Manager.....	85
2.	Leveraging the Defector Narrative.....	85
F.	SIGNIFICANCE	86
LIST OF REFERENCES.....		87
INITIAL DISTRIBUTION LIST		103

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.	Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs	31
Figure 2.	Alderfer's ERG Approach	32

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LIST OF TABLES

Table 1.	American Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq	36
Table 2.	Returnees Involved in the Paris Attacks	58
Table 3.	Assessing the Risk of the Unconvinced.....	80

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ANF	Al-Nusrah Front for the People of the Levant
AQ	al-Qaida
AQAP	al Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula
AUMF	Authorization of Military Force
BOP	Bureau of Prisons
CTC	Combatting Terrorism Center
CVE	Countering Violent Extremism
DHS	Department of Homeland Security
DOJ	Department of Justice
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
FSA	Free Syrian Army
FTO	Foreign Terrorist Organization
HVE	Homegrown Violent Extremist
IC	Intelligence Community
IED	Improvised Explosive Device
IS	Islamic State
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NCTC	National Counterterrorism Center
PRAC	Prevention, Rehabilitation, After-care
PTSD	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
RRG	Religious Rehabilitation Group
SOI	Subject of Interest
TTP	Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan
TTP	Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures
VWP	Visa Waiver Program

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As the territorial significance once held by the Islamic State continues to deteriorate, Western nations are grappling with how to handle returning foreign fighters. Processing, categorization, and management of returning foreign fighters must be done in a way that reduces the risk of increased radicalization, both within the justice system and on the streets.

The radicalizing influence of the mistreatment of those categorized as enemies has been leveraged through terrorist propaganda since the declaration of the *War on Terror*. During this time, freedom, a core American value, was questioned as the hunt for those involved in the September 11, 2001, attacks was underway. Motivational speakers who later aligned with al-Qaeda, such as Anwar al-Awlaki, proselytized the infringements of freedom. In an address before the Dar Al-Hijrah congregation during the *jummah* prayer on March 22, 2002, al-Awlaki stated,

So this is not a war on terrorism—we need to all be clear about this. This is a war against Muslims and Islam. Not only is it happening worldwide, but it is happening right here in America, that is claiming to be fighting this war for the sake of freedom while it's infringing of the freedom of its own citizens—just because they're Muslim, for no other reason.¹

Miscategorization and mistreatment of the perceived enemy in the post September 11, 2001 era has had a radicalizing effect on margins of the population. Those persons labeled enemy combatants, despite citizenship or guilt, were stripped of their freedom. During this time, the United States struggled with the categorization of the enemy resulting in the warehousing of those allegedly associated with terrorism.

The emergence of the Islamic State and the creation of the self-proclaimed caliphate exacerbated radicalization to the point of travel. Reporting indicates that approximately 250 to 300 Americans were convinced to adopt Salafi-jihadist ideology and make *hijrah*,

¹ Scott Shane, *Objective Troy: A Terrorist, A President, and the Rise of the Drone* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2015), 104.

or religiously justified migration, to the caliphate.² As the Islamic State began to hemorrhage its territorial hold in 2017, the question remained: how would the United States handle those labeled as returning foreign fighters? Had the U.S. learned from the categorization issues of its past? Nearly two decades after September 11, 2001, this thesis is grounded in the suspicion that the United States continues to misunderstand and miscategorize its enemies.

In an effort to answer this question, this thesis reviewed eight American foreign fighter cases from 2011 to 2017. Of the eight cases examined, seven had returned home after traveling to Iraq and Syria to be a part of the creation of the caliphate. Using needs theories, this thesis found that many American foreign fighters traveled to the caliphate to fulfill perceived moral obligations. Upon first-hand realization of the brutality and un-Islamic gestures of the Islamic State, those able to escape returned from their misadventure. This finding is counter to the common belief that foreign fighters travel to quench a thirst for violence without consequence and may require reconsideration of the policies adopted to respond to returning foreign fighters.

In the United States, returning foreign fighters have continually been met with prosecution, which serves as the defacto returnee policy. Though no one should be absolved of the consequences for his or her actions, softer approaches to counterterrorism and responses to terrorism could produce more positive, long-term results, especially in cases involving a misadventure. This thesis provides a framework for understanding the idiosyncratic reasons for radicalization and return through needs theories. Through an empathetic lens, it is recommended that counterterrorism officials view returning foreign fighters first as humans who have reacted to emotions after witnessing atrocities and second as a resource to understand ideologies that may differ from personal beliefs.

The United States must disengage from the kinetic war on terror and enter the battle of ideas where the perpetual war is being fought. As the Islamic State loses legitimacy, this

² Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, Seamus Hughes, and Bennett Clifford, *The Travelers American Jihadists in Syria and Iraq* (Washington, D.C.: Program on Extremism The George Washington University, February 2018), <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/extremism.gwu.edu/files/TravelersAmericanJihadistsinSyriaandIraq.pdf>.

battle of ideas will continue to be waged by Salafi-jihadists on the internet. Utilizing the experiences of returned foreign fighters to creating a compelling, first-person counter narrative is likely to result in more resiliency against terrorism. When U.S. authorities assess a returnee to present a threat, they should utilize hard-power policies, such as prosecution and prison. However, for those who do not present a threat, authorities should consider softer policies, such as deradicalization and the reestablishment a higher purpose through reintegration. The challenge lies in determining the difference between returnees who present a threat and those who do not. This thesis recommends that the United States implement a returnee risk assessment tool to understand the level of threat presented by each returning foreign fighter.

The methods by which the United States implements a deradicalization and reintegration strategy will alter its collective resiliency against radicalization and those vulnerable to terrorist ideology. In order to curtail the threat of long-term, generational terrorism in the United States, the U.S. should consider proper categorization and treatment of these Americans returning from the Islamic State.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It may take a village to raise a child, but it takes the incredible team at the Naval Postgraduate School Center for Homeland Defense and Security (CHDS) to foster a thesis. I have endless gratitude to each member of the team. Without knowing, each of you has impacted me and my outlook on homeland security in unimaginable ways.

Dr. Chris Bellavita, you saw in me what I was unsure I saw in myself, and for that I am forever grateful. Dr. David Brannan, your understanding and teaching on the morality of torture significantly impacted how I see the world and broadened my aperture to the moral injuries of U.S. foreign policy. It is through this broadened lens that I was able to find empathy for those whose actions differ from my own. You were also always there to keep me grounded and tell me that I was being too critical of myself, and for that I am thankful. Dr. Shannon Brown, without your quick ability to imagine and frame ideas, this research would have lacked wholeness. You took the pieces and helped put them into a historical box. As for the rest of the CHDS team, your words and lessons acted to broaden my understanding of the problem space, each adding an unanticipated piece to the puzzle, each making the research more meaningful. It is never enough, but thank you from the bottom of my heart.

To Cohort 1701/1702, thank you for not looking at me and seeing a young, green analyst who did not belong among a group of experienced professionals, but still keeping me grounded with “were you even born” jokes. All thirty-one of you, including those who were called to solve the world’s problems and will not walk with us, without all of you the experience would not have been worth it. Each of you brings a unique perspective from your corner of the world. Homeland security really does start with hometown security, and the ideas generated through these eighteen months are proof that hometown ideas can make the homeland safer.

Finally, this journey would not have been complete without my incredible support network: my Mom, Dad, and brother. You have supported me through all of life’s many adventures. To my amazing parents, who I am confident have always imagined me in a

cape at the office, it is your pride that pushes me to be a better human and fight for peace with humility. You made me a dreamer and I love you both. Kilo, (wo)man's best friend, it is probably you who suffered the most in my absence, but you were faithfully at my feet during those late nights in the office. We will run a few extra miles this year. To my fiancé, Taylor, you were brave enough to ask me to marry you in the thick of this ride and patient enough to understand that planning a wedding was not feasible. This is our year.

Finally, I dedicate this effort to my nephew, Dominic, who was born as we embarked on this great journey. If the world could be viewed through your eyes, this thesis would not be necessary. Stay forever young.

I. INTRODUCTION: FOREIGN FIGHTERS RETURNING FROM SYRIA AND IRAQ

“If we fail to address it, my concern is in five or 10 years we’ll have Isis [sic] 2.0 or Al Qaeda 3.0 and the process will start again somewhere else in the world.”

—General Paul J. Selva, January 30, 2018

A. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Beginning in 2011, foreign fighters flocked to join the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria in unprecedented numbers.¹ Despite international efforts to curtail the flow of foreign fighters, by April 2015 estimates suggested that as many as 22,000 foreign fighters had joined the conflict.² Many U.S. based recruits were radicalized online through propaganda developed and released by terrorist organizations, such as al-Qaida (AQ) and the Islamic State (IS).³ Although this virtual propaganda convinced many foreign fighters from numerous countries to join terror organizations, the real face-to-face interaction with the Islamic State caused a wave of foreign fighters to defect.⁴ Defectors choosing to return to their places of origin present security challenges to the United States and the West. Former Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Director James Comey cautioned members of the House of Representative in 2014 to prepare for the threat of a “terrorist diaspora” from

¹ Soufan Group, *Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq* (New York, NY: Soufan Group, December 2015), 10, http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG_ForeignFightersUpdate3.pdf; and Peter Bergen et al., *ISIS in the West: The Western Militant Flow to Syria and Iraq* (Washington, DC: New America, March 25, 2016), 13–18, <https://static.newamerica.org/attachments/12898-isis-in-the-west-march-2016/ISIS-in-the-West-II.8a0c30a894ec4b96a8340d5b26779456.pdf>.

² Peter Neumann *Foreign Fighter Total in Syria/Iraq Now Exceeds 20,000; Surpasses Afghanistan Conflict in 1980s* (King’s College, London: International Center for the Study of Radicalization, January 26, 2015), 1, <http://icsr.info/2015/01/foreign-fighter-total-syriairaq-now-exceeds-20000-surpasses-afghanistan-conflict-1980s/>.

³ This thesis defines a foreign fighter as an individual who successfully joins and operates, whether as a combatant, facilitator, or humanitarian, within the confines of an insurgency. See Thomas Hegghammer, “The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters,” *International Security* 35, no. 3 (2010–11): 58–60.

⁴ Cameron Glenn, “Timeline: The Rise, Spread and Fall of the Islamic State,” *Wilson Center*, December 19, 2017, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/timeline-the-rise-spread-and-fall-the-islamic-state>.

Syria and Iraq.⁵ According to the Soufan Group, of the more than 40,000 foreign fighters who joined, it is estimated that at least 5,600 have returned home.⁶ Potential exists throughout the world for an escalation in foreign fighter returnee numbers as the Islamic State treads to hold territorial relevance. As presented in the U.S. National Security Strategy, the risk is present and growing:

Even after the territorial defeat of ISIS and al-Qaida in Syria and Iraq, the threat from these jihadist terrorists will persist. They have used battlefields as test beds for terror and have exported tools and tactics to their followers, from where they can continue to plot and launch attacks on the United States and our allies.⁷

During the latter months of 2017, the Islamic State faced significant losses as coalition members of Operation Inherent Resolve diligently sought defeat.⁸ On November 12, 2017, Secretary of Defense James Mattis pledged indefinite U.S. military support against IS in an effort to prevent the emergence of an “ISIS 2.0.”⁹ Within the next week Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al Abadi and Iranian President Hassan Rouhani had declared the end of the Islamic State.¹⁰ Even with the declared military defeat, kinetic power does not thwart ideological advancements achieved by the Islamic States’ online propaganda conglomerate, which continues to fuel the indoctrination of sympathizers on a global scale. Managing the evolving threat as foreign fighters return must be done from a platform of rehabilitation, reintegration, and resilience. As stated by Rohan Gunaratna, “Without

⁵ House Homeland Security Committee, *Final Report of the Task Force on Combating Terrorist and Foreign Fighter Travel* (Washington, D.C.: Skyhorse Publishing, Inc., 2015), 9; and *Worldwide Threats to the Homeland: Hearing before the Committee on Homeland Security*, House of Representatives, 113th Cong., 2nd sess. (September 17, 2014) (statement of James Comey, Former FBI Director).

⁶ Richard Barrett, *Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees* (New York, NY: Soufan Center, October 2017), 5, <http://thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Beyond-the-Caliphate-Foreign-Fighters-and-the-Threat-of-Returnees-TSC-Report-October-2017.pdf>.

⁷ Donald J. Trump, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: White House, 2017) 10–11, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

⁸ Glenn, “Timeline: The Rise, Spread and Fall of the Islamic State.”

⁹ Phil Stewart, “U.S. to fight Islamic State in Syria ‘as long as they want to fight’: Mattis,” *Reuters*, November 13, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-usa-syria/u-s-to-fight-islamic-state-in-syria-as-long-as-they-want-to-fight-mattis-idUSKBN1DE037>.

¹⁰ Glenn, “Timeline: The Rise, Spread and Fall of the Islamic State.”

winning over the hearts and minds of the population, insurgent campaigns will continue.”¹¹ Addressing the growing threat of foreign fighter recidivism must take center stage as their opportunities to engage in foreign theaters is increasingly diminished by the collapse of the Islamic State.

Radicalization continues to confound law enforcement and professionals tasked with protecting the U.S. homeland, making deradicalization options difficult to discern. Because radicalization is a seemingly idiosyncratic process stemming from a perceived deprivation of needs, this research will use needs theories to determine the causes driving radicalization and defection. Though only an estimated 16 percent of American foreign fighters have returned, the recent collapse of IS strongholds may result in an increase in returnees.¹² Foreign fighters may return for multiple reasons, either as disillusioned defectors or as hardened fighters eager to continue the fight. Understanding the decisions to join and then defect from a terrorist network from the perspective of those who radicalized is key to effectively implementing deradicalization programs in the West. Defectors, despite their impetus for leaving terrorism, provide an opportunity for a greater understanding of the drivers of radicalization and the development of an effective counter narrative strategy. Empathizing with a foreign fighter’s driving needs can provide a frame with which to design deradicalization programs unique to each individual.

The U.S. government rarely offers empathy to individuals, including to American citizens, who have radicalized and/or become foreign fighters overseas. This research is grounded in the suspicion that we may be misunderstanding and misbranding the reasons that American foreign fighters go to battle and therefore, missing an opportunity to build a more resilient community against terrorism. Thus far, the number of returnees to the United States has been a manageable number to engage in intervention and reintegration. However, the lack of policy and preparedness, and the inability to look past the perception of what it means to be a *terrorist*, has resulted in a cookie-cutter, prison approach.

¹¹ Rohan Gunaratna, “Terrorist Rehabilitation: Genesis, Genealogy and Likely Future,” in *Terrorist Rehabilitation A New Frontier in Counter-terrorism*, ed. by Rohan Gunaratna and Mohamed Bin Ali (London: Imperial College Press, 2015), 5.

¹² Soufan Group, *Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq*, 19–20.

Deradicalization or disengagement programs need to be evaluated to determine how best to sort and process returning foreign fighters, especially at a time when the number of returnees could increase as dreams of living under the caliphate diminish.

Breaking down cognitive bias stemming from the perception of what it means to be a *foreign fighter*, and/or an *ex-terrorist*, must be addressed at the government and community levels. Since the attacks on September 11, 2001, media labels for those who support or commit acts of terrorism have further altered the public perception of terrorism. Negative labels such as, murderous psycho and insane gunman are typical examples of common statements that feed the us-vs.-them narrative that fuels terrorist organizations and boosts their recruitment efforts. Biases have limited the government's ability to consider the reintegration of returnees - a dogma that merits exploration.

B. RESEARCH QUESTION

With the collapse of the Islamic State, how are governments prepared to sort and process the returning foreign fighters?

In order to answer this primary question, this thesis will explore the following sub-questions using a descriptive and evaluative approach:

1. Why have American foreign fighters become disillusioned with the cause that drove them toward terrorism?
2. Can U.S. authorities leverage the idiosyncrasies of radicalization to increase the success of deradicalization programs for disillusioned returnees?
3. Should Western-style governments adopt disengagement or deradicalization approaches to address returning foreign fighters?
4. When should reintegration take place and to what extent should the U.S. justice system offer forgiveness to foreign fighters?

C. LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review brings to light the varied studies on radicalization as well as the push and pull factors that cause an individual to adopt a radical ideology. The nuances

between disengagement and deradicalization are also explored in an effort to categorize which counterterrorism strategies best serve returnees. Western-style governments have been slow to adopt softer approaches to counterterrorism; however, the success of hard and soft policy approaches to terrorism must be understood to recommend a path forward to manage the potential influx of returning foreign fighter, as well as those individuals teetering on the edge of violence.

1. Radicalization Trajectories

Numerous terrorism scholars have studied and defined the racialization process in nuanced ways, especially following September 11, 2001, and given the recent rise of homegrown violent extremism in the West. The National Counterterrorism Center defines radicalization as the “process by which individuals come to believe that their engagement in or facilitation of nonstate violence to achieve social or political change is necessary and justified.”¹³ While most agree that radicalization is a process rather than a single event, and that it becomes increasingly difficult to disembark as the process progresses, much debate has sparked regarding the linear or non-linear path involved in moving toward violence.¹⁴

Quintain Wiktorowiz endorses a linear and emergent path to radicalization consisting of four stages: cognitive opening, religious seeking, frame alignment, and socialization.¹⁵ According to Wiktorowiz, a cognitive opening begins the process and causes an individual to become receptive to radical ideas.¹⁶ The second stage, religious seeking, results in an opening to radical views and religious concepts espoused by those who hold radical beliefs. In the frame alignment stage, the individual sees his or her own

¹³ National Counterterrorism Center, *(U) Radicalization and Mobilization Dynamics of Violent Sunni Islamic Extremists: A Primer*, (Washington, D.C.: NCTC, October 2017), 4.

¹⁴ Fathali M. Moghaddam, “The Staircase to Terrorism: A Psychological Exploration,” *American Psychologist* 60, no. 2 (February-March 2005): 161, doi:10.1037/0003-066X.60.2.161.

¹⁵ Michael King and Donald M. Taylor, “The Radicalization of Homegrown Jihadists: A Review of Theoretical Models and Social Psychological Evidence,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 23, no. 4 (September 2011): 605.

¹⁶ King and Taylor, “The Radicalization of Homegrown Jihadists: A Review of Theoretical Models and Social Psychological Evidence,” 606.

worldview as related to the group. Progression from this stage allows socialization, the final stage, to occur by accepting the ideology of the group as one's own belief.¹⁷

Iranian-born psychologist Fathali Moghaddam promotes a linear, progressive “staircase to terrorism” metaphor to explain the radicalization process.¹⁸ Moghaddam suggests five floors on a “narrowing staircase” where each floor “leads to higher and higher floors, and whether someone remains on a particular floor depends on the doors and spaces that persons imagine to be open to her or him on that floor.”¹⁹ The ground floor is where the majority of people exist and perceive injustices. The first floor on the staircase reveals options for handling those injustices. According to Moghaddam, “those who vehemently blame ‘others’ for their perceived problems climb the staircase to the second floor.”²⁰ On the second floor, individuals escalate to out-group aggression which further ingrains the us-vs.-them narrative. Floor three signifies “moral engagement” with the perceived injustices. Moghaddam describes this floor as a “shadow world with a parallel morality that justifies ‘the struggle.’”²¹ Once an individual radicalizes to the fourth and fifth floors, Moghaddam assessed that there is a nearly nonexistent chance of survival. The fourth floor further legitimizes the parallel world and the terrorist organization as well as the recruit's position in the world. The fifth and final floor is the act of violence against civilian targets who, through the course of climbing the staircase, have become the out-group.²²

Marc Sagemen, a renowned scholar of modern terrorism, considers the process of radicalization to be non-linear.²³ In this model, four prongs lead to violence but do not have to occur in a sequential order. The prongs, as similarly offered by Wiktorowiz, involve

¹⁷ King and Taylor, “The Radicalization of Homegrown Jihadists,” 606.

¹⁸ Moghaddam, “The Staircase to Terrorism: A Psychological Exploration,” 161.

¹⁹ Moghaddam, 161.

²⁰ Moghaddam, 164.

²¹ Moghaddam, 165.

²² Moghaddam, 165–166.

²³ King and Taylor, “The Radicalization of Homegrown Jihadists,” 605.

a cognitive event or moral outrage, framing of the world, resonance of subjective experiences, and interaction with individuals who share an ideological backbone.²⁴

Though all three scholars offer differing explanations for the steps, or stairs, on the trajectory towards violence, each radicalization framework points to a personal, cognitive event that spurs the process. This thesis will build upon the personal nature of radicalization, looking for idiosyncratic reasons within American foreign fighters that led them to the conflict in Syria and Iraq. Understanding the cognitive events intertwined in each foreign fighter's radicalization trajectory will be examined to find a link to execute successful deradicalization practices in the United States.

2. Needs Based Theories

Throughout history psychologists and varying scholars have studied theories related to motivation to explain the actions of individuals and groups. Needs based theories, primarily Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Clayton Alderfer's Existence, Relatedness, Growth (ERG) Approach will inform this study by looking at foreign fighters on a micro-level. Maslow's theory contends that needs motivate an individual's decision.²⁵ The structure of the hierarchy, as designed by Maslow, requires the individual to have met lower needs before satisfying the higher needs.²⁶ In order from lowest level to the highest level of achievement, the needs are as follows: physiological needs, safety needs, belonging and love needs, esteem needs, and, at the highest level, self-actualization needs. Researchers have recognized that Maslow's Hierarchy is limited in the concept of growth in that it does not allow an individual to satisfy multiple needs simultaneously. Clayton Alderfer acknowledges these limitations.

Alderfer's ERG Approach takes the concept of needs-based motivations established by Maslow and refines it to allow for the systemic movement between

²⁴ King and Taylor, 608.

²⁵ Tugba Turabik and Gulsun Atanur Baskan, "The Importance of Motivation Theories in Terms Of Education Systems," *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 186 (May 13, 2015): 1056–1057, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.04.006>.

²⁶ Turabik and Baskan, "The Importance of Motivation Theories in Terms Of Education Systems," 1056–1057.

categories. ERG allows individuals to exist in, and attempt to satisfy, more than one need at any given time and to move in either direction.²⁷ Counter to Maslow's Hierarchy, Alderfer presents an awareness of the effects of disappointment and regret principles. These principles allow the inability to satisfy a higher need to cause a feeling of dissatisfaction of lower needs.²⁸ This approach is more compatible to the experience of foreign fighters who become disillusioned with terrorism and therefore will be used to inform this thesis in the assessment of eight case studies. Maslow's and Alderfer's needs frameworks fill a information void left by current radicalization trajectories. This thesis will leverage the humanness associated with needs theories to eliminate cognitive biases commonly associated with terrorism.

3. Disillusioned vs. Content

Though the authenticity of each account is unverifiable, a number of primary accounts of disillusionment were discovered through video and recent literature related to foreign fighters. Disillusionment often resulted following face-to-face interaction with the Islamic State. "It's actually quite fun," tweeted British foreign fighter Abu Sumayyah Al-Britani. Similar statements of contentment among foreign fighters can be witnessed; however, the literature also articulates that many fighters arriving in the self-proclaimed caliphate become disillusioned when face-to-face with those responsible for the dissemination of the propaganda that led them to the caliphate.²⁹ Parents of foreign fighters have expressed hearing "doubt" in the voices of sons who are fighting with the Islamic State.³⁰ This statement suggests that communication is not as strict as proposed in some literature related to the conditions within Syria and Iraq. Peter R. Neumann, with the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, interviewed 58

²⁷ Turabik and Baskan, 1059.

²⁸ Turabik and Baskan, 1059.

²⁹ Jytte Klausen, "Tweeting the Jihad: Social Media Networks of Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 38, no. 1 (January 2, 2015): 4. doi:10.1080/1057610X.2014.974948.

³⁰ Janny Groen, "Syriëgangers Na Terugkeer Voorlopig Niet Vervolgd - Buitenland - Voor Nieuws, Achtergronden En Columns," *De Volkskrant*, October 19, 2013. <https://www.volkskrant.nl/buitenland/syriegangers-na-terugkeer-voorlopig-niet-vervolgd~a3529923/>.

individuals who defected from IS after January 2014. Through these narratives, Neuman found that four primary motives for disillusionment emerged: IS being focused on fighting Sunni Muslims rather than the Bashar al-Assad regime; IS being responsible for brutality against fellow Sunni Muslims, who it considers to be *kafir* (non-believers); IS being un-Islamic; and life under IS being “harsh and disappointing.”³¹

Interviews conducted by Anne Speckhard and Ahmat S. Yayla offer numerous accounts of hardened Islamic State fighters who escaped IS territory.³² These fighters, who occupied various roles within the terrorist organization, repeatedly use the word *convinced* when describing the reasons why they initially join IS.³³ Throughout the interviews, the defectors expressed a sense of appreciation to IS for teaching those who did not previously have access to religious education about Islam. The level of appreciation was apparent despite having risked their lives to escape the atrocities that the Islamic State had committed.³⁴ These defectors express in detail what led them to join and provide a powerful message to the world not to join IS.³⁵ One troubling statement repeated by the defectors suggested the foreign fighters were the most brutal and the “true believers,” who would come to Syria to fight on the front lines.³⁶ Abu Zafir, a defector originally from Syria, categorizes members of *Ad-Dawlah* (Arabic for “the state”) into five types, with the second type being bloodthirsty individuals, or sadistic psychopaths.³⁷ He offers that these bloodthirsty individuals come from around the world to indulge their desire to kill.³⁸ This

³¹ Peter R. Neumann, *Victims, Perpetrators, Assets: The Narratives of Islamic State Defectors*, (London: The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, 2015), 1, <http://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/ICSR-Report-Victims-Perpetrators-Assets-The-Narratives-of-Islamic-State-Defectors.pdf>.

³² Anne Speckhard and Ahmat S. Yayla, *ISIS Defectors Inside Stories of the Terrorist Caliphate* (Virginia: Advances Press, LLC., 2016), 15–367.

³³ Speckhard and Yayla, *ISIS Defectors Inside Stories of the Terrorist Caliphate*, 15–337.

³⁴ Speckhard and Yayla, 15–337.

³⁵ Speckhard and Yayla, 15–337.

³⁶ Speckhard and Yayla, 88.

³⁷ *Ad-Dawlah* literally means “the State” and is the term in which the Islamic State forces its members to use when referring to the self-proclaimed State. See Speckhard and Yayla, “*ISIS Defectors Inside Stories of the Terrorist Caliphate*,” 162.

³⁸ Speckhard and Yayla, *ISIS Defectors Inside Stories of the Terrorist Caliphate*, 162.

statement merits further research of mental health conditions as an underlying factor that may lead Westerners to join IS.

A former IS fighter, who defected to fight for the Free Syrian Army, stated in a video that the Islamic State “showed only its good face” in the beginning.³⁹ Though this jihadi was not a foreign fighter, his account depicts a feeling that is likely felt by those who join from abroad and witness the firsthand change in IS. Splitting, the result of a non-cohesive group, leads to members feeling disenchanted with the actions of other members within the group. A foreign fighter who, according to his interview, trained with IS for eight months, stated that many “brothers were saddened and felt deceived,” after arriving in IS-controlled territory.⁴⁰ He further articulated that he had been drawn to IS propaganda and that the propaganda is full of lies that attract recruits; his experience ended up being the “opposite of what they said.”⁴¹ This propaganda, issued through slick, glossy form, has proved to be inspirational and manipulative on a global scale.

4. Deradicalization vs. Disengagement

This thesis will consider avenues most likely to generate movement away from terroristic behavior. Knowing how and where to interject an alternative ideology and/or lifestyle requires an understanding of the foreign fighter’s life cycle and the nuances tied to leaving terrorism. Arie Perliger and Daniel Milton of the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point define the phases of the foreign fighter’s life cycle as pre-departure, in theater, and return.⁴² Pre-departure encompasses the method of recruitment used to convince the individual to join as well as demographic and socio-economic status of the

³⁹ “Meeting ISIL 1 (Press TV Goes Deep inside the Terrorist Group),” YouTube video, 38:32, posted by PressTV Documentaries, August 14, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5IUHkb5iHCw>.

⁴⁰ “Interview with an Ex-ISIS Member. What Is Life like for an Average Fighter in ISIS? Is It the “Islamic State” as Advertised? He Will Tell Us His from His Own Perspective. Please Share! Share! And Share Again!,” YouTube video, 00:49, posted by Simon Harris, August 26, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1BHFcaFjK8Y>.

⁴¹ Harris, “Interview with an Ex-ISIS Member.”

⁴² Arie Perliger and Daniel Milton, *From Cradle to Grave: The Life cycle of Foreign Fighter in Iraq and Syria* (West Point: Combating Terrorism Center, November 2016), 10, <https://ctc.usma.edu/posts/from-cradle-to-grave-the-life-cycle-of-foreign-fighters-in-iraq-and-syria>.

individual. Experience, indoctrination, and ideology are the focus of the in-theater phase.⁴³ Positive or negative experiences in this phase could lead to the return phase. Though all phases may offer injection points, this thesis will focus on opportunities to deploy social integration during and after the return phase occurs.

According to the literature, disengagement and deradicalization are not the same. Omar Ashour defines deradicalization as “a process that leads an individual or group to change attitudes about violence—specifically about the appropriateness of violence against civilians.”⁴⁴ Disengagement involves leaving violence while deradicalization constitutes a change in ideological views.⁴⁵ Tore Bjorgo and John Horgan offer three core elements for reaching peace in post-conflict societies: disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration.⁴⁶ These elements are “absent from counterterrorism strategies.”⁴⁷ Bjorgo and Horgan have found that the concept of deradicalization is misrepresented by authorities as a means to prevent radicalization, rather than to change cognition and behavior.⁴⁸ As radicalization is individual, the path of disengagement is individual and dependent on numerous factors; however, Horgan suggests that someone who disengages is not necessarily “deradicalized.”⁴⁹ The National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) similarly defines disengagement as a move “away from opportunities to participate in or support violence.”⁵⁰ NCTC offers deradicalization as a *consequence* of disengagement reflecting

⁴³ Perlinger and Milton, *From Cradle to Grave: The Life cycle of Foreign Fighter in Iraq and Syria*, 10.

⁴⁴ Omar Ashour, “De-radicalization of Jihad? The Impact of Egyptian Islamist Revisionists on al Qaeda,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11, no. 14 (March 2008), 11–14, <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/36/html>.

⁴⁵ Omar Ashour, “De-radicalization of Jihad? The Impact of Egyptian Islamist Revisionists on al Qaeda,” 11–14.

⁴⁶ Tore Bjorgo and John Horgan, “Introduction,” in *Leaving Terrorism Behind Individual and Collective Disengagement*, ed. Tore Bjorgo and John Horgan (Oxon: Routledge, 2009): 1–13.

⁴⁷ Bjorgo and Horgan, Introduction, 1.

⁴⁸ Bjorgo and Horgan, Introduction, 3.

⁴⁹ John Horgan, “Individual Disengagement,” in *Leaving Terrorism Behind Individual and Collective Disengagement*, ed. Tore Bjorgo and John Horgan (Oxon: Routledge, 2009): 27.

⁵⁰ National Counterterrorism Center, “(U) Radicalization and Mobilization Dynamics of Violent Sunni Islamic Extremists: A Primer,” 2.

a “change in attitude.”⁵¹ The preponderance of literature describes the nuances between the definitions of disengagement and deradicalization are described with little variance, though the differences are important when understanding where an individual fits on the terrorism spectrum. This thesis will focus on the deradicalization phase as it relates to returning foreign fighters.

5. Historical Disengagement

Throughout history, politically motivated conflicts, rooted in religious differences, have begun and ended both with a sense of achievement by the rebels and in absence of sought change or perceived justice. The violence in Northern Ireland provides an example of disengagement from a cause. According to Ferguson et al., push or pull factors played a role in fighter’s decisions to disengage from the conflict in Northern Ireland.⁵² The research identified multiple *incentives* that highlight the motivations for ending conflict. Life changes include age, education, and concern for future generations. In the case of Northern Ireland, fighters finding a *thinking space* was considered by authorities to be a factor in disengagement from the conflict. This “space to think” was typically prison. Leadership and future visions also played a role in the life changes theme of disengagement in Northern Ireland.⁵³

Rehabilitation is a relatively new concept in terms of counterterrorism and a framework that the United States has been slow to consider; however, the question of how to handle returning foreign fighters deserves attention. Rehabilitative forms of counter-radicalization have been used recently, primarily by government in the Middle East; however, the institutionalized nature may not foster the desire to disengage in all participants. According to Brian Michael Jenkins, “History suggests that those fighting in

⁵¹ National Counterterrorism Center, “(U) Radicalization and Mobilization Dynamics of Violent Sunni Islamic Extremists,” 2.

⁵² Neil Ferguson et al., “Leaving Violence Behind: Disengaging from Politically Motivated Violence in Northern Ireland,” *Political Psychology* 36, no. 2 (November 2, 2015): 199–214.

⁵³ Ferguson et al., “Leaving Violence Behind: Disengaging from Politically Motivated Violence in Northern Ireland,” 203–207.

Syria and Iraq would pose an increased risk upon their return.”⁵⁴ The United States is currently taking a law enforcement stance when dealing with returning foreign fighters despite the reasons for return. The Neutrality Acts have afforded the United States a solid foundation for prosecution, making fighting against a government with which the U.S. is not at war, a crime. Past instances of returnees highlight flaws in the system, which allows returnees to go undetected, unprocessed to assess a degree of radicalization, and unquestioned for intelligence regarding foreign terror operations.⁵⁵

Prevention, rehabilitation, and after-care (PRAC) forms the Saudi model of counter-radicalization, which boasts an 80 percent release and reintegration rate.⁵⁶ The Saudi program focuses on family and after-care services, as well as a monetary component to deradicalization. Dr. al-Hadlaq notes that this type of program is unlikely to be sustainable for all countries given financial constraints.⁵⁷

Singapore developed a group known as the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) to rehabilitate and reeducate those subscribing to jihadist ideology in Singapore. This program’s success is attributed to the understanding of the primary drivers of radicalization within Singapore’s citizenry. As of February 2009, two-thirds of those detained after 2001 on terrorism charges had been rehabilitated and released with no cases of recidivism.⁵⁸

France and the United Kingdom have focused prosecution efforts on recruiters, rather than returnees, due to the difficulty in proving criminal acts overseas. In the words of Brian Michael Jenkins, “according to this view, society must leave open a doorway to

⁵⁴ Brian Michael Jenkins, *When Jihadis Come Marching Home: The Terrorist Threat Posed by Westerners Returning from Syria and Iraq*, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2014), 19, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE130-1.html>.

⁵⁵ Jenkins, *When Jihadis Come Marching Home: The Terrorist Threat Posed by Westerners Returning from Syria and Iraq*, 25–27.

⁵⁶ Dr. Abdulrahman al-Hadlaq, “Saudi Efforts in Counter-Radicalisation and Extremist Rehabilitation,” in *Terrorist Rehabilitation A New Frontier in Counter-terrorism*, ed. Rohan Gunaratna and Mohamed Bin Ali (London: Imperial College Press, 2015), 21–39.

⁵⁷ al-Hadlaq, *Saudi Efforts in Counter-Radicalisation and Extremist Rehabilitation*, 39.

⁵⁸ Rohan Gunaratna and Mohamed Feisal Bin Mohamed Hassan, “Terrorist Rehabilitation: The Singapore Experience,” in *Terrorist Rehabilitation A New Frontier in Counter-terrorism*, ed. Rohan Gunaratna and Mohamed Bin Ali (London: Imperial College Press, 2015), 41–70.

those who, disillusioned by their experience abroad, want to return.”⁵⁹ As radicalization is an individual experience, deradicalization may need to be individualized. This thesis will fill gaps in the deradicalization puzzle currently faced by U.S. authorities through the assessment of returned foreign fighters.

6. Conclusion

Historically and in the current environment, radicalized individuals have found reason to end conflict, both in cohesive group settings and individually through deradicalization programs. Western governments and law enforcement bodies have predominantly taken a hard approach to radicalization, whereas those in the Middle East and Southeast Asia have taken softer lines in terrorist rehabilitation. Limited literature exists on defection from the Islamic State and even less suggests leveraging defector narratives to aid in deradicalization. Research has not been able to speculate the exact number of foreign fighters, which results in a gap in knowledge of not only numbers and motivation, but also of how best to implement deradicalization.

D. LIMITATIONS

The numbers of returning foreign fighters, as well as their desire and intent for returning has been largely undocumented. Primary information from those who have defected from the Islamic State is limited. This author acknowledges the limitations of using the statements of returned foreign fighters to develop an understanding of motivations. The information related to the idiosyncratic reasons for radicalization and defection, as offered by the returnee, contain misrepresentations, and cannot generalize the collection of American foreign fighters’ experiences. The eight foreign fighters examined through the course of this project should by no means be considered representative of the whole. The cases were selected based on the availability of first person accounts. The use of strictly open source information was intended to broaden the audience, though the use of classified information may have provided a more nuanced understanding of the topics of defection and deradicalization. The author recognizes that “home” may not be the

⁵⁹ Jenkins, *When Jihadis Come Marching Home*, 25.

primary destination of many choosing to leave the caliphate and that many foreign fighters will continue on to other conflict areas, such as Libya and Yemen. The recommendations made will primarily be intended for Western-style governments, more specifically the United States, to process returnees.

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II. VILIFICATION OF THE ENEMY: THE FAULT OF THE DISTANCING MECHANISM

Just as America can never tolerate violence by extremists, we must never alter our principles. 9/11 was an enormous trauma to our country. The fear and anger that it provoked was understandable, but in some cases, it led us to act contrary to our ideals.

—Barack Obama, 44th President of the United States, June 4, 2009

A. CLASSIFYING AND CONTAINING THE ENEMY

In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, the United States government made a conscious decision to fight a war on terrorism. The decision “to fight back, to summon all our strength and all our resources and devote ourselves to a better way to identify, disrupt, and dismantle terrorist networks” became tangled in breaches of the American moral code.⁶⁰ War is not lawless. However, many of the rapid-fire decisions made under the guise of security immediately after September 11, 2001, crossed a moral line. The issue begins with the classification of the enemy. “Unlawful enemy combatant,” the classification mechanism attributed to those persons detained, based not on convictable wrongdoing but on an assessment of the danger that each was assumed to present, set the tone for treatment.⁶¹ Urgency led to these enemy combatants being swept off the streets, refused status, and warehoused for an indefinite period of time. According to Christiane Wilke, the classification of

“enemy combatant” extinguishes public concern for the rights and well-being of the detainee...the detainees are too often not viewed as persons with rights, but as enemies who lack the attributes of persons. The U.S. legal approach in the “war on terror” has, to a large degree, shifted from what

⁶⁰ Former U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft, statement before the Senate Judiciary Committee, quoted from “U.S. Detention of Aliens in Aftermath of September 11 Attacks,” *American Journal of International Law* 96, no. 2 (2002): 473.

⁶¹ Christiane Wilke, “War v. Justice: Terrorism Cases, Enemy Combatants, and Political Justice in U.S. Courts,” *Politics & Society* 33, no. 4 (December 2005): 638, DOI: 10.1177/0032329205280926.

criminal law theorists have called a “criminal law for citizens” to a “criminal law for enemies.”⁶²

Guilt by association, even assumed association, ruled the so-called “War on Terror” landscape. With the “war” declared on an intangible ideology, many of the most basic provisions of the Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War (POW Convention) could not be met. These regulations include that “all persons taken into custody by the U.S. forces will be provided with the protections of the [POW Convention] until some other legal status is determined by competent legal authority” and “repatriation at the conclusion of hostilities.”⁶³ Though bound by the Geneva Conventions, as the dust was still settling, the Bush administration concluded that the regulations did “not apply to al Qaeda and the Taliban.”⁶⁴ Revival of military commissions to carry out secret legal proceedings was considered a tool to “convey that the modern terrorist was no freedom fighter but, like the pirates in ages past, *hostis humani generis* - an enemy of all mankind.”⁶⁵ As the United States continues to engage enemies in asymmetric warfare, upholding the provisions established by the POW Convention regarding the treatment of prisoners of war and repatriation requirements remains a murky, largely unmet order.

Classifying terrorists with treatment that differs from the protections of all persons serves as a means to distance the United States from her enemies. This distancing mechanism has resulted in unconstitutional policies that stain the founding values of the United States and enhance the recruitment narrative of terrorist organizations. “Secret detention and torture had squandered international support, ceded the moral high ground in the battle of ideas, and handed the enemy a potent source of propaganda.”⁶⁶ Seventeen

⁶² Wilke, “War v. Justice: Terrorism Cases, Enemy Combatants, and Political Justice in U.S. Courts,” 638.

⁶³ Jeremy C. Kamens, “International Legal Limits on the Government’s Power to Detain ‘Enemy Combatants’” in *Enemy Combatants, Terrorism, and Armed Conflict Law: A Guide to the Issues*, ed. David K. Linnan (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2008), 108.

⁶⁴ Kamens, “International Legal Limits on the Government’s Power to Detain ‘Enemy Combatants,’” 109.

⁶⁵ Jess Bravin, *The Terror Courts: Rough Justice at Guantanamo Bay* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013), 22.

⁶⁶ Scott Shane, *Objective Troy: A Terrorist, A President, and the Rise of the Drone* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2015), 130.

years after September 11, 2001, under the auspices of a new, yet similar, enemy, the complications associated with the U.S. categorization of the enemy remains.

(1) Warehousing and Isolationism

Interpretation of conflict and the enemies involved therein led to a style of warehousing and isolating those persons who could not be dealt with immediately. Guantanamo Bay in Cuba and Abu Ghraib in Iraq serve as primary examples of warehousing initiatives used to contain those believed to have supported or been associated with a terrorist organization. These facilities, *extraordinary rendition*, and the *enhanced interrogation* tactics used within prisons have not only served to further the Salafi-jihadist, us-vs.-them narrative, but became breeding grounds for Islamist ideology. Radicalization has spread in facilities that leverage the ability to humiliate and dehumanize residents, especially among those held without merit. According to military intelligence officers with the Coalition Forces, between 70 and 90 percent of those persons detained in Iraq between March and November 2003 were “arrested by mistake.”⁶⁷

Though U.S. correctional facilities generally abide by stricter guidelines for the treatment of prisoners, the revocation of basic human rights provides vulnerability and an openness to new belief systems and ideologies. These beliefs are often outside of the purview of correctional staff due to the freedom of religion. The U.S. correctional system has not been exempted from Salafi-jihadist radicalization, which may be the result of the undignified environment. As articulated by McKinley Coffin,

The physical and psychological vulnerability of being imprisoned in an atmosphere that deprives inmates of all but the most basic of privileges provides the opportunity for extremists to establish bonds with individuals through social networks and constitutionally protected activities. These activities “foster identity construction (or reconstruction) and encourage social bonds that facilitate joining by creating a new social network and solidarity to encourage individuals to stay the course and continue” upon parole or release back into society. It is this situation that places inmates in

⁶⁷ International Committee of the Red Cross, *Report of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) on the Treatment by the Coalition Forces of Prisoners of War and Other Protected Persons by the Geneva Conventions in Iraq During Arrest, Internment and Interrogation* (Iraq: International Committee of the Red Cross, February 2004), <http://www.derechos.org/nizkor/us/doc/icrc-prisoner-report-feb-2004.pdf>, 8.

an environment to be recruited by ideological extremists and converted to radicalization.⁶⁸

Yannis Warrach, who serves as a Muslim cleric at a prison in Normandy further describes the situation faced by those incarcerated. He describes joining a group in prison as a necessity for survival.⁶⁹ This necessity is often leveraged by charismatic figures within the confines of the prison, according to Warrach,

The ones who preach and proselytize will at first be nice to a detainee. They see his desperation. They'll befriend him, give him what he needs. Then they'll say it's destiny. They'll say that God has a mission for him. And little by little, they brainwash him, telling him French society has rejected him...⁷⁰

Though the level with which prisons in Western Europe have been saturated with Salafi-jihadism differs from that witnessed in the United States, convicted terrorists housed in prisons in the United States have recently attempted to incite fellow inmates to adopt Salafi-jihadist ideology. In December 2017, Ahmad Khan Rahami, a HVE who carried out several improvised explosive device (IED) attacks in New York and New Jersey, was caught distributing terrorist propaganda and bombmaking instructions to fellow inmates.⁷¹ Cases of prison radicalization in the U.S. and other Western states, including the case of Rahami, have resulted in an isolationist mindset within correctional facilities.

Isolationism is a relatively new counterterrorism tool designed to combat the increasing accounts of prison radicalization. Few Western governments have turned to housing those labeled as jihadists in isolation. France is one such example. Officials in France have justified taking the isolationist approach because prisons were becoming

⁶⁸ McKinley D. Coffin, "Prison Radicalization: The New Extremist Training Grounds?" (master's thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2007), 1, https://calhoun.nps.edu/bitstream/handle/10945/3307/07Sep_Coffin.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

⁶⁹ Eleanor Beardsley, "Inside French Prisons, A Struggle To Combat Radicalization," NPR, June 25, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2017/06/25/534122917/inside-french-prisons-a-struggle-to-combat-radicalization>.

⁷⁰ Beardsley, "Inside French Prisons, A Struggle To Combat Radicalization."

⁷¹ Doug Criss and Laura Ly, "Chelsea Bomber Tried to Radicalize Inmates, Prosecutors Say," CNN, December 24, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/12/24/us/ahmad-rahimi-hunger-strike/index.html>.

“incubators for extremists.”⁷² Empirical data suggesting that isolation deters the spread of radicalization within prison is currently unavailable. At the time of this research, the success of the isolationist approach is largely unknown.

Restrictive measures, such as warehousing and isolationism, though they may be effective at reducing the spread of radical ideologies within prison populations, do not serve to change the mindset of those confined. The measures serve to distance the treatment of terrorists from the treatment of the rest of the prison population. A more humane approach involving the prison community may better serve the long-term goal of reducing radicalization.

B. A HISTORY OF *DO NOT PASS GO* POLICY

The criminal justice system in the United States has long been one of punitive, rather than rehabilitative enforcement. Policies related to terrorism have thus followed suit with harsh, deterrence-centric policies serving as the primary governmental reaction to terrorism. Discourse among counterterrorism experts often illuminates the view that the act of violence is the point of no return.⁷³ Since the first successful federal indictment of a supporter of the Islamic State in March 2014, the ideas of rehabilitation and deradicalization have seldom been featured in the counterterrorism discourse. These softer responses to terrorism, with foundations in positive reinforcement, remain on the periphery of counterterrorism deliberations.

From March 2014 through July 2017, a span that comprises the peak and decline of territorial power for IS, the United States prosecuted 135 defendants in cases relating to IS, none of whom have been acquitted.⁷⁴ This rate of successful prosecution indicates that the system is working as designed, but fails to consider the delicate, intricacies of reentry

⁷² Beardsley, “Inside French Prisons, A Struggle To Combat Radicalization.”

⁷³ Richard Barrett and Laila Bokhari, “Deradicalization and rehabilitation programmes targeting religious terrorists and extremists in the Muslim world,” in *Leaving Terrorism Behind Individual and Collective Disengagement*, ed. Tore Bjorgo and John Horgan (Oxon: Routledge, 2009): 173.

⁷⁴ Andrew Dalack et al., *The American Exception Terrorism Prosecutions in the United States – The ISIS Cases* (New York: Center for National Security, 2017), <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/55dc76f7e4b013c872183fea/t/59cf980ae45a7c855f673bca/1506777101200/The+American+Exception+9-17.pdf>.

into society once a convicted terrorist's sentence has been served. Analysis of the cases of Americans who returned from territory held by the Islamic State demonstrates that prosecution is the *de facto* policy of the United States; however, the convictions suggest that evidentiary support of terrorism-related offenses committed abroad is difficult to provide in U.S. courts. As represented in the subsequent case studies, the majority of returnees face the charge 18 U.S. Code §1001, providing false statements to a federal investigator. This charge results in a maximum sentence of five years, unless escalated to a terrorism related offense, resulting in a maximum sentence of eight years. Five years may be a blink in the grand scheme of life; however, five years in prison is an eternity, as well as an opportunity to further radicalize and spread the extremist narrative within the prison walls while awaiting release. In the words of Maajid Nawaz, a former Islamist extremist, "I'd never wanted vengeance more than during those few days following our arrest. I'd never felt more violent than those few days immediately after our torture."⁷⁵

The current United States justice system lacks deradicalization and reintegration programs relying instead on time served as a means of achieving disengagement. Rohan Gunaratna has recognized that,

Most violent extremists will be released at some point, prison should not be an end in itself. Detainees cannot be considered "dealt with" just by their being locked away. They must be put under the right circumstances that will reduce their recidivism rates and contribute to a holistic counter-terrorism strategy.⁷⁶

While no foreign fighter should be absolved of the consequences of his/her actions, this solution is the equivalent of treating major trauma with a band-aid, and the ineffectiveness of punitive punishment is apparent in the recidivism rates in the United States.

⁷⁵ Maajid Nawaz, *Radical: My Journey out of Islamist Extremism* (Guilford, Connecticut: Lyons Press, 2013), IX.

⁷⁶ Rohan Gunaratna, "Introduction," in *Terrorist Rehabilitation A New Frontier in Counter-terrorism*, ed. Rohan Gunaratna and Mohamed Bin Ali (London: Imperial College Press, 2015), 5.

(1) Recidivist Justice

“Treat a person as they are and they will stay that way. Treat them as they could be, and they will become that person.”⁷⁷ This quote painted on a wall at the Lane County Jail was quickly replaced with, “if you don’t want to be treated like an inmate, stay out of jail.”⁷⁸ For many convicts in the United States, the prison system seems to operate with a revolving door. A study of 404,638 released prisoners representing 30 states found that 56.7 percent were rearrested within one year of release.⁷⁹ Within five years, this number jumps to a staggering 76.6 percent.⁸⁰ Are these prisoners not psychologically prepared to reenter society as a contributing member of the community? What do recidivism rates in the U.S. suggest for convicted terrorists? A NCTC report released in January 2017 titled, “U.S. Homegrown Violent Extremism Recidivism Likely” assessed that “at least some of the more than 90 homegrown violent extremists incarcerated in the U.S. who are due to be released in the next five years will probably re-engage in terrorist activity, possibly including attack plotting.”⁸¹ If deradicalization is not offered to bring some sense of normalcy to the lives of returnees, will they suffer a similar fate, and are they predisposed to accept radical ideologies as a result of perceived deprivations?

Sentence terms for individuals connected to international Islamist extremist terrorist organizations, compiled by Zabel and Benjamin, depict that of 171 defendants identified, 41 received only one to five years in prison before they were eligible for release

⁷⁷ Doug Hooley, “6 evidence-based practices proven to lower recidivism,” CorrectionsOne, March 29, 2010, https://www.correctionsone.com/re-entry-and-recidivism/articles/2030030-6-evidence-based-practices-proven-to-lower-recidivism/PeerReview_Mission-Model-Canvas-Tyerman-Anon (1).

⁷⁸ Hooley, “6 evidence-based practices proven to lower recidivism.”

⁷⁹ Matthew R. Durose, Alexia D. Cooper, and Howard N. Snyder, *Recidivism of Prisoners Released in 30 States in 2005: Patterns from 2005 to 2010* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2014), 1–2, <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/rprts05p0510.pdf>.

⁸⁰ Durose, Cooper, and Snyder, *Recidivism of Prisoners Released in 30 States in 2005: Patterns from 2005 to 2010*, 1–2.

⁸¹ Hollie McKay, “The Troubling U.S. Post-Prison Experiment to ‘Rehabilitate’ an ISIS Supporter,” Fox News, July 18, 2017, <http://www.foxnews.com/us/2017/07/18/troubling-us-post-prison-experiment-to-rehabilitate-isis-supporter.html>.

into society.⁸² An additional 21 of the 171 convicted received a five to eight-year sentence. As of May 2010, according to the Federal Bureau of Prisons, 15 of the 21 had been released, one was still in prison, and five individuals have an unknown status. These 15 freed individuals were released back into the society with no attempts at reintegration and without the public's knowledge. Though many undergo a probationary period, the limitation on movement and activities is largely unrestricted. Research conducted by Michael A. Brown regarding the release of convicted terrorists in America offers five explanations for the apathetic nature of the general public on the issue of releasing convicted terrorists:

1. Americans have confidence in the prison system and are forgiving once debts are paid.
2. Information is not easily attainable when a convicted terrorist is released.
3. Success of the prison rehabilitation system allows for a quiet return to society.
4. Convicts quietly return to prior associates on the fringes of society
5. Public does not believe that a convicted terrorist would be released back into society.⁸³

Each of these explanations shed light on the possibility and need of adopting a policy that focuses on reintegration for returning foreign fighters, especially if the released have “quietly returned to their circle of associates...granted a badge of honor for serving time in prison.”⁸⁴ A quiet return to former associates increases the odds of recidivism which

⁸² Richard B. Zabel and James J. Benjamin, *In Pursuit of Justice: Prosecuting Terrorism Cases in the Federal Courts, 2009 Update and Recent Developments* (New York: Human Rights First, July 2009), 5, <https://www.humanrightsfirst.org/wp-content/uploads/pdf/090723-LS-in-pursuit-justice-09-update.pdf>.

⁸³ Michal A. Brown, “Freed: Ripples of the Convicted and Released Terrorist in America,” (master’s thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2011), 67–69, https://calhoun.nps.edu/bitstream/handle/10945/5822/11Mar_Brown.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

⁸⁴ Brown, “Freed: Ripples of the Convicted and Released Terrorist in America,” 68.

could present a threat to the homeland; however, in the United States no data presently exists to support this assertion.

Statistical analysis conducted by the Bureau of Justice Statistics in a 1994 report found that post-release supervision does not decrease the likelihood of recidivism.⁸⁵ Additionally, recidivism, loosely defined as a return to crime, increases depending on the release environment. The higher the at-risk environment, the more likely those being released are to recidivate.⁸⁶ This may seem obvious, but it highlights the need for risk assessments, both when a returnee reenters the U.S. and, if convicted, once the returnee is eligible for release. Sampson, Laub, and Farrington found that “social support networks” seem to have an influence over recidivism rates.⁸⁷ Though the research is dated, the idea holds true. Numerous institutions were cited as influential, including: family, employment, religious institutions, and even criminal justice. According to Karen E. Needels, the research suggested that “The stronger the bonds to conventional society, the lower the probability and rate of offending.”⁸⁸ These influential factors link directly to the Saudi PRAC model of deradicalization. Though the success rate of this model is ostensibly high with little justification or evidence of achievement, the framework it provides is worth exploring for practicality in the West, especially given the amount of research pointing to the importance of family and rehabilitative measures.

⁸⁵ National Justice Institute, “Impact of Prison Experience on Recidivism,” National Justice Institute Office of Justice Programs, October 3, 2008, <https://www.nij.gov/topics/corrections/recidivism/Pages/prison-experience.aspx>.

⁸⁶ National Justice Institute, “Measuring Recidivism,” National Justice Institute Office of Justice Programs, February 20, 2008, <https://www.nij.gov/topics/corrections/recidivism/Pages/measuring.aspx>.

⁸⁷ D. P. Farrington, *Stepping Stones to Adult Criminal Careers*, National Institute of Justice NCJ Report No. 096730 (United Kingdom: National Institute of Justice, 1986), <https://www.ncjrs.gov/App/Publications/abstract.aspx?ID=96730>; and Robert J. Sampson and John H. Laub, “Crime in the Making: Pathways and Turning Points Through Life,” *Social Forces* 74, no. 1 (September 1995): 357–358, <https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/74.1.357>.

⁸⁸ Karen E. Needels, “Go Directly to Jail and Do Not Collect? A Long-Term Study of Recidivism, Employment, and Earnings Patterns among Prison Releasees,” *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 33, no. 4 (November 1, 1996): 473, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022427896033004005>.

In the United States, it is highly common that parents and/or close family are unaware of a family member's intent to travel to become a foreign fighter.⁸⁹ In the cases presented through this research, this statement holds true with the exception of Mohamed Amiin Ali Roble, who had exposure to influential family members who were known to have held radical ideologies. Though the majority of families with members who become foreign fighters have been blind to intent prior to travel, in a study conducted by the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism, ten of thirty interviewees cited family as an "extremely important" motivational factor in their decision to defect.⁹⁰ Despite the decision to travel, the psychological hardships compounded by the disappointment of loved ones, particularly mothers, appears to have a powerful effect on foreign fighters. With the leverage that family has been shown to have over foreign fighters in the conflict theatre and the data regarding strong familial bonds decreasing recidivism, family may be worthwhile to explore as a component of a returnee deradicalization model in the United States.

(2) Death Squads and the Stateless

The killing of Anwar al-Awlaki was the first time the United States purposely used lethal force against one of its own citizens. Many have questioned the justification of this strike and the ramifications associated with the perceived martyrdom.⁹¹ The justification is outside of the scope of this research; however, the corollaries and precedent are important to the current practice of death squads. Various Western governments, including the United Kingdom and France, have released death squads on its citizens known to be fighting for the Islamic State. Lethal force against citizens engaged in a foreign conflict disallows the democratic process to prevail and can further ingrain and spread the us-vs.-them narrative among fighters. A second policy explored by Western nations to mitigate the threat posed

⁸⁹ Hamed el-Said and Richard Barrett, *Enhancing the Understanding of the Foreign Terrorist Fighters Phenomenon in Syria* (New York: United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism, July 2017), 42, http://www.un.org/en/counterterrorism/assets/img/Report_Final_20170727.pdf.

⁹⁰ el-Said and Barrett, *Enhancing the Understanding of the Foreign Terrorist Fighters Phenomenon in Syria*, 42.

⁹¹ Shane, *Objective Troy: A Terrorist, A President, and the Rise of the Drone*, 237–318.

by returning foreign fighters is the revocation of passports, essentially rendering many citizens stateless.⁹² Not allowing a foreign fighter to return by revoking citizenship and/or passports may serve to mitigate the threat in the fighter's country of origin; however, this band aid policy option acts as an accelerant to the ideology in other regions that the fighter may then travel to and could further fuel the victimhood mentality.

At the time of this report, an alleged American member of the Islamic State is being held in U.S. military custody as an enemy combatant under the authority of the 2001 Authorization of Military Force (AUMF). This marks the first time that the AUMF has been used to detain a U.S. citizen believed to be fighting for the Islamic State, and the real-time case highlights the lack of stateside policy and governmental preparedness to deal with returning foreign fighters in the United States. This strategy of refusing to accept the individual back into the United States and/or charge him with a crime mirrors the post September 11, 2001 approach to classification and could result in increased polarization and the radicalization of those on the periphery of terrorism.

The use of death squads and the rendering of citizens as stateless as policy options are not only costly in terms of the potential for increased, dispersed generational radicalization, but are dangerous from the perspective of core American values, including the right of due process. As attested before the U.S. Supreme Court, even the slightest pass on constitutional rights is dangerous:

It may be that it is the obnoxious thing in its mildest and least repulsive form; but illegitimate and unconstitutional practices get their first footing in that way, namely, by silent approaches and slight deviations from legal modes of procedure. This can only be obviated by adhering to the rule that constitutional provisions for the security of person and property should be liberally construed. A close and literal construction deprives them of half their efficacy, and leads to gradual depreciation of the right, as if it consisted more in sound than in substance. It is the duty of courts to be watchful for

⁹² Article 8 of the United Nations resolution 896 (IX) states that a "Contracting State shall not deprive a person of nationality if the deprivation would render him stateless;" United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness* (Geneva: United Nations Refugee Agency, 2014), 16, <http://www.unhcr.org/protection/statelessness/3bbb286d8/convention-reduction-statelessness.html>.

the constitutional rights of the citizen, and against any stealthy encroachments thereon.⁹³

Deprivation of constitutional rights, regardless of alleged involvement in conflict theatres is a slippery slope and one that should always be approached with caution.

⁹³ Spevack v. Klein, 385 U.S. 511 (U.S. Supreme Court 1967), <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/385/511/case.html>.

III. CONVINCED: THE BEGINNING OF THE JIHADI LIFE-CYCLE

“Learning to stand in somebody else’s shoes, to see through their eyes, that’s how peace begins. And it’s up to you to make that happen. Empathy is a quality of character that can change the world.”

—Barack Obama, 44th President of the United States

A. RADICALIZATION: ONE SIZE FITS ONE

Radicalization is not a new phenomenon; however, the methods by which those in the United States are becoming radicalized have evolved, making the puzzle evermore challenging.⁹⁴ The axiom that “terrorists are made, they are not born,” suggests that there are injection points along the trajectory as well as opportunities to reverse the making of a terrorist.⁹⁵ Radicalization discourse has presented and discussed ranges of motivating push-and-pull factors, which when analyzed as a whole suggest that the ways by which individuals come to adopt a radical ideology are idiosyncratic. Bruce Hoffman, a recognized terrorism scholar, characterized the idiosyncrasies of the decision to join a conflict by stating:

The reasons why someone picks up a gun or throws a bomb represent an ineluctably personal choice born variously of grievance and frustration; religious piety or the desire for systemic socio-economic change; irredentist conviction or commitment to revolution. Joining an organization in pursuit of these aims is meant to give collective meaning and equally importantly cumulative power to this commitment. The forces that impel individuals to become terrorists and insurgents are thus timeless...⁹⁶

American foreign fighters are no exception, each reaching a fracture point and radicalizing to the point of jihad for reasons which must be evaluated on a granular level. The term

⁹⁴ Mohammed Hafez and Creighton Mullins suggest that the “puzzle” metaphor should be the adopted radicalization framework, as it more accurately represents the intricacies of the radicalization transformation. See Mohammed Hafez and Creighton Mullins, “The Radicalization Puzzle: A Theoretical Synthesis of Empirical Approaches to Homegrown Extremism,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 38, no. 11 (September 10, 2015): 958, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2015.1051375>.

⁹⁵ Fathali Moghaddam, *From the Terrorists’ Point of View: What They Experience and Why They Come to Destroy* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2006), 45.

⁹⁶ Bruce Hoffman, “Today’s Highly Educated Terrorists,” *The National Interest*, September 15, 2010, <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/bruce-hoffman/todays-highly-educated-terrorists-4080>.

fracture point is used not to invoke a negative connotation or imply that the individual has in some way been broken; rather the use of the term stems from a philosophical interpretation of *Kintsukuroi*, or *Kintsugi*. Kintsukuroi is a Japanese art and translates as “to repair with gold.”⁹⁷ Fracture points are treated as a break in a part of history, rather than a crack that must be disguised. As a philosophy, the fracture point leading to the radicalization and mobilization of a foreign fighter is a part of his or her history, not to be hidden, but to be illuminated and made whole again. Kintsugi is an expression of resiliency and offers the hope associated with healing.

a. *Fulfilling the Hierarchy of Needs*

Though it is infeasible to derive a single profile from the individuals who mobilized to become foreign fighters or radicalized to the point of violence in the homeland, each case involves a human being with human needs. According to psychologist Abraham Maslow, the godfather of the Hierarchy of Needs,

The more we learn about man’s natural tendencies, the easier it will be to tell him how to be good, how to be happy, how to be fruitful, how to respect himself, how to love, how to fulfill his highest potentialities...The thing to do seems to be to find out what one is really like inside; deep down, as a member of the human species and as a particular individual.⁹⁸

This intuitive description of human tendencies is rarely considered, particularly in the United States, as a method of achieving successful counterterrorism. Using Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, which has been previously explored as a framework to gauge the likelihood of a radicalized individual to “check out” of a terrorist organization, may also provide a framework to categorize the reasons leading to radicalization, both for those caught in close proximity to conflict and those foreign fighters inclined to make hijra.⁹⁹ Interviews with defected members of the Islamic State from Syria have expressed that they

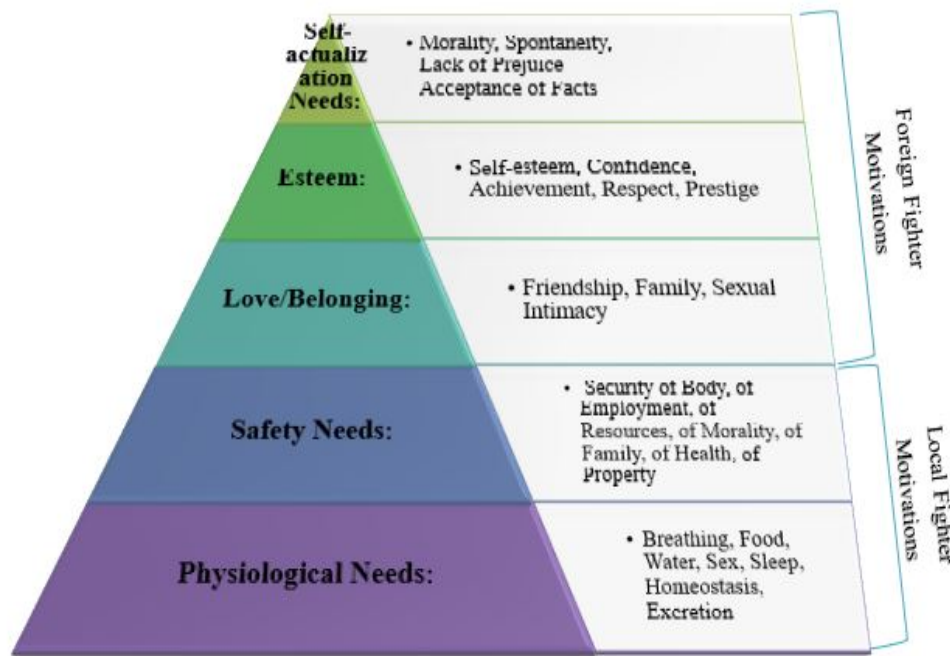
⁹⁷ John Sean Doyle, “Resilience, Growth & Kintsukuroi,” *Psychology Today*, October 3, 2015, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/luminous-things/201510/resilience-growth-kintsukuroi>.

⁹⁸ Abraham H. Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*, 3rd ed. (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1987), 6.

⁹⁹ Michael C. Arndt, Donald R. Green, and Michael S. Maksimowicz, “De-radicalization: You Can Check Out Anytime You Like, But What Will Make You Leave?,” (master’s thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2010), 19–30, <https://calhoun.nps.edu/handle/10945/5023>.

made the choice to join the organization due to limited options and a need to feed one's family.¹⁰⁰ Local defectors often portray foreign fighters as the “true believers” who arrive face-to-face with the ranks of the Islamic State fully indoctrinated in the ideology that had been consumed online.¹⁰¹ Figure 1 illustrates Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and the classes that characterize the reasons for joining the conflict.

Figure 1. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs



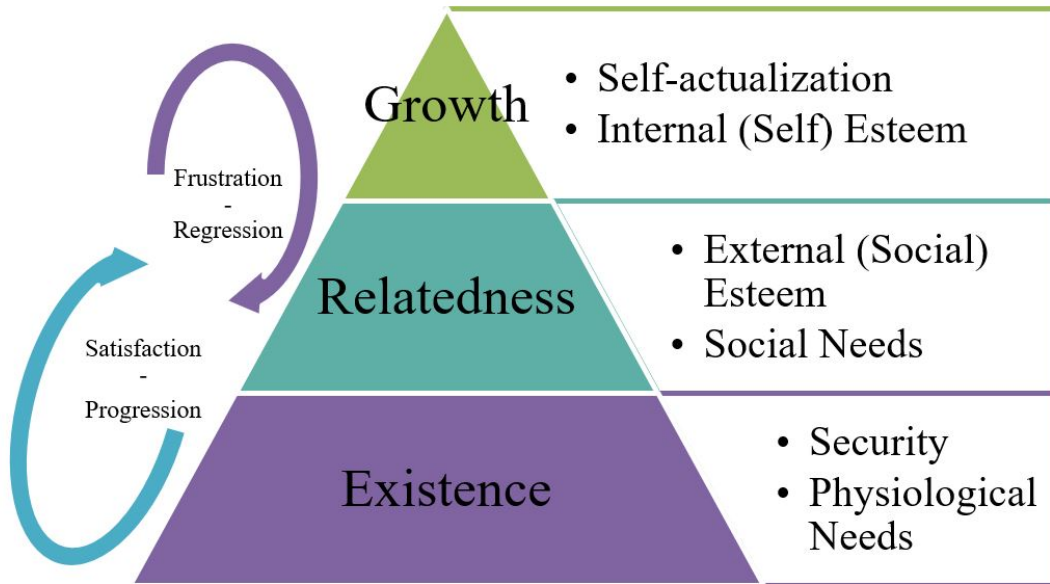
As depicted in prior chapters, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs limits an individual's movement between categories and inhibits cohabitating in higher and lower levels. Alderfer's Existence Relatedness Growth (ERG) Approach allows for less restrictive movements and motivations across the categories. For this reason, though the categories of

¹⁰⁰ Anne Speckhard and Ahmat S. Yayla, *ISIS Defectors Inside Stories of the Terrorist Caliphate* (Virginia: Advances Press, LLC., 2016), 162.

¹⁰¹ Simon Cottee and Keith Hayward, “Terrorist (E)motives: The Existential Attractions of Terrorism,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 34, no. 12 (August 2011): 963, doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2011.621116; and Speckhard and Yayla, *ISIS Defectors Inside Stories of the Terrorist Caliphate*, 88.

needs remain the same, it is important to observe the ERG Approach to needs when analyzing the needs of foreign fighters. Figure 2 represents the hierarchy of needs, as adapted by Clayton Alderfer.

Figure 2. Alderfer's ERG Approach



This research utilizes both needs models as a framework for analysis. The subsequent analysis was conducted to serve as an understanding of foreign fighters and the fracture point that convinced Americans to leave the comforts of home for conflict theatres in Syria and Iraq in relation to the hierarchy of needs.

B. FOREIGN FIGHTERS: THE CONVINCED

Fighters have traveled to join foreign conflict throughout history. The concept of foreigners being compelled to travel to battle theatres is not new, nor is it exclusively tied to conflict in Islamic societies. In the 1980s, foreign fighters traveled to participate on behalf of the *mujahideen* in Afghanistan against the Soviet invasion. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the fighters dispersed resulting in a “global militant

community.”¹⁰² This newly established community in the context of the Afghan jihad against the Soviets was not call for international concern. Unlike during the aggressive post September 11, 2001 environment, the mujahideen were not picked off the streets by authorities due to assumed danger. On the contrary, foreign fighters battling the Soviets in Afghanistan were glorified. Former President Ronald Reagan claimed to be inspired by the mujahedeen during an annual Afghanistan Day proclamation stating that, “to watch the courageous Afghan freedom fighter battle modern arsenals with simple handheld weapons is an inspiration to those who love freedom.”¹⁰³ Escalating brutality and emergence of the idea of a global jihad following the downing of the Twin Towers shifted this perception. Those who have traveled to the caliphate, and the threat of their return, have been at the forefront of international concern. Prior to the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, Thomas Hegghammer argued that foreign fighters can make or break the perceived legitimacy of a conflict:

Foreign fighters matter because they can affect the conflicts they join, as they did in post-2003 Iraq by promoting sectarian violence and indiscriminate tactics. Perhaps more important, foreign fighter mobilizations empower transnational terrorist groups such as al-Qaida, because volunteering for war is the principal stepping-stone for individual involvement in more extreme forms of militancy. For example, when Muslims in the West radicalize, they usually do not plot attacks in their home country right away, but travel to a war zone such as Iraq or Afghanistan first.¹⁰⁴

The foreign cadre fighting for the Islamic State, who flocked from all corners of the globe, has certainly played a factor in the perception of the legitimacy of the organization. Legitimacy and enhanced recruitment are evidenced by past voices such

¹⁰² Maria Galperin Donnelly, Thomas M. Sanderson, and Zack Fellman, “Foreign Fighters in History” (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2017), 1, http://foreignfighters.csis.org/history_foreign_fighter_project.pdf.

¹⁰³ Ronald Reagan, “Message on the Observance of Afghanistan Day,” The American Presidency Project, March 21, 1983, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=41078>; and Shane, *Objective Troy: A Terrorist, A President, and the Rise of the Drone*, 56.

¹⁰⁴ Thomas Hegghammer, “The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters,” 53.

as Anwar al-Awlaki and Samir Khan, American born Salafi-jihadists, who served as vital components to the expansion of Islamist recruitment.

Ideologically driven virtual propaganda by Islamist groups has evolved since September 11, 2001, beginning with the 2010 release of the second issue of *Inspire* magazine by al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), has called for supporters to wage attacks in the United States. This tendency shifted under the black banner of the Islamic State, whose leaders placed more value on the establishment of the caliphate than on attacking the far enemy in the West. As witnessed through the case studies and evidenced by the unprecedented number of people flocking to be a part of the caliphate, the shift toward establishment was a powerful, resonating platform. Territorial degradation of the caliphate requires new adaptation, which Marc Sageman likens to a “Darwinian evolution.”¹⁰⁵ In order to better understand the threat presented by a returning foreign fighter, authorities should conduct risk-based assessments in all cases, despite the surface-level impetus for return, to determine when a person known to engage in terroristic activities is no longer at risk of reengagement. In low-risk cases, authorities should consider soft counterterrorism approaches as policy options, as offered in Chapter V. As discovered by Rukmini Callimachi, a journalist who has covered the Islamic State, the humaneness of a returned Western foreign fighter is almost frightening; a sameness that should be reflected in our treatment of those who commit acts that we do not understand.¹⁰⁶

The United States lacks transparency regarding the number of American foreign fighters who traveled to Iraq and Syria and the projected or known cases of returnees. The majority of reporting suggests that approximately 250 to 300 Americans were convinced by the narrative offered by Salafi-jihadist ideology, as proven by their decisions to make

¹⁰⁵ Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 110.

¹⁰⁶ Rukmini Callimachi, “Recruitment,” podcast by Rukmini Callimachi and Andy Mills, *Caliphate*, The New York Times, April 26, 2018. Audio, 32:05. <https://play.radiopublic.com/caliphate/ep/s1!6150b8401966be81a34b19b35e61ffa0c751b656>.

hijra, or religiously justified migration, to the caliphate.¹⁰⁷ This estimate includes those who have successfully traveled, as well as those who have been apprehended while attempting to leave the United States. In the process of becoming convinced, individual experiences and demographics drastically differ.

C. AMERICAN FOREIGN FIGHTERS

Americans have historically gone to battle in foreign theatres for various reasons; however, the unprecedented number of Americans who traveled to Iraq and Syria between 2011 and 2017 following the start of the Syrian civil war is cause for pause and deeper understanding. The number of Americans drawn to the conflict raises the simple question, why? What draws an individual to travel to fight the war of others? This question is rarely examined on the individual level. The examination of eight Americans who traveled to Iraq and Syria between 2011 and 2017 hopes to answer this question through the lens of needs theory.

This eight Americans studied successfully traveled to Iraq and Syria between 2011 and 2017 with the understanding that they would be entering territory under the control of a designated foreign terrorist organization (FTO) between 2011 and 2017. These eight cases allowed for the analysis of large volumes of information available in open source, including but not limited to criminal complaints. The selected timeframe marks the beginning of the wave of Arab Spring protests, which washed into Syria as early as mid-2012, and the subsequent insurgency against the Bashar al-Assad regime as well as the incursion of jihadist organizations leveraging the opportunities of the deteriorating situation.¹⁰⁸ Though this sample is not all encompassing, the sample allows significant information to be gleaned from the motivations and fracture points drawn from each individual's experience.

¹⁰⁷ Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, Seamus Hughes, and Bennett Clifford, *The Travelers American Jihadists in Syria and Iraq* (Washington, D.C.: Program on Extremism The George Washington University, February 2018), <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/extremism.gwu.edu/files/TravelersAmericanJihadistsinSyriaandIraq.pdf>.

¹⁰⁸ Charles R. Lister, *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 1–8.

Profiles for each foreign fighter sought to include: age, gender, family life, socioeconomic class, criminal history, education, radicalization driver(s), whether the individual was a convert, citizenship, travel route details, and current status. The research acknowledges missing criteria for any specific case and is not naïve to the risk of invalid information stated by a foreign fighter. This research does not include Americans who attempted to travel but were interdicted and arrested; however, it is important to note the likelihood that these individuals continue to hold radical ideologies while under lock and key. The lessons learned about the nuances between hard disengagement involving legal sentences and softer deradicalization may also apply to the cases involving unsuccessful travelers. Causation of any phenomenon is difficult to determine, especially on the individual level. One method for determining the fracture point of an individual who traveled to Iraq and Syria is the retroactively review the case from the point at which the individual is believed to have traveled back to the point of acknowledgeable change; however, it should be noted that not all foreign fighters who are known to have traveled to Syria and Iraq underwent observable changes. Table 1 provides a list of the American foreign fighters whom this thesis analyzes in depth.

Table 1. American Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq

American Foreign Fighters

Bilal ABOOD*	Mirsad KANDIC*
Aws Mohammed Younis AL-JAYAB*	Mohamad Jamal KHWEIS*
Mohimanul BHUIYA*	Mohamad Saeed KODAIMATI*
Daniela GREENE*	Mohamed Amiin Ali ROBLE

*Indicates that the foreign fighter is known to have returned to the United States.

The cases studied were selected for two reasons: all except one of the foreign fighters returned, voluntarily or involuntarily, to the United States to face prosecution and

there is a vast range of first-person and open source documentation available on those fighters. Though the information available on each returnee differs and is not all-encompassing, the case studies provide an in-depth analysis of the idiosyncratic, human side of the radicalization trajectory that has been largely ignored in prior research regarding American foreign fighters. The following cases are their stories.

(1) Bilal Abood

Bilal Abood, an Iraqi-born naturalized United States citizen, migrated to the U.S. in 2009 after working as a contract linguist with the U.S. Army in Iraq.¹⁰⁹ During his service to the U.S., Abood witnessed the pain that can be associated with war. His friend and fellow translator was murdered “by terrorists” for his service to the U.S. military.¹¹⁰ Though Abood’s family was still in Iraq, Abood left the war-torn country in fear for his life. Abood’s service alongside the U.S. military should have fulfilled needs on the higher end of the spectrum. Once in the U.S., Abood was described by family as “well loved” and was in a long-term relationship with his common-law wife in Texas.¹¹¹ At 35 years of age, Abood, like many jihadist ideologues, stated that he was drawn to Syria by the prospect of building an Islamic State.¹¹² Abood attempted to travel on March 29, 2013 but was interdicted at Dallas Fort Worth International Airport and interviewed by the FBI regarding his travel intent.¹¹³ During a later interview with the FBI, Abood admitted his desire to fight the Assad regime in Syria with the Free Syrian Army.¹¹⁴ In furtherance of his goal, Abood left the United States through Mexico on April 29, 2013, traveling through numerous countries en route to Turkey where he then crossed into Syria.¹¹⁵

¹⁰⁹ United States of America vs. Bilal Abood, 3–25CR-0256K (N.D. Tex. 2015).

¹¹⁰ United States of America vs. Bilal Abood.

¹¹¹ Marie Saavedra, “Loved Ones Say Mesquite Man Accused of ISIS Ties Is Innocent,” USA TODAY, May 15, 2015, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/local/2015/05/15/mesquite-isis-family-innocent-fbi/27351959/>.

¹¹² United States of America vs. Bilal Abood.

¹¹³ United States of America vs. Bilal Abood.

¹¹⁴ United States of America vs. Bilal Abood.

¹¹⁵ United States of America vs. Bilal Abood.

In a statement to the FBI, Abood stated, “I’m a human. I had to do something. I thought with my heart.”¹¹⁶ This comment suggests that morality may have driven Abood to travel, as well as a sense of securing family and his greater Muslim *ummah* in the place of his origin.¹¹⁷ This call is not unfamiliar to Muslims, as it is one part of the hadith presented by Mohammad, the messenger of God.¹¹⁸ Anwar al-Awlaki proselytized the hadith in his calls to jihad, which proved immensely influential for Western Muslims witnessing the atrocities abroad through web-based mediums. In one of Awlaki’s popular calls he states, “dear brother and sisters, if one part of the body feels pain, you should feel the same pain as if it is happening to your own family. You need to do something we can’t just sit there and watch,” a message with resounding impact and cause for mobilization for Muslims like Bilal Abood relocated in the West.¹¹⁹ Abood spent his childhood and much of his adult life in Iraq which complicates the drivers and hierarchy of needs. Abood, in a sense, is both a local with safety needs and a foreign fighter fighting for family and self-actualization.

(2) Aws Mohammed Younis Al-Jayab

Aws Mohammed Younis Al-Jayab, a Palestinian born in Iraq, immigrated to the United States in October 2012.¹²⁰ Al-Jayab entered as a Syrian refugee and remained in the United States under refugee status for approximately one year which is when he began

¹¹⁶ United States of America vs. Bilal Abood.

¹¹⁷ Ummah refers to the whole community of Muslims bound together by the ties of religion; *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed. (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 2003). Also available at <http://www.merriam-webster.com/>.

¹¹⁸ The hadith is presented as an obligation for all Muslim to come to the defense of their Muslim brothers and sisters wherever they are threatened. This principle was adopted by the Abdullah Azzam, the founding member of al Qaeda and serves as a defining principle for the Islamic State. See Bruce Hoffman, “The Coming ISIS–al Qaeda Merger,” *Foreign Affairs*, March 29, 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2016-03-29/coming-isis-al-qaeda-merger>.

¹¹⁹ “Recruitment,” Podcast, 32:05, posted by Rukmini Callimachi and Andy Mills, April 26, 2018, <https://play.radiopublic.com/caliphate/ep/s1!6150b8401966be81a34b19b35e61ffa0c751b656>.

¹²⁰ Department of Justice Office of Public Affairs, *California Man Indicted in Chicago for Attempting to Provide Material Support to Overseas Terrorists* (Washington, D.C.: The United States Department of Justice, March 17, 2016), <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/california-man-indicted-chicago-attempting-provide-material-support-overseas-terrorists>.

expressing his desire to “work” in Syria.¹²¹ On October 13, 2012, Al-Jayab stated via social media, “I want to go back. God is my witness...I’ll go to Turkey and enter smuggled to Syria.”¹²² Though a refugee who had lived in Iraq and Syria for much of his life, Al-Jayab’s personal needs to fulfill his perceived “Islamic duty” suggest that his actions were out of a desire to reach self-actualization. Al-Jayab did express an affinity for weaponry when speaking among associates, but conversations lacked any suggestion of a propensity for committing violence or a particular hatred for the United States.¹²³

For more than a year, Al-Jayab maintained his intent to return to Syria; however, he lacked the monetary resources to travel. This is a significant factor in assessing the risk of a radicalizing individual, or a returnee. Many extremists hold radical views but lack violent intent. On the same token, many violent extremists have the intent to inflict harm, but lack the capability to facilitate an attack. In the common case of resource constraint, priority should be given to the individuals holding both intent and capability.

On November 6, 2013, at the age of 21, capability came to fruition for Al-Jayab and he quickly booked a flight from Chicago, Illinois, to Istanbul, Turkey, for November 9th.¹²⁴ Al-Jayab maintained contact with family throughout his travel between November 2013 and January 2014.¹²⁵ Well-being checks with family indicate the importance of familial ties and the need for counterterrorism and law enforcement official to understand cultural norms and familial bonds to be leveraged for information regarding American foreign fighters. Not only can family provide information on return plans for a foreign fighter but may provide insight into the reasons for travel and potential causes for return. Al-Jayab, knowing the criminality associated with his actions could have implications on his refugee status, continued to view jihad as a personal requirement. His status as a refugee in the United States provided a physiological and safety needs net. Al-Jayab seems to have suffered from unfulfilled social needs or a lack of integration. Membership within the

¹²¹ United States of America vs. Aws Mohammed Younis Al-Jayab, 2:16-MJ-1 (E.D. Ca. 2016).

¹²² United States of America vs. Aws Mohammed Younis Al-Jayab.

¹²³ United States of America vs. Aws Mohammed Younis Al-Jayab.

¹²⁴ United States of America vs. Aws Mohammed Younis Al-Jayab.

¹²⁵ United States of America vs. Aws Mohammed Younis Al-Jayab.

cohesive group, through the help of social contacts, fed Al-Jayab's need for human-contact and self-esteem.

(3) Mohimanul Bhuiya

"I believe that I have greatness in me. I want to be a superhero."¹²⁶ Mohimanul Bhuiya offered this proclamation in a college essay in 2008, six years prior to his decision to travel to war-torn Syria.¹²⁷ Bhuiya was raised in Brooklyn, New York, in a more liberal Muslim household.¹²⁸ From the outside looking in, Bhuiya appeared to be an example of the American dream. Bhuiya, as a student at Columbia University, had prospects of a bright future. Despite his educational success, which could serve to fulfill his need for esteem, Bhuiya was victim to an accumulation of fracture points at a vulnerable age.

In 2012 Bhuiya's sister died a "tragic death," causing Bhuiya to put his studies at Kingsborough Community College on hold.¹²⁹ Whether Bhuiya sought or was offered counseling to manage his emotions following the loss of his sister is unknown. Actions following the loss of his sister suggest that he was spiraling in his search for an identity. Acceptance into Columbia, which could have put Bhuiya back on a track to self-actualization, pushed him further toward Islamist ideology. During "Muslims in Diaspora," a course offered at Columbia, Bhuiya became "humiliated" by a portrayal of Muslim women during the screening of the controversial film, *Submission*.¹³⁰ The viewing of this film, in conjunction with familial loss, served as fracture points for Bhuiya. Turning to the internet to fuel his curiosity and answer his questions about Islam, Bhuiya states, "I started

¹²⁶ Adam Goldman, "'I Am Fed up with This Evil': How an American Went from Ivy League Student to Disillusioned ISIS Fighter," Washington Post, June 30, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/i-am-fed-up-with-this-evil-how-an-american-went-from-ivy-league-student-to-disillusioned-isis-fighter/2016/06/29/155e777e-3e07-11e6-80bc-d06711fd2125_story.html.

¹²⁷ Goldman, "'I Am Fed up with This Evil': How an American Went from Ivy League Student to Disillusioned ISIS Fighter."

¹²⁸ Richard Engel, Ben Plessner, and Tracy Connor, "American ISIS Defector: 'I've Let My Nation Down,'" NBC News, May 23, 2016, <https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/isis-uncovered/american-isis-defector-i-ve-let-my-nation-down-n578216>.

¹²⁹ Matthew Petti, "Columbia Student Joins ISIS And Regrets It," Columbia Daily Spectator, October 10, 2017, columbiaspectator.com/the-eye/2017/04/18/columbia-student-joins-isisand-regrets-it/.

¹³⁰ Engel, Plessner, and Connor, "American ISIS Defector: 'I've Let My Nation Down.'"

compromising my American side for my Islamic Side.”¹³¹ During an interview after his return, Bhuiya expressed, like Bilal Abood before him, that the idea of a “utopia[n]” Islamic State, not the ideology of the terrorist organization, lured him to make hijra.¹³²

Bhuiya’s impulsive decision to fight on behalf of the oppressed at the age of 25 suggests that morality was a driving factor. Intervention by the FBI prior to his travel did not serve as a deterrent; rather, the interview seems to have acted as an accelerant to his sense of urgency.¹³³ Bhuiya’s perceived need to be a voice for the voiceless could have been met through structured community involvement and cushioned with a more moderate, deeper understanding of Islam. U.S. policy structured around hard approaches to terrorism often fails to recognize the humanness of its customer, while the internet is quick to produce voices, such as Anwar al-Awlaki’s, to fill gaps of curiosity.

(4) Daniela Greene

In fulfilling a need for love and belonging, Daniela Greene at the age of 38 willingly risked the needs of esteem. Greene served as a contracted FBI linguist and maintained a Top Secret security clearance beginning in February 2011.¹³⁴ Though Greene’s radicalization seems unprecedented, she is not the only individual in a law enforcement or security-related position to be influenced by AQ and IS ideology.¹³⁵ Nicholas Young, a former D.C. Metro Police Transit Officer, was also convicted of supporting the Islamic State.¹³⁶ Greene’s case exemplifies the idiosyncrasies of the decision to travel, the power of perceived deprivations, and the influential nature of online recruitment techniques exploited by the Islamic State.

¹³¹ Engel, Plessner, and Connor, “American ISIS Defector: ‘I’ve Let My Nation Down.’”

¹³² Petti, “Columbia Student Joins ISIS And Regrets It.”

¹³³ United States of America vs. Mohimanul Bhuiya, 14-CR-612 (E.D. Ny. 2014).

¹³⁴ United States of America vs. Daniela Greene, 14-mj-00487 (D.C. 2014).

¹³⁵ Numerous Homegrown Violent Extremists in the United States have held positions as security personnel in various capacities prior to carrying out attacks. Omar Mateen, Dahir Aden, and Esteban Santiago all held security related positions.

¹³⁶ Elizabeth Elizalde, “Former D.C. Cop Convicted of Trying to Help the Islamic State,” NY Daily News, December 18, 2017, <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/convicted-islamic-state-article-1.3707588>.

In January 2014, Greene, who speaks and writes fluent German, was tasked by the FBI with supporting an investigation against Denis Cuspert.¹³⁷ During the course of the investigation, Cuspert, a German-born foreign fighter, was known to have pledged his allegiance to the Islamic State. Cuspert, who now identifies as Abu Talha al-Almani, regularly appears in recruitment videos and willingly displays his appetite for violence.¹³⁸ Cuspert, throughout the course of the investigation, appeared to be, on all accounts, a true believer. Greene, aware that Cuspert was a member of the Islamic State, engaged in conversations via Skype that were outside the scope of the investigation.¹³⁹ Through the course of the conversations, which were unavailable for perusal during the course of this research, Greene allegedly formed a relationship with Cuspert.¹⁴⁰ This relationship led her to give up her comfortable life in the United States and travel to Syria. After six months, on June 23, 2014, Greene left the U.S. for Turkey. On June 27th Greene married Cuspert and lived with him over the course of the next thirty days.

Greene, like many jihadi brides, was influenced by a sense of love and belonging. Despite her personal achievements, expectations, and public trust, Greene was overcome by the adventure of traveling to foreign lands for love. Female foreign fighters represent numerous security issues, as they are often treated as less of a threat than their male counterparts, solely based on gender. However, their roles and experiences should not be discounted. Many women who have joined the Islamic State have served in roles related to recruitment and propaganda. As fighters disperse from Syria and Iraq, these roles could be facilitated in their next settlement and influence the next generation: the “ISIS 2.0.”¹⁴¹

¹³⁷ United States of America vs. Daniela Greene, 114-mj-00487 (D.C. 2014).

¹³⁸ Justin Ling, “An FBI Translator Married the ISIS Fighter She Was Supposed to Be Investigating,” VICE News, May 1, 2017, https://news.vice.com/en_ca/article/paz87v/fbi-translator-daniela-greene-married-the-isis-fighter-she-was-supposed-to-be-investigating.

¹³⁹ United States of America vs. Daniela Greene.

¹⁴⁰ United States of America vs. Daniela Greene.

¹⁴¹ Carlo Munoz, “Gen. Paul Selva: U.S. Coalition, Partner Nations Working to Address ISIS Detainees, Foreign Fighters,” The Washington Times, January 30, 2018, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2018/jan/30/gen-paul-selva-us-coalition-partner-nations-workin/>.

(5) Mirsad Kandic

“As alleged, defendant Kandic abandoned the United States, his adopted country, and joined ISIS, a violent terrorist organization opposed to the U.S. and its interest,” held Acting U.S. Attorney General Bridget M. Rohde in reference to Mirsad Kandic, who acted as a recruiter and facilitator for the Islamic State.¹⁴² This language, inciting the connotation of betrayal against the United States, is common during hearings against returned foreign fighters. Kandic immigrated to the United States from his birth country of Kosovo, becoming a legal permanent resident living in New York between 2003 and 2013.¹⁴³ An unidentified associate of Kandic alleged that as early as 2005 Kandic expressed a desire to fight non-Muslims, engage in jihad against the U.S. military, and to become a martyr.¹⁴⁴ Graphic, inhumane photos revealing torture and detainee abuse released from Abu Ghraib created a noticeable public grievance, particularly among the American Muslim communities in 2004 and 2005. This grievance, spread as a result of the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the miscategorization and handling of enemy combatants, could have fueled Kandic’s personal need to achieve a higher purpose. Kandic’s expressed desire to seek martyrdom suggests that he sought the perceived prestige of dying with honor for a cause perceived to be justified. Actions of the U.S. military following the declaration of the “War on Terror” seem to have pulled Kandic towards terrorism.

As a result of his expressed intent to engage in terrorism, Kandic was placed on a no-fly list.¹⁴⁵ Circumventing travel restrictions, in November 2013, just before the height of recruitment for the Islamic State began, Kandic traveled from Monterrey, Mexico to Panama City, Panama, and onto Sao Paulo, Brazil before arriving in Turkey on December

¹⁴² Department of Justice Office of Public Affairs, *New York Resident Charged With Providing Material Support to ISIS, Extradited to United States* (Washington, D.C.: The United States Department of Justice, November 1, 2017), <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/new-york-resident-charged-providing-material-support-isis-extradited-united-states>.

¹⁴³ United States of America vs. Mirsad Kandic, 16M383 (E.D. Ny. 2016).

¹⁴⁴ United States of America vs. Mirsad Kandic; and Department of Justice Office of Public Affairs, “New York Resident Charged With Providing Material Support to ISIS, Extradited to United States.”

¹⁴⁵ United States of America vs. Mirsad Kandic.

25, 2013.¹⁴⁶ At the time of travel, Kandic was approximately 32 years of age.¹⁴⁷ This travel pattern sheds light on U.S. border control vulnerabilities which could be exploited by returning foreign fighters, or any Western foreign fighter who has decided or been directed to leave the conflict zone.

From Turkey and during time spent in Syria, rather than fulfill his desire to become a martyr, Kandic served as a recruiter. As a recruiter, Kandic urged the group of foreign fighters that he convinced to join the fight to become martyrs.¹⁴⁸ Kandic facilitated recruitment and travel for Jake Bilardi, a young, Australian citizen, through social media, namely Twitter. On March 11, 2015, with ongoing encouragement from Kandic, Bilardi carried out a suicide bombing in Ramadi, Iraq.¹⁴⁹ Kandic praised the perceived achievement through Twitter, which may have served as an esteem builder, thus filling a need for Kandic, and furthering his personal justification for his actions. Kandic frequently boasted of his achievements, once stating, “I sent out over 20,000 brothers...to Sham.”¹⁵⁰ Repeated boasts, though shown to be influential to recruits, may have served a personal esteem need for Kandic. Though his childhood experiences and education are largely unknown, it is likely that during his upbringing in Kosovo, Kandic was not coddled and rarely received recognition for his achievements. The perception of the ability to belong and repeatedly prove self-worth, through his involvement in the recruitment process, likely filled Kandic’s perceived deprivation.

¹⁴⁶ United States of America vs. Mirsad Kandic.

¹⁴⁷ United States of America vs. Mirsad Kandic.

¹⁴⁸ United States of America vs. Mirsad Kandic; and Department of Justice Office of Public Affairs, *New York Resident Charged With Providing Material Support to ISIS, Extradited to United States*.

¹⁴⁹ Department of Justice Office of Public Affairs, *New York Resident Charged With Providing Material Support to ISIS, Extradited to United States*.

¹⁵⁰ Department of Justice Office of Public Affairs, *New York Resident Charged With Providing Material Support to ISIS, Extradited to United States*.

(6) Mohamad Jamal Khweis

Aware of the violent atrocities being committed by the Islamic State by mid-2015, Mohamad Jamal Khweis sought inclusion in the caliphate.¹⁵¹ At the age of 26, Khweis was not known to have grown up with strict practicing Muslim parents. His parents had emigrated to Fairfax, Virginia from Palestine.¹⁵² His behavior reflects that he was not raised in a strict Muslim household. Khweis had previously been arrested for driving under the influence and cited for public intoxication.¹⁵³ Though speculation, his arrests may have served as fracture points on his trajectory. Similar to Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, who prior to the Boston Bombing regularly drank, smoked marijuana, and engaged in other activities not conducive to a virtuous Muslim lifestyle; Khweis may have viewed his travel and inclusion in the formation of the caliphate as a form of atonement.¹⁵⁴ Khweis admitted during his trial that he was not a devout Muslim and had even consumed alcohol while en route to the caliphate.¹⁵⁵

Motivations and fracture points along Khweis' journey lack clarity and continuity. Curiosities allegedly lead him to join the group. While on trial Khweis offered,

I wanted to go to the Islamic State, the caliphate, and see for myself how it is, how people are living there, and one day tell me kids, I have been there. You know, it's not all like it seems...I just wanted to, you, just share with them like history, like places, places I have been.¹⁵⁶

Curiosity, fueled by virtual, slick propaganda, has led numerous foreign fighters to answer the call. Khweis' case depicts the deeply personal influence of online radicalization on lone

¹⁵¹ Meleagrou-Hitchens, Hughes, and Clifford, *The Travelers American Jihadists in Syria and Iraq*, 63.

¹⁵² Meleagrou-Hitchens, Hughes, and Clifford, *The Travelers American Jihadists in Syria and Iraq*, 63.

¹⁵³ Anne Speckhard and Ahmet S. Yayla, "American ISIS Defector - Mohamad Jamal Khweis and the Threat Posed by 'Clean Skin' Terrorists: Unanswered Questions and Confirmations," *Huffington Post* (blog), March 21, 2016, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/anne-speckhard/american-isis-defector-mo_b_9511746.html.

¹⁵⁴ "Boston Bombing and the Process of Radicalization," Podcast, 00:37, posted by Karl Murand, April 6, 2015, <https://player.fm/series/59577>.

¹⁵⁵ United States of America vs. Mohamad Jamal Kheweis, 1:16-cr-00143 (E.D. Va. 2017).

¹⁵⁶ United States of America vs. Mohamad Jamal Kheweis.

individuals. As the dream of the caliphate deteriorates virtual radicalization will likely become increasingly crucial to the Islamic States' ability to hold relevance and rebuild.

(7) Mohamad Saeed Kodaimati

Born in Aleppo, Syria in 1991, the needs that led Mohamad Saeed Kodaimati, here on referred to as Saeed to avoid confusion with his family name, to join the Islamic State are complicated and lean heavily towards the safety needs surrounding a local fighter. Though Saeed became a naturalized U.S. citizen at the age of 17, his family left the U.S. in December 2012 with the intention of returning to their country of origin.¹⁵⁷ Familial belonging initially fueled Saeed's travel. While en route to Syria, an invalid documentation issues led to the detention of the Kodaimati family.¹⁵⁸ Time spent in a Turkish jail served as a fracture point for Saeed. His fracture point was further fueled by a prolonged association with Mohamed Mahmoud, an Islamic State sympathizer from Austria. Mahmoud treated the Kodaimati family well during their stint in prison. This perceived fair treatment likely had an influential effect on their collective identity. As described in Chapter II, prison can serve as a breeding ground for terrorism and allow radicalization to spread amongst member of the prison population. Those feeling rejected by society may be predisposed to jihadi ideology, especially while incarcerated. Once released, the family was refused admission to the U.S. embassy and deported to Syria, potentially furthering feelings of rejection.

Settling in Kafr Hamra, an area controlled, at the time, by Salafi-jihadist organizations, Saeed describes his actions as necessary for survival. Physiological and safety needs can serve to fuel the radicalization of local fighters and Saeed's situation fits the lower spectrum of the hierarchy. Saeed penned,

I am not a terrorist, do not like violence and whatever I did while in Turkey and Syria was necessary for survival. My family is living in a war zone where they are being bombed by barrel bombs. It is a desperate situation.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁷ United States of America vs. Mohamad Saeed Kodaimati, 15 CR 1298 AJR (S.D. Ca. 2015).

¹⁵⁸ United States of America vs. Mohamad Saeed Kodaimati.

¹⁵⁹ United States of America vs. Mohamad Saeed Kodaimati.

Though Saeed, a U.S. citizen, did not have to travel to Syria to fight, his familial sense of belonging led him and his family home to Syria. Once surrounded by the war, survival seems to have fueled his fight. Saeed's situation is unique among the foreign fighters analyzed through this research but is a worthy example of the nuances and idiosyncrasies along the trajectory to terrorism. Saeed also serves as an example of the enemy miscategorization committed by U.S. authorities when handling returnees; a categorization which blindly merits prosecution and sentencing as measures of success.

(8) Mohamed Amiin Ali Roble

As a young victim of a rare, traumatic incident, Mohamed Amiin Ali Roble believed that he had been saved for a higher purpose.¹⁶⁰ At the age of ten, Roble was involved in a bridge collapse. Roble was on board a bus, along with his four siblings, in August 2007 when the Interstate 35W bridge collapsed killing 13 and injuring 145 travelers.¹⁶¹ Despite sustained injuries, doctors claimed that none of the siblings seemed as affected by the collapse as Mohamed Amiin Ali Roble.¹⁶² Variances in the effects of traumatic events are evidence of the idiosyncrasies of fracture point on the human mind. Diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), Roble began seeing a therapist who noted Roble's "spiritual belief that God had saved him for a purpose."¹⁶³ Roble did not complete his therapy sessions.¹⁶⁴ Any attempts to follow-up on Robles' condition and well-being are unknown.

The collapse was deemed a design failure resulting in a substantial monetary settlement for Roble upon his 18th birthday. Roble turned eighteen in August 2014, one month after Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared the establishment of the caliphate.¹⁶⁵ In

¹⁶⁰ "Bridge Collapse Survivor Linked to ISIS in Syria," Associated Press, May 27, 2016, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/isis-link-minnesota-man-survivor-minneapolis-bridge-collapse-ap/>.

¹⁶¹ United States of America vs. Mohamed Amiin Ali Roble, 16-MJ-584HB (D. Min. 2016).

¹⁶² Jennifer Mayerle, "I-35W Bridge Collapse Survivor Linked To ISIS," CBS Minnesota, May 27, 2016, <http://minnesota.cbslocal.com/2016/05/27/bridge-collapse-survivor-islamic-state/>.

¹⁶³ Associated Press, "Bridge Collapse Survivor Linked to ISIS in Syria."

¹⁶⁴ Associated Press, "Bridge Collapse Survivor Linked to ISIS in Syria."

¹⁶⁵ Associated Press, "Bridge Collapse Survivor Linked to ISIS in Syria;" and Glenn, "Timeline: The Rise, Spread and Fall of the Islamic State."

addition to his perceived need to fulfill a higher purpose, family played an integral role in Roble's radicalization. Roble's uncle, Abdiwali Nur, was a member of a group of Islamic State sympathizers, who are known to have made it to Syria.¹⁶⁶ Nur, aware of Roble's settlement and vulnerable mindset, likely exploited his desire for self-actualization and fulfillment of his perceived "purpose."¹⁶⁷

D. MORALITY OF UTOPIAN DREAMS

None of the individuals described in the case studies joined a FTO to quench a thirst for blood, though it is recognized that the blood thirsty have been drawn to conflict as an outlet for violent desires with repercussions. Of the eight cases analyzed during the course of this research, all of whom were naturalized U.S. citizens, many experienced fracture points weighing heavily on their moral compasses which resulted in a burning desire to live in a purely Islamic society. The foreign fighters are caught in a moral conflict fueled by both religious and political ideals and driven by a personal requirement to defend those needs. There is no biological incentive to do nothing and the perceived necessity to fulfill a moral duty to the ummah likely overpowered the realization that more psychological needs could be sacrificed in the process of filling the moral obligation. For each of the American foreign fighters, family life and socioeconomic class had a negligible impact on their decision to travel. According to Lorne L. Dawson and Amarnath Amarasingam, "religion provides the dominant frame these foreign fighters use to interpret almost every aspect of their lives, and this reality should be given due interpretive weight."¹⁶⁸ These findings are counter to much of the research previously presented, which proposes that religion is not a significant motivator, but rather that economics and perception of marginalization lead to radicalization.¹⁶⁹ Even in Daniela Greene's case, where belonging

¹⁶⁶ United States of America vs. Mohamed Amiin Ali Roble.

¹⁶⁷ Associated Press, "Bridge Collapse Survivor Linked to ISIS in Syria."

¹⁶⁸ Lorne L. Dawson and Amarnath Amarasingam, "Talking to Foreign Fighters: Insights into the Motivations for Hijrah to Syria and Iraq," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 40, no. 3 (March 4, 2017): 191–210, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2016.1274216>.

¹⁶⁹ Daan Weggemans, Edwin Bakker, and Peter Grol, "Who Are They and Why Do They Go? The Radicalization and Preparatory Processes of Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighters," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 8, no. 4 (January 1, 2014): 100–110, <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/365>.

played a role, her motivation did not result from marginalization. Rather Greene was pushed to the point of travel by a perceived deprivation entangled with love. Finally, age, in the cases analyzed, does not appear to have a direct correlation to the decision of travel. Though many were in their early to mid-twenties, some were in their late twenties and thirties.

During a primary interview conducted by Dawson and Amarasingam, one fighter from the United Kingdom highlights the importance of religion, stating that factors leading to radicalization in the media are inaccurate.¹⁷⁰ The unidentified fighter offered,

Firstly these people who say muslims who join are bored or looking for adventure are propagandists. Its kind of orientalism. They want to portray the guys who go to jihad like the same people who in the west go on killing rampages for no reason or because they are bored or psychos. Many muhajireen I know came with their wives and children. Some were about to get married...Some divorced their wives...Some left parents whom they loved the most...All this is strange...This is all for the sake of Allah.¹⁷¹

Religiosity may be more challenging to accept as a motivating factor for American foreign fighters, where freedom of religion is presented as a constitutionally protected core value; however, the cases analyzed in the research suggest a disconnect between Islamic religious ideals and life in the West. Incompatibility must be recognized and reconciled because it is often the incompatibility being exploited through us-vs.-them rhetoric across all communication media, including social media and the mass media in the United States.

The Islamic States media conglomerate has been regarded by governments and recruits alike as a highly capable recruitment operation attracting those prone to violence. For many recruits, the free pass for violence may be an attractive draw, and the increasingly corroborating reports of *bihyat* (pledged loyalty) requiring atrocities such as beheading suggest that those recruited may quickly breach nihilism. However, the foreign fighters analyzed through this research can be neither labeled as blood-thirsty nor barbaric. It is the religious duty portrayed both through social media and the Islamic State's official media

¹⁷⁰ Dawson and Amarasingam, "Talking to Foreign Fighters: Insights into the Motivations for Hijrah to Syria and Iraq," 200.

¹⁷¹ Dawson and Amarasingam, "Talking to Foreign Fighters," 200.

outlets that helped pulled these individuals toward jihad, while the realization of the unIslamic practices of the Islamic State likely pushed them to return home. Fathali Moghaddam, who focuses on the psychological process involved in adopting terrorism offers “inhibitory mechanisms” to explain the effect of violence on those who have not fully adopted the us-vs.-them narrative.¹⁷² This adoption makes killing another human immoral in the eyes of the fighter. According to Moghaddam, “terrorists psychologically distance themselves from other humans they intend to destroy.”¹⁷³ However, those unable to distance themselves may become disillusioned with the terrorist cause. Moghaddam, through his *Staircase to Terrorism* radicalization framework, suggests that those reaching the fourth floor on the staircase to terrorism have a significantly limited chance of exiting alive.¹⁷⁴ Where prevention is not attainable, this floor likely offers opportunity for counter narrative measures and disengagement. Giving those who seek an exit strategy an opportunity to disengage from their perceived moral obligation through the conveyance of a new, creative moral highroad could lead to successful reintegration. The walls of the “parallel or shadow world” provided by terrorist organizations must be broken down and discredited in the eyes of those who sought identity in the perceived in-group.¹⁷⁵ The next chapter will explore the inhibitory mechanisms that led returnees to march home.

¹⁷² Fathali M. Moghaddam, “The Staircase to Terrorism: A Psychological Exploration,” *American Psychologist* 60, no. 2 (February-March 2005): 166, doi:10.1037/0003-066X.60.2.161.

¹⁷³ Moghaddam, “The Staircase to Terrorism: A Psychological Exploration,” 166.

¹⁷⁴ Moghaddam, 165.

¹⁷⁵ Moghaddam, 165.

IV. UNCONVINCED: THE LONG MARCH HOME

Conflict is inevitable, but combat is optional.

—Max Lucado

A. “HOME”

As the Islamic State continues to lose footing, foreign fighters may flee the battleground and march home.¹⁷⁶ While many returnees will return disillusioned, some are fleeing IS with a more violent conviction than the ideology that originally drove them to leave the comfort of home. *Home* for a foreign fighter is more than a place. Definitions of “home” include both a place that one resides and a place of origin.¹⁷⁷ Individuals granted refuge in the West—previously displaced by conflict—may have felt inclined to engage in the war, and/or provide aid in states currently facing civil conflict. A previously displaced person’s decision to travel may differ from the foreign fighter who seeks violence, or the humanitarian who strives to render aid. Push and pull factors weigh heavily on foreign fighters faced with conflict. Detailed documents referencing Islamic State foreign fighters recovered from the self-proclaimed caliphate contained data on recruits from Iraq and Syria.¹⁷⁸ Thirty-Six Iraqi nationals, according to the document cache, arrived from the Turkish-Syrian border. Additionally, 50 of the 126 Syrian fighters included in the documents were recorded as entering the Islamic State from Turkey.¹⁷⁹ Though the reasoning for the documentation is unknown and likely will remain unclear, the classifications suggest that members of the Islamic State’s hierarchy may have considered

¹⁷⁶ Jenkins, *When Jihadis Come Marching Home: The Terrorist Threat Posed by Westerners Returning from Syria and Iraq*, 19.

¹⁷⁷ Merriam-Webster’s *Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed. (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 2003). Also available at <http://www.merriam-webster.com/>.

¹⁷⁸ Brian Dodwell, Daniel Milton, and Don Rassler, *The Caliphates Global Workforce: An Inside Look at the Islamic States Foreign Fighter Paper Trail* (West Point: Combating Terrorism Center, April 2016), <https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2016/11/Caliphates-Global-Workforce1.pdf>.

¹⁷⁹ Dodwell, Milton, and Rassler, *The Caliphates Global Workforce: An Inside Look at the Islamic States Foreign Fighter Paper Trail*, 3.

the establishment of the caliphate as the birth of a new nation and homeland for those entering the territory.

The act of returning, during or after conflict, differs for each individual. Disillusioned foreign fighters may return out of nostalgia for home. Hardened fighters may not return due to a yearning for home, but out of a desire to continue the fight at home. According to an assessment focusing on the dimensions of the foreign fighter threat, “It is highly likely that even as the territorial caliphate shrinks and is increasingly denied an overt presence, its leadership will look to supporters overseas, including returnees, to keep the brand alive.”¹⁸⁰ Maintaining strength in the brand may result in an increase in violent attacks as the Islamic State struggles to maintain legitimacy.

B. FOREIGN FIGHTERS RETURNEES

Following the territorial losses in Mosul and Raqqa, experts feared a surge of returning foreign fighters at the borders. This assessment links to an idea presented by Bjorgo and Horgan suggesting that terrorist groups and individuals are more likely to look for an exit when they feel that they are losing than when winning feels within reach.¹⁸¹ This calculation has not come to fruition, leading to increased anxiety over assessing the next play; however, as the Islamic State’s territorial holds become increasingly less inhabitable, those foreign fighters who traveled to the self-proclaimed caliphate may attempt to return home or travel on to other conflicts. Though combatants have dispersed from conflict zones in the past, the unprecedented number of Western foreign fighters makes this instance challenging for democratic governments who are ground in guaranteeing the rights of citizens.

Risks do exist; this research is not naïve to the fact that returning foreign fighters pose risks to public safety. However, not all returnees carry the same weight of risk and

¹⁸⁰ Richard Barrett, *Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees* (New York, NY: Soufan Center, October 2017), 5, <http://thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Beyond-the-Caliphate-Foreign-Fighters-and-the-Threat-of-Returnees-TSC-Report-October-2017.pdf>; and Alastair Reed, Johanna Pohl, and Marjolein Jegerings, *The Four Dimensions of the Foreign Fighter Threat: Making Sense of an Evolving Phenomenon* (The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, June 2017), <https://doi.org/10.19165/2017.2.01>.

¹⁸¹ Bjorgo and Horgan, “Introduction,” 4.

should, therefore, be handled in accordance to their risk level. This section will consider the risk of improperly assessing and managing returning foreign fighters. Richard Barrett has warned that “national resources in most countries are insufficient to monitor more than a handful of returnees.”¹⁸² Proper, multi-discipline risk assessment could serve to ease the pressure on overtaxed law enforcement agencies that manage the risk posed by a large number of returnees and ensure that proper resources are allocated to the threats of highest concern.

A number of citizens originating from Western Europe and a few from the United States returned from territory held by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria relatively quickly, while others were killed or otherwise unable to escape. As of October 2017, the Soufan Group assessed the at least 5,600 foreign fighters representing 33 countries had returned.¹⁸³ The collapse of IS has resulted in physical, involuntary exits from the region, but not necessarily from the pursuit of the movements objectives. Subversive engagement may start to escalate in new territories where IS was not previously considered a threat. New found convictions to the cause may erupt in parts of the global that have been largely immune to terror. However, new opportunity to return home also now exists for those fighters who no longer believe in the black and white version of the IS takfir, Salafi-jihadist ideology. The challenge lies in accurately assessing the nuances between disillusioned returnee and hardened terrorist, as there are varying types and degrees of returnee. The types of returnee, though not all inclusive, are: individuals who become disillusioned when faced with the reality of the situation, those who return for pragmatic reasons but continue to hold radical ideologies, and those who return with the intent of executing an attack. As the threats posed by each type of returnee differs, so too should the approaches for assessing and solving the threat. The need for assessment requires further exploration of the varying types of returning foreign fighter, as well as the benefit or threat that each present.

¹⁸² Richard Barrett, *Foreign Fighters in Syria* (New York, NY: Soufan Center, June 2, 2014), 7, <http://soufangroup.com/foreign-fighters-in-syria/>.

¹⁸³ Richard Barrett, *Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees* (New York, NY: Soufan Center, October 2017), 5, <http://thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Beyond-the-Caliphate-Foreign-Fighters-and-the-Threat-of-Returnees-TSC-Report-October-2017.pdf>.

Disillusionment depends upon how engrained the us-vs.-them narrative is for the foreign fighter. Disillusioned returnees could prove valuable in the ongoing fight against extremist narratives. The voice of a returnee who was convinced to join the Islamic State but found the life of a terrorist to be unsatisfactory could be perceived as more legitimate to an individual on the trajectory to terror. In addition to providing a voice counter to the propaganda machine fed to hungry consumers, those disillusioned may be able to provide valuable intelligence on the Islamic States techniques, tactics, and procedures both in theatre and at home. Prosecution in these instances may not be the most beneficial solution; however, ensuring that the returnee meets the criteria of both disengaged and deradicalized is paramount to success. Deradicalization and reintegration policies may be necessary to win the hearts and minds of those with a voice to leverage. The policy option provided as a result of this research is focused on the assessment of a disillusioned returnee but should not be considered a one size fits all approach to returning foreign fighter. As the radicalization process is idiosyncratic, the process of deradicalization may not serve all those who return from conflict theatres in Iraq and Syria.

Individuals returning due to family or illness, who are disengaged but maintain radical ideologies, may present the risk of acting as recruiters and/or facilitators for future travelers. These returnees hold the status of fighters, which many aspire to become, making them particularly dangerous to society even without the intent to attack. General Paul J. Selva, Vice Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff has warned of the radicalizing potential of extremist content online but failed to identify the radicalizing potential of those who have fought in theatre and since returned.¹⁸⁴ Their vulnerabilities may be able to be exploited and deradicalization may be possible if the proper policies exist to intervene.

¹⁸⁴ Ben Riley-Smith, "Isil could continue radicalizing for years after battlefield defeats, senior U.S. general warns," The Telegraph, January 30, 2018, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/01/30/isil-could-continue-radicalising-years-battlefield-defeats-senior/>.

a. The Attackers

Returnees who arrive with the intent to perpetrate attacks have historically been few in number.¹⁸⁵ Though few in number, attacks committed by returning foreign fighters are suggested to be exponentially more lethal than attacks carried out by HVEs.¹⁸⁶ Research presented in *Should I Stay or Should I Go?* indicated that one in nine Western foreign fighters who return execute an attack.¹⁸⁷ With this estimate and the projected 250 Americans who joined the conflict, the risk of a returning U.S. foreign fighter perpetrating a terrorist attack is low. However, increasing attacks in the West over the past five years, particularly in Paris and the United Kingdom, have brought the returnee threat to the forefront. As Hegghammer noted, the conflict in Syria “will prolong the problem of jihadi terrorism in Europe by 20 years,” expressing the risk of an “almost inevitable” attack perpetrated by a returnee.¹⁸⁸ This section examines attacks perpetrated by returnees, including two recent attacks in Paris and Manchester which are analyzed in depth. The attacks in Paris and Manchester provide an understanding of the level of sophistication and lethality that can be associated with attacks carried out by returning foreign fighters.

The threat posed by hardened returnees has been recognized by Neil Basu, the Senior National Coordinator for Counterterrorism Policing in the United Kingdom:

We’ve long known that training overseas can battle-harden people. It’s not just being able to fire a gun; it’s the psychological bar that you overcome by being brutalized in theater. Once you get a taste for violence, the second time is much easier.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁵ Thomas Hegghammer and Peter Nesser, “Assessing the Islamic State’s Commitment to Attacking the West,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no 4 (2015): 1, <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/440/html>.

¹⁸⁶ Thomas Hegghammer, “Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists’ Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting,” *American Political Science Review* 107, no. 01 (February 2013): 10. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055412000615>.

¹⁸⁷ Thomas Hegghammer, “Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists’ Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting,” 10.

¹⁸⁸ Charles Lister, *Returning Foreign Fighters: Criminalization or Reintegration?* (Doha, Qatar: Brookings Institution Center, August 2015), <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/En-Fighters-Web.pdf>.

¹⁸⁹ Raffaello Pantucci, *A View from the CT Foxhole: Neil Basu, Senior National Coordinator for Counterterrorism Policing in the United Kingdom*, (West Point: Combating Terrorism Center, February 15, 2018), <https://ctc.usma.edu/view-ct-foxhole-neil-basu-senior-national-coordinator-counterterrorism-policing-united-kingdom/>.

Returning foreign fighters have victimized European nation states in at least six separate attacks since the declaration of the caliphate in June 2014. The attacks involving returnees were: Charlie Hebdo, Paris in November 2015, the Thalys attack, Brussels, Ansbach, and most recently the concert attack in Manchester. *Fear Thy Neighbor*, a study of attacks in the West from June 2014 to June 2017, analyzed data pertaining to sixty-five individuals who have carried out attacks. Of the sixty-five attackers examined, twelve individuals were confirmed to have been foreign fighters.¹⁹⁰ Based on these cases alone, eighteen percent of attackers in the West served as foreign fighters.¹⁹¹ Eleven of the twelve had traveled to Iraq and Syria and fought for the Islamic State. The remaining returnee had training in Yemen with AQAP.¹⁹²

At the time of this report, only one returnee has been known to plan an attack in the United States since 2011. Mohamed Rafik Naji traveled in March 2015 to join the Islamic State branch operating in Yemen.¹⁹³ Naji returned to New York in December, but his loyalties remained with the Islamic State as he strategized an attack.¹⁹⁴ Naji was arrested prior to carrying out his plan and charged with attempting to provide material support to the Islamic State at the age of thirty-seven.¹⁹⁵ Whether or not Naji was directed to return is unknown.

Prior to the rise of the Islamic State in 2011, Faisal Shahzad, a Pakistani-born, naturalized U.S. citizen, unsuccessfully attempted to detonate an explosive laden SUV in

¹⁹⁰ Lorenzo Vidino, Francesco Marone, and Eva Entenmann, *Fear Thy Neighbor: Radicalization and Jihadist Attacks in the West* (Milano, Italy: Ledizioni, 2017), 60–61.

¹⁹¹ Vidino, Marone, and Entenmann, *Fear Thy Neighbor: Radicalization and Jihadist Attacks in the West*, 60–61.

¹⁹² Vidino, Marone, and Entenmann, 60–61.

¹⁹³ Meleagrou-Hitchens, Hughes, and Clifford, *The Travelers American Jihadists in Syria and Iraq*, 12.

¹⁹⁴ Department of Justice U.S. Attorney's Office, *Brooklyn Man Arrested For Attempting To Provide Material Support To ISIL*, (Washington, D.C.: The United States Department of Justice, November 21, 2016), <https://www.justice.gov/usao-edny/pr/brooklyn-man-arrested-attempting-provide-material-support-isil>.

¹⁹⁵ Department of Justice, *Brooklyn Man Arrested For Attempting To Provide Material Support To ISIL*.

Times Square on May 1, 2010.¹⁹⁶ Shahzad had moved to the United States in 1999, earned a bachelor's degree and an MBA in computer science, married, had a daughter, and a career.¹⁹⁷ Granted citizenship in May 2009, Shahzad would have appeared from the outside to be a well-assimilated Pakistani-American in Bridgeport, Connecticut. Shahzad traveled to Pakistan to train alongside Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) before returning to the U.S. to carry out his attack.¹⁹⁸ Though Shahzad's attack was unsuccessful, his ability to receive training and finances from a known FTO, plan an attack, make an improvised explosive device (IED), and deploy the IED under the radar suggest a diminished level of preparedness to detect and prevent attacks perpetrated by returning foreign fighters.

Though the "blowback rate" for returnees has been low given the unprecedented number of who flocked to Syria and Iraq, it is important to note that attacks involving returning foreign fighter have been the most lethal, as previously suggested by Hegghammer.¹⁹⁹ Five cases studied in *Fear Thy Neighbor*, which predates the Manchester attack, depict a much higher average death toll in attacks involving a veteran foreign fighter. The average lethality across all attacks regardless of veteran involvement was seven. This number rose to an average of thirty-five deaths with the participation of a veteran.²⁰⁰ This "veteran effect" highlights the needs for policy to ensure deradicalization of those who return from the battlefield regardless of their role.²⁰¹ If the efforts of a deradicalization program for those returning to the United States from Syria and Iraq can prevent a single incident the endeavor is worthwhile.

¹⁹⁶ Lorraine Adams and Ayesha Nasir, "Inside the Mind of the Times Square Bomber," *The Guardian*, September 18, 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/sep/19/times-square-bomber>.

¹⁹⁷ Adams and Nasir, "Inside the Mind of the Times Square Bomber."

¹⁹⁸ Adams and Nasir, "Inside the Mind of the Times Square Bomber."

¹⁹⁹ Vidino, Marone, and Entenmann, *Fear Thy Neighbor*, 60–61; and Hegghammer, "Should I Stay or Should I Go?," 6–11.

²⁰⁰ Vidino, Marone, and Entenmann, 60–61.

²⁰¹ Thomas Hegghammer defines "Veteran Effect" as pertaining to those domestic fighters with prior foreign fighter experience, who, as a result, are significantly more effective operatives. See Hegghammer, "Should I Stay or Should I Go?," 7.

(1) Paris

Of the perpetrators involved, both in planning and facilitation, in the coordinated attacks carried out in Paris in November 2015, at least eight had returned from Syria.²⁰² Most reentered Europe three months prior to the attacks, with two known to leverage the vulnerability of the refugee flow via the porous Greek border. Abdelhamid Abaaoud, the ringleader from Belgium, and Salah Abdeslam, a foreign fighter originating in France, had previously engaged in, and been convicted of criminal activity. Table 2 depicts that travel and nationality of each foreign fighter known to be involved in the Paris attacks.²⁰³

Table 2. Returnees Involved in the Paris Attacks

Suspect	Nationality	Known Travel to Syria
<i>Ringleader</i>		
Abdelhamid Abaaoud	Belgian	Trips between 2013 and 2015
<i>Stade De France</i>		
Bilal Hadfi	French	2015
Unidentified	Unknown	Return via Leros 2015
Unidentified	Unknown	Return via Leros 2015
<i>Bataclan</i>		
Ismael Mostefai	French	2013-2014
Samy Amimour	French	2013-2015
Foued Mohamed-Aggad	French	2013-2015
<i>Mobile Team</i>		
Brahim Abdeslam	French	Attempted Travel in 2015
Salah Abdeslam	French	Indications of Travel

The sophistication of these choreographed, simultaneous attacks shows the potential lethality of attacks carried out by those who have trained as foreign fighters. The Paris attacks further exposes the security challenges presented by the free migration of foreign fighters and the inherent risk presented by open borders further exacerbated in Europe by the Schengen Agreement.

²⁰² Jean-Charles Brisard, “The Paris Attacks and the Evolving Islamic State Threat to France,” *CTC Sentinel* 8, no. 11 (December 2015): 5.

²⁰³ Brisard, “The Paris Attacks and the Evolving Islamic State Threat to France,” 7.

(2) Manchester

Salman Abedi was born in Manchester to a mother and father who had fled Libya seeking asylum from the Gaddafi regime. Abedi, who had traveled to Libya between April 15 and May 18, 2017, had been a MI5 Subject of Interest (SOI) in the past.²⁰⁴ At the time of the attack, the all SOI investigations pertaining to Abedi were closed.²⁰⁵ According to an independent assessment of MI5 and police, Abedi had been referenced multiple times during intelligence gathering operations.²⁰⁶ According to reporting, referral to a deradicalization program was not considered. Abedi, like the Paris attackers, had a limited criminal record, which included an assault on a female during his time in college. Of note is the number of foreign fighters and, though outside of the scope of this research, homegrown violent extremists (HVE) with a prior domestic violence and/or history of violence against females. According to more than one third of the 13 HVEs who have successfully conducted attacks in the U.S. since September 11, 2001 have had criminal histories involving domestic violence and sex crimes.²⁰⁷

Abedi's ability as an SOI to return home to Libya, a known IS foothold, sheds light on a weakness within the immigration system in the United Kingdom, whose citizens may take advantage of the Visa Waiver Program (VWP) to enter the United States. Additionally, this successful attack highlights the ongoing security challenge of prioritizing resources through risk-based assessments. In the cases of returnees who are not prosecutable, whether from Syria and Iraq or any IS territory that emerges in the future, the public safety risk must be calculated. The vulnerabilities presented by the VWP is outside of the scope of this research but does merit future study.

²⁰⁴ David Anderson, *Attacks in London and Manchester between March and June 2017, Independent Assessment of MI5 And Police Internal Reviews* (London: Brick Court Chambers, December 2017), 15, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/attacks-in-london-and-manchester-between-march-and-june-2017>.

²⁰⁵ Anderson, *Attacks in London and Manchester between March and June 2017, Independent Assessment of MI5 And Police Internal Reviews*, 15.

²⁰⁶ Anderson, 15.

²⁰⁷ Peter Bergen et al., *Jihadist Terrorism 16 Years after 9/11: A Threat Assessment* (Washington, D.C.: New America, September 11, 2017), [/international-security/policy-papers/jihadist-terrorism-16-years-after-911-threat-assessment/](https://www.newamerica.net/publications/papers/jihadist-terrorism-16-years-after-911-threat-assessment/).

C. UNCONVINCED

Between January 2014 and August 2015, the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence tracked defector narratives.²⁰⁸ Their findings, though including no Americans, determined four common defector narratives among fifty-eight cases. It should be noted that the majority of the defectors were Syrian and therefore would not be categorized as foreign fighters; however, the narratives can be strongly associated with hierarchical needs and therefore deserve mentioning. The primary reason given for defection was the lack of focus on fighting the Assad regime, a call that had led so many to Syria initially.²⁰⁹ This call for support against the genocide of the Assad regime resonated with a high number of the case studies presented in this research. The second and third prominent defector narratives expressed are intermingled: brutality, particularly against fellow Sunni Muslim and un-Islamic behavior.²¹⁰ The reality of committed atrocities were often in competition with the moral reasons associated with group membership which lead to disenchantment with the avenues that IS was taking to achieve their broader goals of maintaining and expanding the caliphate. The final narrative relates to the need of safety and is often portrayed by defectors as harsh living conditions. Neumann describes the disappointing reality experienced particularly by Western foreign fighters as, “hard to cope with shortages of electricity and basic goods.”²¹¹

At the time of this report, twelve foreign fighters are known to have returned home and one unnamed U.S. citizen is known to be held in a U.S. detention facility abroad.²¹² The below analysis builds upon the preceding case studies with the exception of Mohamed Amiin Ali Roble, who was charged in absentia in violation of 18 U.S.C. § 2339B(a)(1),

²⁰⁸ Peter R. Neumann, *Victims, Perpetrators, Assets: The Narratives of Islamic State Defectors*, (London: The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, 2015), 1, <http://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/ICSR-Report-Victims-Perpetrators-Assets-The-Narratives-of-Islamic-State-Defectors.pdf>.

²⁰⁹ Neumann, *Victims, Perpetrators, Assets: The Narratives of Islamic State Defectors*, 10.

²¹⁰ Neumann, 10.

²¹¹ Neumann, 11.

²¹² Meleagrou-Hitchens, Hughes, and Clifford, *The Travelers American Jihadists in Syria and Iraq*, 2.

providing material support and resources to the Islamic State, a known FTO.²¹³ Roble radicalized as a part of a networked group of Somali Americans residing in Minnesota and is believed to still reside in Syria with his Uncle Abdi Nur.²¹⁴ The case studies are examined to better understand the motivating factors leading previously convinced American foreign fighters to defect. This research recognizes that the verifiability of claims of motivation presents a challenge. The claims are often self-reported by the returnee and may be reported under duress. The hierarchy of needs comprising physiologically needs, safety needs, a need for love/belonging, esteem, and self-actualization, forms the backdrop of contributing motivations.

D. AMERICA’S RETURNEES

The returnee cases build upon the stories of the foreign fighters examined in Chapter III. Of the cases studied, all foreign fighters except Mohamed Amiin Ali Roble have returned to the United States. One foreign fighter, Mirsad Kandic, returned unwillingly through extradition. All foreign fighters in the study who returned home have been met with prosecution. The level of detail in the criminal complaints and sentencing transcripts differs for each returnee; however, the use of primary source documents is important to the understanding of their motivations. The following analysis provides a nuanced glimpse into each returnee’s story and reasons for return.

(1) Bilal Abood

On September 16, 2013, Bilal Abood returned to the United States after spending approximately four months in Syria. Upon his return, in an interview with the FBI, Abood denied that he had supported a terrorist organization claiming that he had fought with the Free Syrian Army (FSA).²¹⁵ Determining which organization a foreign fighter has fought alongside remains a challenge for investigators. Left to rubble, the information confiscated

²¹³ Department of Justice Office of Public Affairs, *Eleventh Twin Cities Man Charged with Conspiracy to Provide Material Support to ISIL* (Washington, D.C.: The United States Department of Justice, August 24, 2016), <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/eleventh-twin-cities-man-charged-conspiracy-provide-material-support-isil>.

²¹⁴ United States of America vs. Mohamed Amiin Ali Roble, 16-MJ-584HB (D. Min. 2016), 17.

²¹⁵ United States of America vs. Bilal Abood, 3–25CR-0256K (N.D. Tex. 2015), 4.

on the ground does not often provide a clear picture of who is fighting with which organization. Eric Harroun, a returned foreign fighter who fought with “guys who want freedom and democracy,” expressed in an interview with Vice News that it was not always obvious who he was fighting alongside.²¹⁶ Harroun clarified, “of course if they are flying a Jabhat al-Nusra flag, or mujahedeen you know it is just it is [sic] very complicated on the ground. It is a messed-up situation.”²¹⁷ Abood supported this claim during his FBI interview, claiming that collaboration frequently took place between the FSA and Al-Nusrah Front for the People of the Levant (ANF).

Lack of action on the ground led to disillusionment for Abood. He had traveled to Syria to be a part of the building of the Islamic State and did not witness progress being made. Experience in Syria led to a realization of the deprivation of achievement. It is this deprived need that drove Abood home. On May 25, 2016, Bilal Abood was sentenced to 48 months in prison for making false statements to a federal official after being in the United States for nearly two years.²¹⁸

(2) Aws Mohammed Younis Al-Jayab

Shortly after attaining refugee status in the United States from Syria in October 2012, Al-Jayab, as previously discovered, made the decision to return to Syria in November 2013. After approximately two months in Syria, Al-Jayab returned to Los Angeles International Airport on January 23, 2014.²¹⁹ Electronic communication between Al-Jayab and his associates suggest that infighting between groups and his view of the immorality of fighting against fellow Sunni Muslims drove his decision to return.²²⁰ On January 7, 2014, Al-Jayab communicated,

²¹⁶ “The American Jihadist: Eric Harroun In His Own Words,” YouTube video, 8:57, posted by Vice News, April 12, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=97ndpOAID50>.

²¹⁷ Vice News, “The American Jihadist: Eric Harroun In His Own Words.”

²¹⁸ Department of Justice Office of Public Affairs, *Iraqi-Born U.S. Citizen Sentenced to 48 Months in Prison for Making False Statements to the FBI* (Washington, D.C.: The United States Department of Justice, May 25, 2016), <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/iraqi-born-us-citizen-sentenced-48-months-prison-making-false-statements-fbi>.

²¹⁹ United States of America vs. Aws Mohammed Younis Al-Jayab, 2:16-MJ-1 (E.D. Ca. 2016), 16.

²²⁰ United States of America vs. AWS Mohammed Younis Al-Jayab, 15.

I swear that the State is killing al-Ansar and al-Nusrah. They are our brother, but they are making a mistake. I might withdraw. And we are going to stand with the State against the [Free Army]. I might withdraw. [...] When the seditious acts are over, I will return. [...] I did not come to fight for the sake of sedition.²²¹

Based on Al-Jayab's repeated use of "sedition" in his electronic communications, it seems that security of morality, a need categorized under safety in the hierarchy, led to his decision to leave the conflict zone.²²² The killing of fellow Sunni Muslims is a common draw away from Salafi-jihadist groups, in particular *takfiri* groups such as the Islamic State.²²³ Al-Jayab, though ideologically convinced that joining the fight was necessary, did not find himself convinced that the killing was justified. Upon his return, Al-Jayab settled in Sacramento, CA. Al-Jayab remained in the Sacramento area until he was arrested for making false statements in a terrorism investigation on January 7, 2016.²²⁴

(3) Mohimanul Bhuiya

From June 2014 until October of the same year, Bhuiya was in Syria at which time he sent an email stating that he wanted to return home.

Please help. I had a week [sic] though out letter, but it's too risky to have it saved on my device. I'll try to write to you soon in full explanation. But right not [sic] my window is closing. I just want to get back home. All I want is this extraction, complete exoneration thereafter, and have everything back to normal with me and my family...Please help me get home...I am fed up with this evil.²²⁵

Bhuiya elaborated on the "evil" in an interview after arriving back in the United States stating that "you could see madness in their eyes, people who just have a readiness for

²²¹ United States of America vs. AWS Mohammed Younis Al-Jayab, 15.

²²² United States of America vs. AWS Mohammed Younis Al-Jayab, 14–15.

²²³ *Takfiri* is a belief held by a sect of radical Islamists where Muslims who fail to uphold the tenets of Islam are apostates and therefore are to be justifiably killed as non-believers; See Neumann, *Victims, Perpetrators, Assets*, 1.

²²⁴ Department of Justice Office of Public Affairs, *California Man Arrested for Making False Statements in a Terrorism Investigation* (Washington, D.C.: The United States Department of Justice, January 7, 2016), <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/california-man-arrested-making-false-statements-terrorism-investigation>.

²²⁵ United States of America vs. Mohimanul Bhuiya, 14-CR-612 (E.D. Ny. 2014), 5.

violence,” describing his peers in Syria as bloodthirsty.²²⁶ Bhuiya admitted that he had worked for the Islamic State but claimed not to have held a fighting role. Leveraging his knowledge of computers, Bhuiya was allegedly assigned to teach other members of IS computer skills to avoid being made a fighter.²²⁷ Bhuiya had described his radicalization as “compromising my American side for my Islamic side,” but found life in the caliphate was “just not the Islam I grew up with.”²²⁸ Disillusionment for Bhuiya came in varied forms, the first of which is safety. Victim and witness to beatings and the fear of becoming a fighter on the front lines stripped Bhuiya’s sense of bodily security. Being witness to the un-Islamic nature of the Islamic State was the second force that drove Bhuiya to make the journey home despite the consequences for his decisions.

In a 2016 interview Bhuiya stated, “I want to be the voice that helps deter extremism and really attack false ideology at its core. It’s something I’m absolutely committed to and my parents know my commitment and the government knows my commitment and I hope America can see my commitment as well.”²²⁹ Bhuiya was plead guilty to providing material support to a foreign terrorist organization but continues to work with the FBI in an effort to combat radicalization in the United States. Though program success is difficult to gauge this early, Bhuiya’s experience and built-in perception of being a veteran Islamic State fighter has the potential to give his story a sense of authority among his vulnerable peers. In addition to providing a counter-narrative to those on the periphery of terrorism, Bhuiya is now able to fulfill his higher need of achievement and goal of minimizing prejudice for his fellow Muslims, thus attaining self-actualization through non-violent means.

²²⁶ Richard Engel, Ben Plessner, and Tracy Connor, “American ISIS Defector: ‘I’ve Let My Nation Down,’” NBC News, May 23, 2016, <https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/isis-uncovered/american-isis-defector-i-ve-let-my-nation-down-n578216>.

²²⁷ United States of America vs. Mohimanul Bhuiya, 6.

²²⁸ Engel, Plessner, and Connor, “American ISIS Defector: ‘I’ve Let My Nation Down.’”

²²⁹ Engel, Plessner, and Connor, “American ISIS Defector: ‘I’ve Let My Nation Down.’”

(4) Daniela Greene

Leaving the United States on June 23, 2014, Daniela Greene was in Syria less than one month before showing indicators that she was disillusioned with her decision. On July 9, 2014, Greene stated in an email,

I am gone and I can't come back I am in Syria. Sometimes I wish I could just come back I wouldn't even know how to make it through, if I tried to come back I am in a very harsh environment and I don't know how long I will last here.²³⁰

Greene's choice of words suggests she was once convinced to travel to be a part of the Islamic State; however, the reality of the living conditions and the brutality of the environment has left her unconvinced of her decision, which was fueled by a need for belonging and sexual intimacy. Though she was quick to marry the German foreign fighter who had lured her to travel to Syria, thus fulfilling her driving needs, her correspondences reveal her physiological needs were not being met. It is those most basic needs that drove her back to the United States. Greene escaped Syria and returned to the United States unscathed on August 6, 2014.

Despite her unwavering, conscious decision to risk national security and violate public trust, given the position that Greene held, she was sentenced to a much lesser degree than other returnees. Though Greene was not recommended for rehabilitative treatment, the government's sentencing recommendation demonstrates a willingness to entertain deradicalization measures for those *low risk* returnees. The problem, however, is in defining and measuring the risk associated with returning foreign fighters without fully understanding their level of involvement within a terrorist organization. According to the *Government's Motion For Departure and Memorandum in Aid of Sentencing*, Greene's lack of "a prior criminal record, or any apparent need of treatment available in the Bureau of Prisons" and her willingness to have "accepted responsibility for her crime, admitting it to law enforcement at the first opportunity, and agreeing to cooperate thereafter," exhibited

²³⁰ United States of America vs. Daniela Greene, 114-mj-00487 (D.C. 2014), 6.

that Greene was unlikely to recidivate.²³¹ Daniela Greene was sentenced to be incarcerated for twenty-four months followed by three years of supervised release.²³² Greene has since been released.

(5) Mirsad Kandic

Mirsad Kandic was neither unconvinced, nor is it likely that he is currently deradicalized. Kandic was extradited to the United States following his capture. It could be argued that the nature of his return disqualifies him to be classified as a returnee. However, the cross-border movements of Mirsad Kandic under a false identification illustrate the challenges of the fluidity of the current situation in Iraq and Syria, which is important for authorities to recognize. Though his reasoning for leaving the caliphate is unknown, as a recruiter and/or handler for the Islamic State Kandic did not need to be in the caliphate to spread the IS Salafi-jihadist ideology. His needs, both to belong to a group and attain self-worth, were filled through camaraderie and the internal glorification of providing countless recruits. Though speculative, given the timing of his exit from the caliphate in late 2016 or early 2017 perhaps the escalation of Operation Inherent Resolve pushed him to relocate his operations.

Kandic provides an example of a foreign fighter who was disengaged physically but remained ideologically motivated by the larger terrorist movement. Through social media and encrypted applications, Kandic could spread his message from any location to any recruit using a cell phone. According to Anders Strindberg and David Brannan, the focus of IS and its cadre of believers is now asymmetrical.²³³ Strindberg elaborated by stating that this is,

One of the ongoing problems that ISIS, despite having been dispersed, will pose because the battlefield commanders and the various cadres who until recently had been in Mosul or Raqqa are now not only dispersed, but they also have more time on their hands, frankly...they are harbored

²³¹ United States of America vs. Daniela Greene, Governments Motion for Departure and Memorandum in Aid of Sentencing, 14-CR-230, 8.

²³² United States of America vs. Daniela Greene, 10.

²³³ "Finding the Missing Pieces of Mercury," Podcast, 45:06, posted by Frank Forman, March 5, 2018, <https://www.chds.us/ed/items/18190>.

somewhere...and they travel with their network. The network that they have in terms of social media, in terms of the electronic network, it comes with them. It's in their pocket.²³⁴

The location of the handler has no effect on the power and effectiveness of the ideology and messaging being presented, which is the reality of the situation at the time of this research.

At the time of his arrest in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kandic was in possession of more than ten identities, which could help him evade various border security checkpoints. The Islamic State is known to have collected the passports of its foreign cadre.²³⁵ These valid passports may now be used to move its members to safe harbor outside of the caliphate, presenting additional security concerns at the border. This concern will be explored in the next chapter. Minister of Security of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Dragan Mektic, claimed during a press conference that Kandic was one the “most wanted terrorists in the world.”²³⁶ The United States had issued a warrant for his arrest in 2014 and a subsequent Interpol Red Notice was issued in 2016. It is this international cooperation that led to Kandic's arrest and extradition to the United States. Given the volume of foreign fighters from the West, it is improbable that all can be identified and processed in the same manner.

(6) Mohamad Jamal Khweis

Khweis radicalized and began his journey to the caliphate strictly through virtual propaganda with no networked connection, communication, or indication of his intent prior to arriving in Turkey. For this reason, this case is particularly troubling in terms of governmental preparedness in dealing with returnees, which will be explored in the subsequent chapter. Though an obvious statement, Khweis' journey shows that the United States government cannot prepare for the return of Americans that it does not know left.

²³⁴ Frank Forman, “Finding the Missing Pieces of Mercury.”

²³⁵ Dodwell, Milton, and Rassler, *The Caliphates Global Workforce: An Inside Look at the Islamic States Foreign Fighter Paper Trail*, 34.

²³⁶ “Mektić o hapšenju u Sarajevu: Saradnik ISIL-a koristio deset identiteta,” Al Jazeera Balkans, November 1, 2017, <http://balkans.aljazeera.net/vijesti/mektic-o-hapsenju-u-sarajevu-saradnik-isil-koristio-deset-identiteta>.

Khweis was unknown to have joined the ranks of the Islamic State at the time of his capture by Kurdish Peshmerga forces near Sinjar Mountain.²³⁷ According to the United States Department of Justice, Khweis

purposefully traveled to other countries first before entering Turkey to conceal his final destination. During his travel to the Islamic State, he used numerous encrypted devices to conceal his activity, and downloaded several applications on his phone that featured secure messaging or anonymous web browsing. Khweis used these applications to communicate with ISIS facilitators to coordinate and secure his passage to the Islamic State.²³⁸

These tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) are present in much of the jihadist propaganda available online and encouraged to be utilized by those attempting to travel to the caliphate to avoid detection.

Upon his capture, Khweis participated in an interview on Kurdish television admitting that he had made a “bad decision” in joining IS.²³⁹ During the interview, Khweis expressed that the environment and un-Islamic teachings drove him to defect. Khweis was unconvinced by his experiences during indoctrination in which recruits spend the majority of the day learning concepts of Sharia Law. According to Khweis,

I didn’t complete the whole Sharia. I didn’t agree with their ideology. That’s when I wanted to escape. My message to the American people is that life in Mosul is really very bad. The people who control Mosul don’t represent a religion. Daesh does not represent a religion. I don’t see them as good Muslims.²⁴⁰

The statements made by Khweis in the days following his capture suggest that his experience did not mirror what he had been convinced to believe through social media. The needs that fueled his travel were not met in the reality of the situation in Mosul. The

²³⁷ United States of America vs. Mohamad Jamal Kheweis, 1:16-cr-00143 (E.D. Va. 2017), 2.

²³⁸ Department of Justice Office of Public Affairs, *American Sentenced to 20 Years for Joining ISIS*, *American Sentenced to 20 Years for Joining ISIS* (Washington, D.C.: The United States Department of Justice, October 27, 2017), <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/american-sentenced-20-years-joining-isis>.

²³⁹ Goran Shakhawan and Mewan Dolamari “Exclusive interview with the American-born ISIS fighter,” Kurdistan24, March 17, 2016, <http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/bf92b765-a474-4f3b-8dcd-d90446a60f9c?>.

²⁴⁰ Daesh is Arabic translating to “the state.” See Shakhawan and Dolamari “Exclusive interview with the American-born ISIS fighter.”

safety of morality, as he understood the morality of Islamic teachings, was jeopardized through the indoctrination process, thus leaving Khweis unconvinced to kill.

Khweis was convicted of providing and conspiring to provide material support, including himself, to a known FTO. During the course of the investigation, Khweis repeatedly lied about his involvement and experiences with the Islamic State, including details regarding a fellow American recruit “who had trained with ISIS to conduct an attack in the U.S.”²⁴¹ Based on this information, Khweis may physically disengaged from the caliphate with the intent to return home to conduct an attack, though he had initially been convinced to travel. His “enlistment,” according to Hegghammer, may have resulted in a change of willingness to attack at home.²⁴²

His own initial intention was to join a foreign insurgency, but he finds himself in a training camp operated by a group with plans to attack in the West. The recruit may or may not be aware of the group’s international ambitions when joining. Over time he develops a sense of loyalty to the leadership and makes friends with fellow trainees. At some point he is asked about his general willingness to serve the organization by participating in an operation, the details of which may or may not be known to him. Peer pressure, a sense of loyalty, and/or a lack of exit options make him accept. When the order to deploy to the West arrives, he is so deeply invested in the organization and has so few ways out that he complies, even if the operation is of a type that he originally considered illegitimate.²⁴³

Khweis’ unknown affiliation with the Islamic State and clean Virginia driver’s license may have resulted in an internal push for him to return to the United States. The true intent of his alleged defection cannot be known.

²⁴¹ Department of Justice Office of Public Affairs, *Jury Convicts Man of Providing Material Support to ISIS* (Washington, D.C.: The United States Department of Justice, June 7, 2017), <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/jury-convicts-man-providing-material-support-isis>.

²⁴² Hegghammer, “Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists’ Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting,” 10.

²⁴³ Hegghammer, “Should I Stay or Should I Go?,” 10.

(7) Mohamad Saeed Kodaimati

“I am not a terrorist...”²⁴⁴ Words uttered by Mohamad Saeed Kodaimati to both U.S. Custom and Border Patrol and the FBI upon his return to the United States. Saeed spent more than three years in Turkey and Syria, his country of origin before deciding to return. Saeed and his immediate family members arrived in Syria in early 2013. The Islamic State was not yet metastasizing in the minds of Americans. Control and expansion served as the underlying goal of IS as Raqqa fell to Syrian opposition forces in Syria. It was mid-2013 when the Islamic State, then the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, began actively attacking secular and rebel groups in Raqqa and Aleppo.²⁴⁵ Violence between groups operating in Syria continued to escalate while Saeed was in country.

Familial and physiological needs led him to fight and physiological needs likely led him to return to the United States. Saeed also expressed religiosity as a contributing factor in his associated with rebel groups. The below Facebook messages written by Saeed articulate the needs surrounding the situation in Syria:

December 14, 2013:

I work with the brothers Trying to help people to live Kind of Jihad²⁴⁶

No need for fighters that much People here need a lot of help Whenever they need backup we go That’s how it goes²⁴⁷

This message passed on Facebook touches on the perceived religious necessity to help those in need.

Saeed attempted to return to the United States in early March 2015, initially being denied boarding in Istanbul. Prior to his arrival at the U.S. embassy in Turkey, the Islamic State had released video of graphic, brutal killings including the immolation a of Jordanian

²⁴⁴ United States of America vs. Mohamad Saeed Kodaimati, 15 CR 1298 AJR (S.D. Ca. 2015).

²⁴⁵ Glenn, “Timeline: The Rise, Spread and Fall of the Islamic State.”

²⁴⁶ United States of America vs. Mohamad Saeed Kodaimati, 18.

²⁴⁷ United States of America vs. Mohamad Saeed Kodaimati, 19.

military pilot who had been taken captive.²⁴⁸ The brutality of IS was increasing, which may have escalated Saeed's internal safety concerns, resulting in his decision to return. Following numerous interviews with U.S. authorities, Saeed returned to the United States on March 23, 2015. Saeed resided in Rancho Bernardo, California until his arrest on April 22, 2015. Saeed was sentenced to serve ninety-six months in violation 18 U.S.C. 1001(a)(2), providing false statements in relation to a terrorism investigation.²⁴⁹

E. HARSH REALITY OF UNFULFILLED BASIC NEEDS

Analysis of the reasons for defection aligns more with the bottom tiers of the hierarchy, whereas the reasons for Americans joining were most affiliated with the top needs.²⁵⁰ Realization that attaining a higher personal moral standing is not conducive to the environment created by the Islamic State, often creates a situation where foreign fighters slip into lower needs bases. The returnee cases depict incongruence between propaganda and reality. The media strategy of the Islamic State plays on each person's perceived conflict or deprivation and exploits the vulnerability through its representation of the self-proclaimed caliphate. Jytte Klausen categorized content into five areas: religious instructions, reporting from battle (suggested as the primary recruitment tool), interpersonal communication, threats against the West, and basic tourism.²⁵¹ Klausen further categorizes images, with lifestyle and brotherhood among the fighters ranking in the top types of images being propagandized through Twitter.²⁵² Research of IS graphic messaging by Shahira Fahmy, while working on behalf of the NATO Strategic Communications Center, concludes that a common type of image used by IS in their

²⁴⁸ Glenn, "Timeline: The Rise, Spread and Fall of the Islamic State."

²⁴⁹ Department of Justice U.S. Attorney's Office, *San Diego Man Sentenced to 96 Months in Prison for Making False Statements in an International Terrorism Investigation* (Southern District of California: The United States Department of Justice, March 14, 2016), <https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdca/pr/san-diego-man-sentenced-96-months-prison-making-false-statements-international>.

²⁵⁰ Abraham H. Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*, 3rd ed. (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1987), 6.

²⁵¹ Jytte Klausen, "Tweeting the Jihad: Social Media Networks of Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 38, no. 1 (January 2, 2015): 11. doi:10.1080/1057610X.2014.974948.

²⁵² Jytte Klausen, "Tweeting the Jihad: Social Media Networks of Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq," 11.

propaganda magazine *Dabiq*, from July 2014 through the November 2015 issue depicts the utopian lifestyle offered by IS.²⁵³ Imagery focused on children, health services, belonging, and brotherhood accounted for roughly one-fourth of the five hundred and twenty-eight images in the sample. According to Fahmy, only about one-tenth of the images depicted the brutality and atrocities that IS is known for in the West. Depictions offering a sense of power and social aspects of the caliphate control the narrative viewed by radicalized Salafi-jihadists, rather than images of beheadings and torture so frequently shown by Western media outlets.²⁵⁴

According to an American who was once convinced by al Qaeda, “I don’t think you can justify it, but at the end of the day I understand how they get to that point. They’re young and vulnerable. It’s the same way that a kid in the ghetto joins a gang.”²⁵⁵ Though many of the reasons that an individual is drawn to radical propaganda can be likened to the motivating push and pull factors involved in joining a gang, the situations are vastly different for Americans. The territory that these Americans traveled was not in their back yard, but rather more than two thousand miles away at the risk of death. According to the research, those convinced were not the children or teens that are typically coerced into joining gangs in the United States, but ranged in age, were educated, and had promising futures. Families were not depending on them joining the Islamic State for survival and often were in the dark of their intentions. These Americans traveled to foreign lands to fill the void created by their perceived needs, whether aligned by morality or belonging and then, each for less idiosyncratic reasons, returned home. Each has been received by the United States Department of Justice (DOJ), whether fresh from the battlefield or months after settling in, to serve their respective sentences. According to Bjorgo and Horgan,

Relying on repressive measures alone has long been associated with ineffective counter-terrorism activity, and though this realization is no secret in today’s world, the lack of viable alternatives to repression has to

²⁵³ Shahira Fahmy, “What ISIS Wants You to See,” Ahramonline, February 7, 2016, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/P/4/186884/Opinion/What-ISIS-wants-you-to-see.aspx>.

²⁵⁴ Fahmy, “What ISIS Wants You to See.”

²⁵⁵ Elizabeth Cohen and Debra Goldschmidt, “Ex-Terrorist Explains How to Fight ISIS Online,” CNN, December 21, 2015, <https://www.cnn.com/2015/12/18/health/al-qaeda-recruiter-fight-isis-online/index.html>.

date been unclear. The need to develop initiatives that more closely reflect the natural processes inherent and underpinning terrorist behavior (at whatever level it may occur) is therefore both urgent and critical.²⁵⁶

The long-term effects of radicalization and the atrocities that many returnees have witness is not known or understood. What is known are the increasing cases of prison radicalization in the West, indicating that the system needs repair. Is government prepared to deal with returnees from Syria and Iraq, or even the next diaspora of returning foreign fighters?

²⁵⁶ Tore Bjorgo and John Horgan, "Conclusions," in *Leaving Terrorism Behind Individual and Collective Disengagement*, ed. Tore Bjorgo and John Horgan (Oxon: Routledge, 2009), 245.

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V. BREAKING THE CYCLE

No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite.

—Nelson Mandela, October 1, 1995

A. AN ALTERNATIVE RETURN NARRATIVE FOR BILAL ABOOD

Bilal Abood was sentenced by the United States justice system to serve 48 months in prison, followed by three years of supervised release, on May 25, 2016. At the time of this research, Abood remains incarcerated by the U.S. Bureau of Prisons (BOP). Abood, despite his prior service to the United States, fell into the *do not pass go* category created by the United States justice system to handle individuals who associate with the perceived enemy. The country that had given him the opportunity of the American dream presented and accepted Bilal Abood's misadventure as betrayal.

Bilal Abood led his life selflessly. Abood served as a translator for Special Forces following the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, until his life was threatened “by terrorists.”²⁵⁷ Upon moving to the U.S., he served as an American Federal Contractor training soldiers on cultural customs and Muslim traditions in preparation for deployment to the Middle East. Finally, as a naturalized United States citizen, Abood served as a linguist in the U.S. Army. Abood proved, through his service, that he was a man of moral character and put sacrifice before self. It was this moral code that led him to Syria in 2013, following the progression of the Arab Spring and the Syrian civil war.

Abood described the effects that the media portrayal of the deteriorating situation in Syria had on his “heart”: graphic depictions of children becoming victims of chemical warfare and women being dragged through the streets and raped became ever more challenging for Abood to witness through the television screen. “It’s my heart, sir. I was—

²⁵⁷ United States of America vs. Bilal Abood, Mr. Todd Anderson, RMR, CRR (United States District Court Northern District of Texas Dallas Division 2016), 10.

I was crying every time I see it on the YouTube and see the people crying in the media...I'm sorry, but I'm a human.”²⁵⁸ Bilal Abood offered these words to a judge during his sentencing hearing on May 25, 2016.

Bombastic language presented by the judge during the sentencing hearing reflects that the actions of his misadventure were construed by public officials within the justice system as betrayal. Retaliation for this betrayal could be served through sentencing. However, what if Bilal Abood was offered a chance to achieve a higher moral objective? What if rather than being locked away, Abood became a voice for the people that he sought to save? Is this not a better allocation of human capital? This is not an attempt to justify the axiom that one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter, or a question of moral relativism. This is a look into a system of justice that has lacked the ability the leverage human capital and failed to consider the moral injury of the human condition.

Though this is not the case for every foreign fighter, nor should it be, for Bilal Abood and other similar cases, the moral injury of retribution for a misadventure intended to lend to a higher personal morality could create larger problems in terms of strategic counterterrorism communication and radicalization. Moral injury, as defined by David Wood, can have an enduring effect that should be recognized by counterterrorism strategists,

Moral injury is a jagged discomfort from our understanding of who we are and what we and others ought to do and ought not to do. Experiences that are common in war—inflicting purposeful violence, witnessing the sudden violent maiming of a loved buddy, the suffering of civilians—challenge and often shatter our understanding of the world as a good place where good things happen to us., the foundational beliefs we learn as infants. The broader loss of trust, loss of faith, loss of innocence, can has enduring psychological, spiritual, social, and behavioral impact.²⁵⁹

Bilal Abood had suffered a moral injury when his fellow translator and friend in Iraq was brutally murdered for assisting the United States. Standing by while Syrian women and

²⁵⁸ United States of America vs. Bilal Abood, Mr. Todd Anderson, RMR, CRR (United States District Court Northern District of Texas Dallas Division 2016), 28.

²⁵⁹ David Wood, *What Have We Done: The Moral Injury of Our Longest Wars* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2016), 8.

children were slaughtered by the hundreds resulted in a moral injury with which Abood could not live. Incarceration at a BOP facility does not serve to heal these moral injuries, but rather inflicts further pain, creates further loss of trust, and deepens social and behavioral impressions. In extreme cases, the potential exists for those incarcerated to turn further towards radicalization. The perception of being further removed from society and their possible predisposition toward jihadist ideology could result in an inverse effect and have a significant negative impact, both on the prison population and society after release. America foreign fighters, such as Bilal Abood should be afforded the opportunity to see and change the world through a more positive lens. Misunderstanding and miscategorizing the reasons that American foreign fighters travel to engage in foreign conflict causes a missed opportunity to build more resilient communities against terrorism.

B. A PRESCRIPTION FOR THE UNCONVINCED

The system is broken. Throughout the course of American history, the United States has laid emphasis upon the execution of a punitive justice system. Unfortunately for the society of which the justice system was designed to correct, cognizance of the needs of individuals has been fundamentally absent. This lack of understanding of needs was absent from the American policy psyche following September 11, 2001 when the decisions were made in how best to categorize the enemy. Seventeen years later, under the threat of a new enemy, the challenge of categorization of the perceived enemy in the U.S. remains; however, those requiring categorization have changed. Who was previously the “other” in a foreign land, are now Americans returning home from the caliphate. Proper categorization and treatment of these Americans arriving home are indispensable tools in curtailing the threat of long-term, generational terrorism on U.S. soil.

Those who have left the conflict zone should not automatically be considered to have been deradicalized. Just as adopting a terrorist ideology is a process, one cannot simply wake up and no longer hold those strong ideological beliefs that lead them to accept and/or promote violence. Prison sentences, regardless of length, are not synonymous of deradicalization. An increasing number of returnees are involved in attacks, leaving the question of what can be done to prevent the attacks and how can the threat posed by

returnees, whether the number large or small, be mitigated to prevent future unnecessary losses of life?

Such a multi-dimensional problem must be recognized for the complexities that it entails. The current one-dimensional, prosecutorial approach to terrorism suggests that we have not fully appreciated these complexities. The spark igniting this research is grounded in the suspicion that the Western-style governments may be misunderstanding the underlying dynamics pushing foreign fighters into conflict theatres and, as a result, mismanaging the categorization of their return. Following the philosophy of *kintsukuroi*, the experiences of American foreign fighters should not be forcibly suppressed or, worse, exacerbated by society, but should be illuminated for their educational value and used to make society whole and resilient against terrorism. The methods by which the United States implements a deradicalization and reintegration strategy will alter its collective resiliency against radicalization and those vulnerable to terrorist ideology. Though kinetic, military force has predominantly led the fight against Salafi-jihadist ideology since September 11, 2001, it has been recognized by counterterrorism experts that “military force is too blunt an instrument to defeat most terrorist groups.”²⁶⁰ A deradicalization prescription empathetic to the needs driving individuals to terrorism should be considered as a means to build communities less permeable to the Salafi-jihadist narrative. Deradicalization efforts must offer creative solutions to the valid grievance presented by returning foreign fighters.

Creative solutions require an understanding of cultures and traditions that may seem foreign; however, it has been this lack of understanding that has exacerbated feelings of alienation among fractions of the American population. In the words of Brad Deardorff, who has written of the benefits of soft-power counterterrorism policies: “When one demonstrates empathy—the ability to understand, if not sympathize, with another’s condition—it affords the ability to speak frankly about local grievances within the

²⁶⁰ Seth G. Jones and Martin C. Libicki, *How Terrorist Groups End: Lessons for Countering Al Qaeda* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 2008), 107, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2008/RAND_MG741-1.pdf.

American Muslim community and the security concerns of the government.”²⁶¹ Though it is recognized that a deradicalization policy may be favorable to adaptation across a spectrum of extremists, returning foreign fighters offer a testing ground where the links of social cohesion have been frayed. Evidence presented in CONTEST, the United Kingdom’s Strategy for Terrorism, suggests a correlation between the support of terror related violence and a lack of social cohesion in society. “Communities who do not (or in some cases feel they cannot) participate in civic society are more likely to be vulnerable to radicalisation; a stronger sense of belonging and citizenship makes communities more resilient to terrorist ideology.”²⁶² Building resilient communities should be a part of the counterterrorism prescription and a key component of the countering violent extremism (CVE) policy adopted by the United States.

Motivation for return differs for each individual, as does the risk associated. Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs and Alderfer’s adaptation of the understanding of needs provides a starting point for assessing the risk associated with returning foreign fighters. These needs frameworks fill an information gap left by previous radicalization assessment tools in the sense that they remove cognitive biases commonly associated with the idea of a terrorist. Table 3 provides a risk assessment for each of the eight foreign fighter cases analyzed in the preceding chapters, through the lens of these needs frameworks.

For those foreign fighters that return for reasons linked to the realization of the immortality of the conflict, a lengthy prison sentence may not offer the most societally productive response. This table highlights the grievances that have helped recruit American foreign fighters to be recruited into foreign conflict, particularly conflict driven by Salafi-Jihadist ideology.

²⁶¹ Brad Deardorff, *The Roots of Our Children’s War: Identity and the War on Terrorism* (California: Agile Press, 2013), 202.

²⁶² Home Office, *CONTEST The United Kingdom’s Strategy for Countering Terrorism*, Cm 8123 (London: Secretary of State for the Home Department, 2011), https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/97995/strategy-contest.pdf.

Table 3. Assessing the Risk of the Unconvinced

	Need Driving Radicalization	Need Driving Return	Societal Risk	Candidate for Deradicalization
Bilal ABOOD	Morality “I am human. I had to do something”	Lack of achievement limited progress in creating an Islamic State	Low	Yes
Aws Mohammed AL-JAYAB	Morality “Islamic duty”	Immorality killing of fellow Muslims	Low	Yes
Mohimanul BHYTYA	Morality “utopia” Islamic State	Immorality “fed up with this evil”	Low	Yes
Daniela GREENE	Love and Belonging Traveled to marry a foreign fighter	Safety “I am in a very harsh environment...”	Low (vulnerable)	Yes
<u>Mirsad</u> KANDIC	Esteem Self-worth and respect from others	<i>Unknown</i> Evaded security multiple times; apprehended with false IDs	High (recruiter)	Criminal Charged Required
Mohamad Jamal KHWEIS	Spontaneity “...see for myself...”	Immorality and Safety “didn’t agree with ideology”	Medium (vulnerable)	Yes
Mohamad Saeed KODAIMATI	Safety “I am not a terrorist...It was a desperate situation.”	Safety Escalation of the deteriorating situation.	Low	Yes
<u>Mohamed Amiin Ali</u> ROBLE	Esteem Need to fulfill a higher purpose following a near death experience	<i>Remains at Large</i>	High (financier)	Criminal Charges Required

Being empathetic to individual grievances is paramount to mitigating the risk associated with travelers and homegrown sympathizers. Particularly following September 11, 2001, the U.S. government was slow to recognize that the actions taken in Afghanistan

and even more so in Iraq were impacting fractions of the population. These fractions have not been influenced by fictional grievances, but rather grievances that have proven to have mobilizing effects. The United States cannot go back and correct past wrongs committed during a time of hasty decision making, but it can make a conscious effort to learn from the past and pave a path to deradicalization for the future.

C. A GROWING NEED FOR DERADICALIZATION

Former Director of U.S. National Intelligence James Clapper offered an approach emulating forgiveness during an event hosted by the Council on Foreign Relations, titled *Global Intelligence Challenges*, on March 2, 2015, stating, “if they come back and they are not involved in plotting or don’t have a nefarious purpose, then that’s their right and privilege as American citizens to come back.”²⁶³ However, the privilege to return to the United States has continually been met with prosecution. The United States is not only underprepared to identify and assess returning foreign fighters but has been negligent in its efforts to develop a deradicalization framework for returnees. The urgency of the problem cannot continue to be pushed into the background. Deradicalization may offer a solution to this potentially growing problem and ease the pressure on law enforcement to monitor numerous individuals with increasingly limited resources.

Terrorism is a human condition driven by emotion and the existence of perceived deprivation. According to the 9/11 Commission Report, the United States must “engage in the struggle of ideas,” and yet U.S. policies have been slow to approach the struggle at face value.²⁶⁴ The U.S. continues to fight the declared war as wars have been fought in the past, with kinetic power. Fighting the struggle on the ground is not an effective solution to an ideology that finds itself in the inbox of the those with legitimate grievances and pain in their heart from witnessing suffering. Recognition and better understanding of the origin of these grievances is necessary through an unbiased lens. The United States must open its aperture to the concept of resilience. This opening will require imagination. It is important

²⁶³ Frances Fragos Townsend, “James Clapper on Global Intelligence Challenges,” Council on Foreign Relations, March 2, 2015, <https://www.cfr.org/event/james-clapper-global-intelligence-challenges>.

²⁶⁴ The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, “The Final 9/11 Commission Report,” (Washington, D.C.: Forms in Word, 2004), loc. 10511, Kindle.

to establish policies that, rather than fuel the us-vs.-them narrative driven home by Islamist extremists, ignite a sense of meaning and inclusion in society based on American values. To echo retired U.S. Navy Rear Admiral John Kirby, “you cannot kill your way out of a terrorism problem,” and you cannot extinguish an ideology through prison sentences.²⁶⁵ Prison does provide a means to encourage disengagement from terrorist activities from a behavioral perspective, but the ideology can still prove to be persuasive, spread throughout the prison population, and hinder the mental wellbeing of those incarcerated. Through its spread, the continued existence of the ideology can prove to be a detriment to society. Custodial reform offers an opportunity for a range of professionals to interject in a positive way to decrease the likelihood of recidivism through a deradicalization program.

Though numerous deradicalization frameworks exist throughout Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, the United States has maintained a fairly isolated view of the threat and has been slow to adopt the idea of deradicalization. Those with the highest attributable rates of success have a broad focus that is adaptable and tailored on the individual level. John Horgan, a terrorism scholar who studies radicalization and disengagement within terror groups, offers that:

While terrorism is ultimately a group activity, such a group will always comprise individuals, each of whom has a role to play in the movement. Anti-terrorism programs tend not to focus on individuals, but it is through understanding individual radicalization and its associated social and psychological qualities that effective ways of promoting disengagement can be developed.²⁶⁶

Programs that provide educational, vocational, socio-cultural, religious, psychological, and extracurricular avenues have been most successful. Formation of the deradicalization program should start with recognition and understanding of the individual radicalization drivers, which can be realized through the use of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, as extrapolated in chapters III and IV. Though this can be a tedious, time consuming process,

²⁶⁵ Statement made by Retired Navy Rear Admiral John Kirby during an interview on CNN New Day on June 12, 2017.

²⁶⁶ John Horgan, “Disengaging from Terrorism,” in *The Faces of Terrorism: Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. David Canter (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons Ltd. 2009), 257.

the lower rate of returnees in the U.S. makes the endeavor possible. Policy recommendations focused on individual deradicalization and eventual reintegration are therefore being made in an effort to mitigate the potential of an attack by a returning foreign fighter. According to Daniel Koehler, a deradicalization expert in Germany, “most of the ideal candidates [for deradicalization] have thought about changing, thought about leaving, but do not know how to do it, or are afraid of the consequences.”²⁶⁷ Given this assessment, many returnees would make for ideal program candidates. The key is in the assessment of the individual, which should begin prior to his/her return.

D. CHALLENGES, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In the current counterterrorism environment, law enforcement predominately occupies the counterterrorism space, following laws established to drive arrest and prosecution. These rules have been widely accepted by the general public, who rank personal safety as a priority. Research conducted in August 2016 by The Chicago Council on Global Affairs revealed that many Americans are supportive of policies that grant perceived safety, such as limiting migrant flow into the United States.²⁶⁸ This understanding of the limited margin for error within public safety drives policy.

Officials working in law enforcement or, more generally, in disciplines driven by justice, intelligence, and public policy, may take a more hands-on approach to the issue of security as it pertains to returning foreign fighters. The weight of identifying and thwarting an attack on American soil rests on the shoulders of this group of professionals, thus giving them more stake in the game. Softer approaches to terrorism are therefore likely to be met with pushback from individuals in this professional community. Presenting those tasked with ensuring public safety with an opportunity to engage in deradicalization programs intended to produce long-term results and a decreased risk of generational radicalization as

²⁶⁷ Priyanka Boghani, “‘Deradicalization’ Is Coming To America. Does It Work?,” FRONTLINE, March 18, 2016, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/deradicalization-is-coming-to-america-does-it-work/>.

²⁶⁸ Dina Smeltz and Karl Friedhoff, “As Acts of Terror Proliferate, Americans See No End In Sight,” The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, August 22, 2016, <https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/publication/acts-terror-proliferate-americans-see-no-end-sight>.

returnees reintegrate into society may gain their support. Though the success of deradicalization programs currently being used in the Middle East has not proved quantifiable, the possibility of a decreased risk of terrorism in the homeland may outweigh the consequence of an attack being carried out by a returning foreign fighter in the future.

Victims, those directly impacted by a terrorist attack, may prove the least forgiving in the case of returning foreign fighters. Though representing a small portion of the population, victims have suffered the wrath of a violent terrorist ideology firsthand. Reconciling the actions of terrorists, according to Roche, requires that “the victim must give up resentment or moral outrage against the offender otherwise reconciliation could not occur...forgiveness in the context of terrorist criminality as a moral imperative is not only incoherent, but a perversion of legality and morality.”²⁶⁹ Creating a winning coalition for a deradicalization and reintegration policy will require the support of those who have experienced the violence that terrorism can bring.

Though the availability of data on the success of deradicalization programs abroad is limited, cases of returning foreign fighters operating under the radar and committing atrocities in the West exist. The coordinated attacks in Paris validate the threat posed by returning foreign fighters. The alleged mastermind of the operation, Abdelhamid Abaaoud, the Stade de France suicide bombers, Bilal Hadfi and Ahmad Almohammad, and the Bataclan attackers, Samy Amimour and Omar Ismael Mostefai, had all traveled to Syria before returning to Belgium to carry out the attacks.²⁷⁰ The ability of those returnees to enter under the radar and without repercussions for joining a designated terrorist organization highlights the need for policy to process, sort, deradicalize, and reintegrate returnees. A narrative expressing the possibility of fewer people victimized by terror may be the key to implementing an effective returnee risk assessment and deradicalization policy.

²⁶⁹ Patrick J. Roche, “Why should we shake the hand of reconciliation?,” *Belfast Telegraph*, January 25, 2010, <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/opinion/why-should-we-shake-the-hands-of-reconciliation-28517773.html>.

²⁷⁰ Ben Farmer, “Who is Salah Abdeslam and Who Were the Paris Terrorists? Everything We Know About the ISIL Attackers,” *The Telegraph*, March 18, 2016, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/france/11996120/paris-attack-what-we-know-about-the-suspects.html>.

Political opposition and the opposition of the citizenry is not the only challenge to implementation. Financial hurdles exist; though much of the infrastructure is already in place, reallocation may require additional resources. Overcoming the financial obstructions should be handled from a place of necessity. The proper assessment and management of returning foreign fighters is an investment in long-term counterterrorism, which presents a sound investment in the future. Finally, the most critical piece is the community. Building communities to ensure the goals are met and risk has been assessment to the greatest extent possible is essential to the public safety mission. Risk assessment comes from a mindset that terrorists are not born but created and are therefore susceptible to deradicalization. Finding compassionate human resources to believe in this mission is paramount to success.

E. FUTURE RESEARCH

1. Community Manager

Terrorist treat terror like a business; therefore, rehabilitating terrorist may benefit from a business inspired model. Community managers in business act to reinforce a message or brand. Radicalization of foreign fighters is increasingly occurring online through ideological brand reinforcement by the terrorist recruiters. With social media platforms serving as echo chambers for the Islamic States ideological messages, meeting those who have succumbed to radicalization on familiar ground may prove beneficial in the rehabilitation and reintegration process. Though the current bureaucratic conditions are not conducive to this type of approach, the idea of engaging community problem in the environment that it breeds is an idea that merits further exploration.

2. Leveraging the Defector Narrative

Combating the utilization of the or us-vs.-them narrative through understanding is an area where counterterrorism has struggled to find its footing. The U.S. State Department attempted a counter narrative campaign entitled *Think Again Turn Away*. Though this campaign is unlikely to have resulted in increased radicalization, it highlights the government's inability to understand and relate to the radicalization drivers of its adversaries. Offering mental and social assistance to a returnee assessed to be disillusioned with terrorism could assist in rapport-building and eventually lead to a legitimate voice

against the Salafi-jihadist narrative. Using the voice of the defectors of the Islamic State provides a viable base on the anti-Islamic State platform. The voice, however, must be vetted for sincerity. This vetting process is where the risk-assessment model could prove valuable, not only in assessing the risk associated with each returning foreign fighter, but in determining his or her eligibility to aid in the fight against ideological, Salafi-jihadist extremism. Though the utilization of the defector narrative has been deliberated and executed in a few instances, this is a counterterrorism policy worthy of further historical and contemporary research. Even after the complete collapse of the Islamic State, another group will reemerge like a phoenix out of the ashes. Total annihilation is a utopian fantasy; rather, the radical ideologies of Salafi-jihadist Islamists must be deflated, and thus their effect minimized through a powerful, resonating counter narrative.

F. SIGNIFICANCE

This thesis set out to provide a nuanced understanding of American foreign fighters, to include the idiosyncratic personal justifications for traveling to join and operate within the confines of an insurgency. Eight American foreign fighters, who traveled to Syria and Iraq were analyzed, both upon traveled to the conflict and upon their return to the United States. The foreign fighters were analyzed through the lens of needs-based theories to better understand their motivations for joining the ranks of the Islamic State. This thesis argues for the need to better understand the motivations of foreign fighter within the United States and provides a road map to a risk assessment framework for those returnees who may be eligible and receptive to deradicalization. Everyone has a story to be told.

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