

# **The Impact of ISIS on the Homeland and Refugee Resettlement**

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This testimony is divided into six sections:

1. What are the homeland security lessons of the large-scale ISIS terrorist attacks in Paris and Sinai?
2. Who are the Westerners being recruited by ISIS?
3. How are they being recruited?
4. The threat to the United States by ISIS's American recruits
5. The threat to the United States by ISIS's non-American recruits;
6. How to defeat ISIS: twelve action items.<sup>1</sup>

**On Friday November 13, France had its 9/11.** At least 129 people were killed at multiple locations in Paris, including a concert hall, a soccer stadium and a popular restaurant, the kinds of venues that ordinary Parisians flock to on a Friday night. At, or near, these venues the attackers deployed a mix of terrorist tactics, including suicide attackers, an assault using more than one gunman willing to fight to the death, hostage-taking and bombings. French President Francois Hollande blames ISIS, for the attack, and the terror group has claimed responsibility. It is still early in the investigation, but already it's clear that French and Belgian citizens some of whom had spent time in Syria fighting with ISIS were involved in the attack. One of the attackers had posed as a Syrian refugee.

**On October 31 ISIS brought down a Russian Metrojet airliner leaving Sharm el-Sheikh airport in Sinai, Egypt killing all 224 people on board; the deadliest attack on commercial aviation since 9/11.**

**What are the homeland security lessons of the ISIS terrorist attacks in Paris and Sinai?** The fact that one of the Paris attackers was posing as a Syrian refugee has caused many to ask whether one of the lessons of the Paris attacks is to end or "pause" accepting Syrian refugees into the States. More than 4.2 million Syrians have been registered as refugees according to the United Nations, yet the United States has accepted only around 2,000 Syrian refugees with the Obama administration announcing that it will accept 10,000 in 2016. Some have criticized the commitment to accept even 10,000 refugees citing fears that Syrian refugees would pose a terrorism threat to the United States. Republican presidential candidate Ben Carson, commented, "The jihadists want to infiltrate our nation. We have to exercise something that even resembles common sense" adding "That would be foolishness to take in people from a region where we don't have any way in making a determination if this person is radicalized already or potentially radicalized."

But how big a terrorist threat do Syrian refugees really pose to the United States? Animating the fear of accepting refugees is the belief that terrorism is a threat that infiltrates the United States from abroad. **Yet a survey by New America of 330 individuals accused of jihadist criminal activity in the United States since 9/11 found that more than eight in ten were American citizens.**

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Courtney Schuster and David Sterman of New America for their help in preparing this testimony.

**Among those 330 jihadist terrorism cases, none involved a refugee plotting or conducting an attack inside the United States.** (One involved an alleged plot to do, but it was a tightly controlled sting operation.)

Attacks by foreigners entering the United States do pose a real threat, yet the plots to do so since 9/11 were not by refugees. British national Richard Reid's December 2001 attempt to bring down an American airliner flying between Paris and Miami with a bomb hidden in his shoe was enabled by the Visa Waiver Program, not by being a refugee. Umar Abdulmutallab was able to attempt to bring down Northwest Flight 253 flying over Detroit with a bomb hidden in his underwear on Christmas Day 2009, because he had a multiple entry visa. Far from being a refugee, he was a privileged member of the Nigerian elite.

**Some refugees have been charged with terrorism related crimes. Of the 330 terrorism cases New America found nine instances of refugees charged with some kind of terrorist crime, most of them for conspiring to support an overseas terrorist organization.**

In 2011, Waad Ramdan Alwan and Mohanad Shareef Hammadi were arrested in Bowling Green, Kentucky following a two-year FBI investigation. The FBI began tracking Alwan shortly after his arrival in the United States in 2009 due to his known insurgent activity in Iraq from 2003 to 2006, when he was detained by Iraqi authorities for placing IEDs targeting American forces. The FBI used a confidential informant to get close to Alwan and together the men developed what Alwan believed was a plan to send weapons to al-Qaeda in Iraq. Alwan recruited Mohanad Hammadi, another refugee from Iraq. Together, the two men acquired weapons through a FBI informant and loaded these materials in a truck that they believed would be shipped to al-Qaeda in Iraq. They did not, however, make any plans for an attack on U.S. soil. Both are serving long prison terms.

In another case, Yassin Aref, a Kurdish refugee from Iraq was convicted of conspiring to support a terrorist organization using a missile to attack a Pakistani diplomat in New York. The case was also a sting operation driven by an informant.

Some cases involved Somali men from Minnesota who traveled to Somalia to fight for the al-Qaeda aligned terrorist group Al Shabaab. Other cases involve refugees from Uzbekistan. Fazzlidin Kurbanov, an Uzbek refugee who came to the United States in 2009 was convicted of conspiring to provide material support to the Uzbek terrorist group, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. In another case involving an Uzbek refugee, Jamshid Muhtorov, was charged him with planning to travel to fight with the Uzbek terrorist group Islamic Jihad Union abroad. However, the government did not allege that he plotted attacks inside the United States.

There are other reported cases beyond the nine we identified in which individuals who came, as refugees later became legal permanent residents or citizens. For example, Agron Abdullahu, a refugee from Kosovo who became a legal permanent resident, pleaded

guilty to providing firearms to illegal aliens; who ended up being convicted of conspiring to attack the Fort Dix military base in New Jersey in 2007.

**The record simply does not provide support for fears of a significant threat from terrorists infiltrating as refugees.** To the extent that there is a problem with refugees radicalizing, it is a homegrown problem similar to the radicalization of American citizens. Sometimes cited to justify fear of a refugee threat, the Tsarnaev brothers, who bombed the Boston Marathon in 2013, were both minors when their parents brought them to the United States from the former Soviet Union. They radicalized in the United States only around a decade after they had arrived in Boston. At the time of the bombing one of the brothers was an American citizen and the other had American residency.

As Congress contemplates what to do with the very small number of Syrian refugees that the States is willing to admit, it's worth recalling a shameful episode in U.S. history when refugees fleeing another brutal dictator were turned away from American shores. At the time seven in ten Americans polled said that they did not want these refugees let into the States. The year was 1938 and the refugees were Jews fleeing Hitler. Those attitudes had consequences. On May 13, 1939, more than 900 Jews fled Germany on the *St. Louis* cruise ship steaming first for Cuba and then, they hoped, the States. The Jews were turned away both in Havana and from the States—they could see the lights of Miami in the distance as they sailed back to Europe---where some 250 were killed in the Holocaust.

Today more than half of Americans polled say the States shouldn't take any Syrian refugees fleeing the terrible war in Syria and the brutal rule of both Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad and of ISIS. Pandering to this anti-refugee sentiment may be easy politics but it isn't in the American spirit as best expressed by Emma Lazarus: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore, send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me."

The existing Syrian refugee screening process involves a layered process of multiple checks and interviews by several US government agencies and on average lasts 18 to 24 months and therefore poses significant hurdles to any effort to infiltrate terrorists as refugees. **And so far, according to the US State Department, of the some 2,000 Syrian refugees who have been accepted into the States only around 2% are "military age males" who are unattached to families; the rest are children and women and the sick and the elderly.**

The screening for Syrian refugee is a rigorous system that can certainly be reviewed but there is no reason to hold up the application process of any Syrian refugee given the fact that the screening process is both so rigorous and so lengthy. **Syrian refugee claims should continue to be processed simultaneously as a review is instituted of the screening procedures to ensure they are the best procedures possible.**

**Given the prevalence of French and Belgian citizens in the Paris attacks it's not so much the Syrian refugee program that bears more scrutiny but the Visa Waiver Program enjoyed by many European countries' nationals.** Of course the Visa Waiver

Program significantly benefits the US economy as it encourages tourism and business by Europeans and so any possible adjustments to the program should take this into account.

**One of the other lessons of the Paris attacks is the dangers of TATP bombs. French prosecutors say the bombs used in Paris last week were made from TATP, a fact that yields important clues about the way the plot was planned and executed.**

TATP-based bombs are built using the common household ingredient hydrogen peroxide, which is used to bleach hair. Such bombs have been a signature of jihadist terrorists in the West for more than a decade because the materials are so easy to acquire, unlike military-grade explosives, which are tightly controlled in much of the West.

**Their use in the Paris attacks, as well as in terrorist plots in London and in the United States over the past decade, should remind law enforcement in the West that these TATP bombs are what jihadist terrorists may deploy in the future.**

What is tricky about TATP bombs is that they are quite difficult to make because their ingredients, when combined, are highly unstable and can explode easily if mishandled. To make an effective TATP bomb requires real training, which suggests a relatively skilled bomb-maker was involved in the Paris plot, since the terrorists detonated several bombs. It also suggests that there was some kind of bomb factory that, as yet, appears to be undiscovered, because putting together such bombs requires some kind of dedicated space. And it also suggests that there were probably tests of the bombs in an isolated place to ensure that they worked.

The dangers of TATP bombs can be seen in the case of Matthew Rugo and Curtis Jetton, 21-year-old roommates in Texas City, Texas. They didn't have any bomb-making training and were manufacturing explosives in 2006 from concentrated bleach when their concoction [blew up](#), killing Rugo and injuring Jetton. The pair had no political motives: They had just wanted to blow up vehicles for fun.

Others in the United States have built TATP bombs with far more malevolent intent. Najibullah Zazi, who grew up in New York City, [wanted to blow up as many commuters as possible](#) on the Manhattan subway system. Zazi was trained by al Qaeda to make a TATP bomb in Pakistan, and during the summer of 2009, he made bulk purchases of hair bleach in suburban Denver and set up his bomb factory in a nearby motel room. He mixed and cooked batches of hair bleach in the kitchenette of the motel. On the night of September 6, 2009, as he labored over the stove, Zazi sent several emails to an al Qaeda operative "Ahmad." The emails contained a well-known al Qaeda code for a terrorist operation being imminent -- "the marriage is ready" -- and also asked for specific instructions "right away, please" about the other ingredients needed for the explosive. Zazi had mastered the manufacture of the hair bleach-based bombs but had forgotten the The Brits tipped off American officials that the email account belonged to an al Qaeda operative living in Pakistan, and the U.S. National Security Agency began monitoring it. Once the FBI realized there was an al Qaeda recruit living in Denver making TATP bombs, it intensively monitored Zazi. He traveled from Denver to New York to carry out

his plan around the eighth anniversary of [9/11](#) and was soon arrested, as were two of his co-conspirators..

More successful for al Qaeda was the cell of British suicide bombers who carried out the ["7/7" London bombings](#) on July 7, 2005. They used their training to heat up and distill ordinary hair bleach, combining it with other ingredients to make effective bombs. Making these bleach-based bombs was a complex process, not something that could be picked up by reading bomb-making recipes on the Internet. The ringleader had received bomb-making training from al Qaeda in Pakistan. In an apartment the London plotters had rented to serve as their bomb factory, they mixed the chemicals. As they brewed up batches, they wore disposable masks because of the high toxicity of the materials, which bleached their dark hair a noticeably lighter color. They installed a commercial-grade refrigerator in the apartment to keep the highly unstable bomb ingredients cold. They built four devices.

Fifty-two commuters were killed when the bombs detonated on three London Underground trains and a double-decker bus. Two weeks after the attacks, on July 21, 2005, a second wave of hydrogen peroxide-based bombs was set off in London, this one organized by a cell of Somali and Eritrean men who were first-generation immigrants to the UK. Fortunately, while four bombs were set to detonate on July 21 -- three on the Underground and one on a bus, mimicking the attacks two weeks earlier -- their faulty construction rendered them harmless.

Hydrogen peroxide-based bombs would again be the signature of a cell of British Pakistanis who plotted to bring down seven passenger jets flying to the United States and Canada from the UK during the summer of 2006. The plotters were intent on committing suicide during the attacks on the passenger jets. Six of them made "martyrdom" videotapes recovered by British investigators. British authorities were tracking the ringleader intensively in the summer of 2006. When he was arrested in east London on August 10, 2006, he was carrying a memory stick storing flight plans for United Airlines, American Airlines and Air Canada jets flying from the UK to destinations such as Chicago, Washington, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Montreal and Toronto. Investigators later found several large bottles containing concentrated hydrogen peroxide that one of the conspirators had dumped in a London park. The plotters were planning to bring the liquid explosives disguised as soft drinks in hand luggage onto the flights they had targeted, together with other innocuous-looking items that could act as triggers. They had planned to assemble their bombs on the planes.

It was this plot that triggered airlines to ban almost all liquids being taken on flights. As French investigators try to piece together what happened in Paris, they will surely be looking for where the TATP bombs were assembled, whether in an apartment as the 7/7 plotters did, or in a motel room as Zazi did, or in some other location. They will also be trying to determine who built the bombs. Were they built by the terrorists themselves, as was the case with the 7/7 plotters, or did someone else build them? And where did the training to build the bombs happen? Was it in France, or in Syria, or in some other

location? These are some of the questions that, hopefully, the investigation will eventually unearth.

After 9/11, the New York Police Department initiated Operation Nexus, in which cops visited thousands of stores in the city and the wider Northeast region that sold or distributed materials that could be used in a terrorist operation. It could be anything from pipes useful for pipe bombs to the explosive "black powder" that can be found in fireworks. Each storeowner would be told, "If you see in an anomaly in a purchase, let us know."

Najibullah Zazi was just such an anomaly, as he was a dark-haired, bearded Afghan-American man in his 20s who bought six bottles of Clairoxide hair bleach during one shopping trip at a store in a Denver suburb. Zazi returned to the store a month later and purchased another dozen bottles of Ms. Kay Liquid, which is also a peroxide-based hair bleach. **It's that kind of bulk purchase of hydrogen peroxide that should trigger a suspicious activity report in the U.S. and other Western countries.**

**The bomb smuggled aboard the Metrojet flight by what was almost certainly an insider at Sharm el-Sheikh airport in Sinai raises the question: Could such an insider attack happen in the West? Short answer: It isn't out of the question.**

Five American citizens involved in serious terrorist crimes since 9/11 have worked at major U.S. airports in a variety of capacities. Add to that the 73 airport workers in the United States with access to secure areas who only six months ago were identified by officials at the Department of Homeland Security as being in [a federal database of possible terrorists](#), and a troubling picture emerges. (Those 73 workers were in a classified database that the TSA could not normally access.)

The five American terrorists who have worked at major American airports were recruited by variously ISIS; the al Qaeda-affiliated Somali terrorist group, al-Shabaab; a virulent "homegrown" jihadist cell based in California; and another such group in New York City.

In the years after 9/11, Kevin Lamar James was jailed in California's Folsom prison where he formed a group that he conceived of as "al Qaeda in America." James [recruited others](#) to help him with his plans. One of them was 21-year-old Gregory Vernon Patterson who had recently worked at a duty-free shop at Los Angeles International Airport (LAX). James thought that Patterson's inside knowledge of LAX would be helpful for his plans and when he made a list of potential targets in California, James listed LAX. James' crew planned to attack around the fourth anniversary of 9/11. They financed their activities by sticking up gas stations and their plans only came to light during the course of a routine investigation of a gas station robbery by police in Torrance, California, who found documents that laid out the group's plans for jihadist mayhem. Members of the California cell are now serving long prison terms. At the time, senior FBI official John Miller said, "Of all of the terrorist plots since 9/11, it is probably the one that operationally was closest to actually occurring."

On October 29, 2008, Shirwa Ahmed became one of the first Americans ever to conduct a suicide attack anywhere in the world when he was recruited by al-Shabaab to drive a truck loaded with explosives into a government building in Somalia, blowing himself up and killing 20 other people. Ahmed graduated from high school in Minneapolis in 2003 and then worked at the Minneapolis airport pushing passengers in wheelchairs; it was during this period that [he became increasingly religious and was recruited](#) by al-Shabaab. Abdisalan Hussein Ali became a suicide bomber for al-Shabaab in Somalia in 2011 and [had also worked](#) at the Minneapolis airport, in a Caribou coffee shop. Similarly, Abdirahmaan Muhumed, who was killed in 2014 while fighting for ISIS in Syria, [had worked](#) at the Minneapolis airport, where he had a security clearance that gave him access to the tarmac and to planes.

The problem of militants working at airports and airlines is not peculiar to the States. In the past decade, British citizens working at Heathrow and at British Airways have conspired with members of al Qaeda. In the United Kingdom, British Airways IT expert Rajib Karim, 31, conspired with al Qaeda's affiliate in Yemen to place a bomb on a U.S.-bound plane. In 2010, one of the leaders of al Qaeda's Yemeni affiliate, Anwar al-Awlaki, wrote an email to Karim asking, "Is it possible to get a package or a person with a package on board a flight heading to the US?" [Karim replied](#): "I do not know much about US I can work with the bros to find out the possibilities of shipping a package to a US-bound plane." [Karim had applied](#) for cabin-crew training before he was arrested and was sentenced to 30 years in 2011. In 2006, an employee at a shop in Heathrow working on the "airside" post-security section of the airport [provided advice about the security conditions](#) to self-proclaimed al Qaeda terrorist Sohail Qureshi, who was convicted of multiple terrorism charges.

Department of Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson announced in June that he was implementing new measures to "address the potential insider threat" by mandating biannual background checks for workers at U.S. airports, while also requiring airports to reduce the number of access points to secured areas and to increase randomized screening of airport employees. These are welcome developments but the real vulnerability is the two hundred or so airports around the world that have direct flights to the States.

## **2. Who are the Westerners being recruited by ISIS?**

Until the Paris attacks, French citizen Mehdi Nemmouche was the only case of a Western fighter in Syria accused of returning to conduct a deadly terror attack in the West -- the May 24, 2014, shooting at the Jewish Museum in Brussels, Belgium, that left four people dead. Nemmouche has been extradited to Belgium, where he awaits trial.

Two major factors place Europe at far greater risk of "returnee" violence from veterans of the Syrian conflict than is the case in the United States: the much larger number of European militants who have gone to fight in Syria and the existence of more developed jihadist networks in Europe.



**France has supplied more fighters to the Syrian conflict than any other Western country.** In September, Prime Minister Manuel Valls told Parliament that 1,800 French citizens have been involved in jihadist networks worldwide -- almost all of whom were drawn to the Syrian war. Nine months earlier, Interior Minister Bernard Cazeneuve [estimated](#) that 185 militants had returned to France from Syria. Of those who had returned, he said 82 were in jail and 36 were under other forms of judicial control.

German security services report that 720 Germans have left for Syria, and they estimate that 100 [have been killed](#) there, while another 180 [have returned](#) to Germany. Last year, the Belgian Foreign Ministry [released figures](#) that up to 350 Belgians had left to fight in Syria. More than [700 British citizens have left for Syria](#), with about half estimated to have returned to the United Kingdom, according to British officials. In January, Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop [placed the number of Australians fighting](#) abroad at 180, with 20 having died in Syria.

**1. So who exactly are the estimated 4,500 Westerners who have been drawn to join ISIS and other militant groups in Syria?** To provide some answers to that question, New America collected information about 474 individuals from 25 Western countries who have been reported by credible news sources as having left their home countries to join ISIS or other Sunni jihadist groups in Syria or Iraq. The Western fighters drawn to Syria and Iraq represent a new demographic profile, quite different than that of other Western militants who fought in Afghanistan in the 1980s or Bosnia in the 1990s.

**First, women are represented in unprecedented numbers.** One in seven of the militants in New America's data set are women. Women were rarely, if at all, represented in previous jihadist conflicts. While Western women are not going to fight in the war in Syria, they are playing supporting roles, often marrying front-line fighters and sometimes working as a kind of police officer enforcing ISIS's draconian laws. They are women like Sally Jones, 44, from the United Kingdom, who took her 10-year-old son to Syria in 2013, and Emilie Konig, 31, one of the first women to leave for Syria, who left France and her two children behind in 2012 to join her husband there. The U.S. State Department says both women have encouraged terrorist attacks in their native countries, and it officially [designated](#) both of them terrorists in September.

**Second, the recruits are young.** The average age of Western volunteers drawn to the Syrian jihad is 24. For female recruits, the average age is 21. Almost a fifth are teenagers, more than a third of whom are female. New America has documented an astonishing 80 cases of Western teenagers who have traveled to the war in Syria. More than a third of these teenagers are girls. Hans-Georg Maassen, the head of Germany's domestic security agency, [said, for instance](#), in March that nine female German teens had left for Syria. That same month, [ISIS released a video](#) of a French boy shooting a Palestinian hostage in the forehead.

**Third, many have familial ties to jihadism.** More than a quarter of Western fighters have a familial connection to jihad, whether through relatives who are also fighting in Syria and Iraq, through marriage or through some link to other jihads or terrorist attacks. For instance the father of British ISIS recruit Abdel-Majed Abdel Bary is Adel Abdel

Bary, who was [convicted](#) in New York for his role in the 1998 U.S. embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania. Of those with a familial link, one third are through marriage, many of them marriages between female recruits and male fighters conducted after they arrive in Syria. Three-fifths of Western fighters with familial ties to jihad have a relative who has also left for Syria. For example, the Deghayes family in the United Kingdom had three sons, ages 16 to 20, fighting in Syria together.

**Fourth, the Americans drawn to the Syrian jihad -- 250 who have tried or have succeeded in getting to Syria -- share the same profile as the Western fighters overall: Women are well-represented, and the volunteers are young, and many have family ties to jihad.** One in six of the Americans drawn to the Syrian conflict are women. The average age of the American militants is 25, with a fifth still in their teens. Almost a fifth of the American militants have a familial connection to jihad. The American recruits are, perhaps unsurprisingly, particularly active online: Around nine out of 10 American militants are active in online jihadist circles.

**Fifth, for Western militants, the wars engulfing Syria and Iraq have often proved deadly.** Almost half of the male fighters and 6% of the female recruits have been killed in Syria or Iraq.

**Sixth, few of the Western fighters who have traveled to Syria and Iraq are in government custody.** Only one-seventh of Western fighters in New America's data set are in custody, and more than two-fifths of individuals are still at large. (As indicated above, around half the Western militants were killed in the conflicts in Syria or Iraq.)

**Seventh, the most popular route to Syria is through Turkey.** Almost half of the Western foreign fighters made their way to Syria or Iraq via Turkey. Only one of the militants is documented as attempting to use an alternative route via Lebanon. For the rest of the Western militants, it's not clear from the public record how they arrived in Syria.

**Eighth, where an affiliation can be determined, the majority of the Western fighters have joined ISIS:** Three-fifths have joined ISIS, while only a tenth have joined al Qaeda's affiliate in Syria, known as al Nusra Front, and one-seventh have joined other smaller militant groups.

**2. How these Westerners are recruited: Propaganda and motivations.** Who is inspiring these militants to give up their often-comfortable lives in the West for the rigors of the war zone in Syria? Based on court records and press reports, New America has identified several Western militants acting as online recruiters. Among them are a number of Americans. For instance, Abdi Nur, a 20-year-old from Minnesota, allegedly took on the role of online recruiter after leaving for Syria in the summer of 2014. A complaint filed in November that charged six Minnesota men with trying to go to join ISIS [accuses Nur of acting as an online recruiter](#) and providing encouragement and advice to the men via Kik and other social media platforms from Syria. Another is Hoda Muthana, a 20-year-old American woman from Alabama, was [identified by BuzzFeed](#) as the individual behind the Twitter account Umm Jihad, which encouraged militants to

leave for Syria.

ISIS has disseminated two online guidebooks to encourage its Western recruits. In 2015, ISIS published its how-to guides *Hijrah* and "How to Survive in the West." *Hijrah* provided potential fighters with detailed packing lists -- advice on how to get to Turkey and dupe customs officials into issuing visas for the country; Twitter accounts of fighters living in Syria who can facilitate their travel; and even suggestions for recruits to assess their personality strengths and weaknesses before leaving home to prepare themselves better for jihad.

"How to Survive in the West" is a guide on how to "be a secret agent" in a Western country, giving readers tips on the making of Molotov cocktails, bombs and cell phone detonators; hiding weapons in secret compartments of vehicles, in the same fashion as gangs; and how to identify and evade police surveillance, even suggesting that readers watch the Jason Bourne film series for tips on employing evasion tactics.

What motivates many of these Western fighters to travel to a dangerous war zone with which most have no prior connection? A review of both ISIS propaganda and reporting on the individual cases in New America's data set suggests the answer is a mishmash of motivations that ISIS has picked up on as part of its recruiting strategy, including opposition to Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad, religious invocations of the spiritual benefit of participating in jihad, the belief that religious duty requires living under ISIS's so-called caliphate, anger and alienation from Western society, and for some the "cool" factor of participating in a war.

Here are the rationales for joining ISIS that are provided by a couple of ISIS's alleged American recruits: Abdi Nur, the 20-year-old Minnesotan, tweeted: "Jihad Is The Greatest Honor For Man So Come On And Join Dawla Ya Iqwa (you brothers of the Islamic State)." [Nur later explained](#) to his sister: "If I didn't care I wouldn't have left but I want jannah (paradise) for all of us." Authorities say Chicago teen [Hamzah Khan](#) left a letter for his parents before attempting to travel to Syria in 2014, explaining that "there is an obligation to 'migrate' to the 'Islamic State.'" He was charged with material support of ISIS and has pleaded not guilty.

**3. The threat to the United States by ISIS's American recruits. Four years into the Syrian civil war, little evidence has emerged to support the notion that returning fighters from Syria pose a great threat to the United States.** In the United States, there has only been one case of a fighter returning from Syria and allegedly plotting an attack. [Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud](#), 22, of Columbus, Ohio, left for Syria in April 2014 and fought there before returning home around two months later. The government alleges that a cleric in Syria told Mohamud that he should return to the United States to conduct an act of terrorism and that he discussed some kind of plan (with an informant) to kill American soldiers at a military base in Texas. He has pleaded not guilty to a charge of providing material support to a terrorist group.

Speaking at the Council on Foreign Relations in March, Director of National Intelligence

James Clapper said that about 40 individuals had returned from Syria. "We have since found they went for humanitarian purposes or some other reason that don't relate to plotting," he said.

We identified 23 Americans who actually reached Syria, 46 individuals who attempted or plotted to travel to Syria but were unsuccessful in doing so, and 14 who provided support to others fighting or seeking to fight in Syria.

Instead of being a launch pad for attacks at home, Syria turned out to be a graveyard for the few Americans who made it to the war zone. Of the 23 individuals who reached Syria, nine died there. For instance, Floridian Moner Abu Salha died conducting a suicide bombing in northern Syria last year, and Douglas McAuthur McCain was killed fighting for ISIS. Nine of the Americans who reached Syria remain at large, while five American fighters who returned to the United States from Syria were taken into custody.

**Rather than being an easy target for ISIS recruits, the United States benefits from a series of layered defenses that make returning and plotting a sophisticated attack undetected quite difficult.** It takes more than a plane ticket for a returning fighter to conduct a sophisticated attack: they also have to gather arms, conduct surveillance, and carry out the attack undetected. In assessing the threat posed by returning American fighters, it is worth putting the current Syrian conflict into historical perspective. The historical comparison most people are aware of is the Afghan war against the Soviets and the ensuing civil war, which helped launch Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda. Though an important cautionary tale, much has changed since then that makes it a weak comparison for how "blowback" from Syria might affect the United States.<sup>2</sup> For example, on 9/11, there were 16 people on the U.S. "no fly" list. Today, there are more than 48,000 people. In 2001, there were 32 Joint Terrorism Task Force "fusion centers," where multiple law enforcement agencies work together to chase down leads and build terrorism cases. Now there are 104 centers.<sup>3</sup> A decade ago, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, National Counterterrorism Center, Transportation Security Administration, Northern Command, and Cyber Command didn't exist. In 2014, all of these new post-9/11 institutions make it much harder for terrorists to operate in the United States. The U.S. intelligence budget also grew dramatically after 9/11, with Congress giving the government substantial resources with which to improve its counterterrorism capabilities. In 2013, the United States allocated \$72 billion to intelligence collection and other covert activities.<sup>4</sup> Before 9/11, the budget was around one third of that figure: \$26 billion.

Perhaps of most relevance to the issue of returning fighters is that prior to 9/11, the U.S. law enforcement community demonstrated little interest in investigating or prosecuting individuals who traveled abroad to fight in an overseas jihad. Today, the U.S. government considers such persons to be a serious concern and tracks their activities.

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<sup>2</sup> The section below is drawn from Peter Bergen et al. "2014 Jihadist Terrorism and Other Conventional Threats," *Bipartisan Policy Center*, September 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Federal Bureau of Investigation. "Protecting America from Terrorist Attack: Our Joint Terrorism Task Forces." Federal Bureau of Investigation. Accessed August 5, 2013. [http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/investigate/terrorism/terrorism\\_jtfts](http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/investigate/terrorism/terrorism_jtfts).

<sup>4</sup> Intelligence Resource Program. "Intelligence Budget Data." Federation of American Scientists. Accessed August 25, 2014. <http://fas.org/irp/budget/>.

A post-9/11 American fighter flow to jihadist groups abroad that sparked fears but turned out not to be a real threat to the United States was Al-Shabaab's recruitment of American fighters to wage war in Somalia. According to a review by New America, no American fighter who fought in the conflict in Somalia returned to plot an attack in the United States. Instead, about one third of the individuals known to have traveled to fight in Somalia died there, either as suicide bombers or on the battlefield, while others were taken into custody upon their return.<sup>5</sup>

There are, however, worrisome cases of returning militants to the United States since 9/11 that attempted serious attacks. The United States' experience with Americans fighting or training in Afghanistan and Pakistan provides an illustration of what a more serious returnee threat might look like. Najibullah Zazi, Adis Medunjanin, and Zarein Ahmedzay, who all grew up in New York City, traveled to Pakistan, where they ended up receiving training from al-Qaeda, and were sent back to the United States where they were part of a serious plot to bomb the New York City subway in the fall of 2009. On May 1, 2010, Connecticut-based Faisal Shahzad, who was trained in bomb-making techniques in Pakistan by the Pakistani Taliban, left a car bomb undetected in New York City's Times Square that failed to properly explode.

**Acts of violence by Americans inspired by, but with no direct connection to the terrorist groups in Syria, pose a more immediate challenge than attacks by returning fighters from Syria.** As FBI Director James Comey noted in September 2014 while referring to the December 2013 arrest of Terry Loewen, who was accused of plotting an attack on Wichita Airport in Kansas after being radicalized online: "We have made it so hard for people to get into this country, bad guys, but they can enter as a photon and radicalize somebody in Wichita, Kansas." At the time, Comey also noted that ISIS lacked the capability for a sophisticated attack in the United States.<sup>6</sup>

On May 3, 2015, the United States saw its first actual attack inspired by ISIS along the lines of similar ISIS-inspired attacks in Ottawa, Copenhagen, and Paris. Two men were killed by police after opening fire at a contest to draw cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed in Garland, Texas, organized by the American Freedom Defense Initiative. The event featured right-wing Dutch politician Geert Wilders, who had been named on an al-Qaeda hit list. One of shooters, Elton Simpson, had previously been convicted of making a false statement to the FBI regarding plans to travel to Somalia. Before conducting the attack Simpson tweeted his allegiance to ISIS.<sup>7</sup> Simpson, a 30-year-old resident of Phoenix, Arizona, who was born in Illinois and converted to Islam during his youth, was joined in the attack by his roommate Nadir Soofi, a 34-year-old who was born in Garland.

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<sup>5</sup> Bergen, Peter and David Sterman. "ISIS Threat to U.S. Mostly Hype." *CNN*. 9/5/2014. <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/09/05/opinion/bergen-sterman-isis-threat-hype/>.

<sup>6</sup> Kendall, Brent and Jay Solomon. "FBI Cites Online Terror Recruiting, Training, Dumps Subway-Plot Claim." *Wall Street Journal*. 9/25/2014. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/fbi-director-cites-online-terror-recruiting-training-dumps-subway-plot-claim-1411688762>.

<sup>7</sup> Ahmed, Saeed, Ed Lavender, and Joe Sutton. "Garland, Texas, shooting suspect linked himself to ISIS in tweets" *CNN*. 5/4/2015. <http://www.cnn.com/2015/05/04/us/garland-mohammed-drawing-contest-shooting/>

The shooting in Texas is not a lone case. While the United States has seen only one possible case of a domestic attack plot by a returned fighter from Syria, it has seen a number of alleged Syria-related plots to conduct violence that were inspired by the propaganda put out by ISIS. For instance, in March, the United States unsealed charges against Hasan Edmonds, a 22-year-old member of the National Guard, and his cousin Jonas Edmonds, alleging that Hasan Edmonds had sought to travel to fight with ISIS and that they had plotted to have Jonas Edmonds conduct an attack against a military facility. The plot was monitored by an undercover officer.<sup>8</sup>

**4. Threats to the United States by non-American ISIS recruits.** Many fighters from countries other than the United States have traveled to fight in Syria and could pose a potential threat to the United States. So far we have not seen a case of a foreign fighter from another country traveling to the United States to conduct an attack. However, the large number of foreign fighters traveling to fight in Syria from other countries magnifies the potential threat of an infiltration attack, especially given the high numbers of foreign fighters from countries that enjoy the Visa Waiver Program with the United States, such as Australia, Belgium, France, Germany, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom.

Tracking the many foreign fighters from Western countries who have gone to Syria and who have returned to the West poses a greater challenge, given their larger numbers, than tracking the handful of returning American fighters. Each French militant placed under surveillance requires 25 agents to maintain round-the-clock monitoring, and the strain on resources produced by ever increasing numbers of militants who need to be monitored was in part behind [the failure to maintain surveillance](#) of the Kouachi brothers, who conducted the attack on the Charlie Hebdo magazine in Paris earlier this year. It would take many thousands of agents to monitor each of the more than a 1,000 Frenchmen reportedly involved in the Syrian war, and France simply doesn't have that kind of manpower. The fact that a French prosecutor says that one of the Paris attackers on November 13 was a French national who was known to police is an indicator of how difficult tracking all of these militants has proven to be.

**5. ISIS expands its reach.** ISIS controls territory in Syria and Iraq that by some estimates is the size of the United Kingdom, and it lords over millions of people in both countries. The group has also secured pledges of allegiance from two dozen militant organizations from around the Muslim world, including in the Sinai and Egypt's neighbor Libya, while around 10 other groups have declared some form of solidarity with ISIS. The key to ISIS's success is not the group's military strength — ISIS in Syria and Iraq may number only about 20,000 to 30,000 fighters — but the weaknesses of the regimes where the group is doing well.

**Think of the Sunni militant group ISIS as a pathogen that preys on weak hosts in the Muslim world. In fact, there is something of a law: The weaker a Muslim state the stronger will be the presence of ISIS or like-minded groups.**

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<sup>8</sup> "US Army National Guard Soldier and his Cousin Arrested for Conspiring to Support Terrorism (ISIL)." *Department of Justice*. 3/26/15. <http://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/us-army-national-guard-soldier-and-his-cousin-arrested-conspiring-support-terrorism-isil>.

In 2014 ISIS seized huge swaths of Iraq, exploiting the fact that the country had been in a civil war for more than a decade and the Iraqi government had pursued a policy of excluding Sunnis from power. ISIS is one of the most powerful players in Syria because the country has been embroiled in a civil war since 2011 and the regime of Bashar al-Assad has imposed a reign of terror on its Sunni population, including the use of chemical weapons and widespread torture. For the moment, ISIS and the countries allied against it, including the United States, have come to something of a stalemate in Iraq and Syria.

ISIS also has a significant foothold in Libya because the country is embroiled in a civil war, which was instigated by the U.S.-led overthrow of Libyan dictator Moammar Gadhafi four years ago. (This move may turn out to be the most significant foreign policy blunder of the Obama administration, as there was no serious American plan for what would follow Gadhafi — the same negligence that had characterized George W. Bush’s overthrow of Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein.) ISIS is growing in Egypt because a military dictator who seized power in a coup leads the country, and he has brutally quashed all forms of dissent, including criminalizing the Muslim Brotherhood, which has many millions of members in Egypt and had formed the previous government. It’s fertile soil for ISIS, which had done particularly well in the Sinai, leading an insurgency there that has killed hundreds.

When ISIS first gained significant ground in Iraq and Syria in 2014, it focused almost entirely on its actions there and encouraged its overseas followers to join the jihad. Writing in the third issue of *Dabiq*, its English-language online magazine, an ISIS writer asserted, “This life of jihad is not possible until you pack and move to the Khilafah,” meaning to leave your home and travel to ISIS's areas of control in Iraq and Syria.

**In the past weeks, ISIS has shifted its strategy, attacking on a large scale outside of Iraq and Syria.** The group claimed responsibility for the downing of the Russian Metrojet carrying 224 passengers and crew on October 31 in the Sinai in Egypt. The Russians have in the past 24 hours finally conceded what was obvious: the plane was brought down by a bomb. Two weeks after the Metrojet bombing the team of ISIS militants attacked at multiple locations in Paris.

## **6. How to Defeat ISIS: Twelve Action Items:**

1. Enlist [defectors from ISIS](#) to tell their stories publicly. Nothing is more powerful than hearing from former members of the group that ISIS is not creating an Islamist utopia in the areas it controls, but a hell on earth. The flow of “foreign fighters” to ISIS from around the Muslim world is estimated to be about 1,000 a month. Reducing that flow is a key to reducing ISIS manpower.

2. Amplify voices such as that of [the ISIS opposition group Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently](#), which routinely posts photos online of bread lines in Raqqa, the de facto capital of ISIS in northern Syria, and writes about electricity shortages in the city. This will help to undercut ISIS propaganda that it is a truly functioning state.
3. Amplify the work of former jihadists like the Canadian [Mubin Shaikh](#), who intervenes directly with young people online who he sees are being recruited virtually by ISIS.
4. Support the work of clerics such as [Imam Mohamed Magid](#) of Northern Virginia, who has personally convinced a number of American Muslims seduced by ISIS that what the group is doing is against Islam.
5. Keep up pressure on social media companies such as Twitter to enforce their own Terms of Use to take down any ISIS material that encourages violence. Earlier this year, [Twitter quietly took down](#) 2,000 accounts used by ISIS supporters, but the group continues to use Twitter and other social media platforms to propagate its message.
6. Keep up the military campaign against ISIS. The less the ISIS “caliphate” exists as a physical entity, the less the group can claim it is the “Islamic State” that it purports to be. That should involve more U.S. Special Forces on the ground embedded with Iraqi and other coalition forces and more U.S. forward air controllers calling in close air support strikes for those forces.
7. Applaud the work that the Turks have already done to tamp down the foreign fighter flow through their country to ISIS in neighboring Syria, and get them to do more. Turkey, which had long been criticized by Western countries for allowing foreign fighters to move through its territory on their way to Syria, has started to clamp down on that traffic into Syria. Those efforts by the Turks are paying off, according to ISIS itself. In early 2015, ISIS posted advice in one of its English-language online publications to would-be foreign fighters, saying, “It is important to know that the Turkish intelligence agencies are in no way friends of the Islamic State [ISIS].”
8. Provide “off ramps” to young ISIS recruits with no history of violence, so that instead of serving long prison terms for attempting to join ISIS — as they presently do in the United States — they would instead serve long periods of supervised probation. This will help families that presently face a hard choice: If they suspect a young family member is radicalizing and they go to the FBI, that person can end up in prison for up to 15 years on charges of attempting to support ISIS; but if they don’t go to the authorities and their child ends up traveling to Syria, he or she may well end up being killed there. Providing off-ramps would offer families a way out of this almost impossible choice.
9. Educate Muslim-American parents about the seductive messages that ISIS is propagating online.
10. Relentlessly hammer home the message that ISIS positions itself as the defender of Muslims, but its victims are overwhelmingly fellow Muslims.



11. Build a database of all the foreign fighters who have gone to Syria to fight for ISIS and Nusra. This is one of the recommendations of the House Homeland Security Committee's September 2015 report on foreign fighters in Syria and it is a very good one. How can you prevent an attack by returning foreign fighters if you are not cognizant of their names and links to ISIS? Right now INTERPOL has a list of some 5,000 foreign fighters, but that is simply dwarfed by the estimated 30,000 foreign fighters who have gone to fight in Syria.

12. Stay in Afghanistan beyond 2016. One only has to look at the debacle that has unfolded in Iraq after the withdrawal of U.S. troops at the end of 2011 to have a preview of what could take place in an Afghanistan without some kind of residual American presence. Without American forces in the country, there is a strong possibility Afghanistan could host a reinvigorated Taliban allied to a reinvigorated al-Qaeda – not to mention ISIS, which is also gaining a foothold in the region. Earlier this month U.S. and Afghan forces in Kandahar province destroyed “probably the largest” al-Qaeda training camp discovered during the 14-year Afghan War, according to Gen. John Campbell, the U.S. commander in Afghanistan. This U.S. military presence in Afghanistan doesn't have to be large, nor does it need to play a combat role, but U.S. troops should remain in Afghanistan to advise the Afghan army and provide intelligence support past 2016.