

START

NATIONAL CONSORTIUM FOR THE STUDY OF TERRORISM AND RESPONSES TO TERRORISM

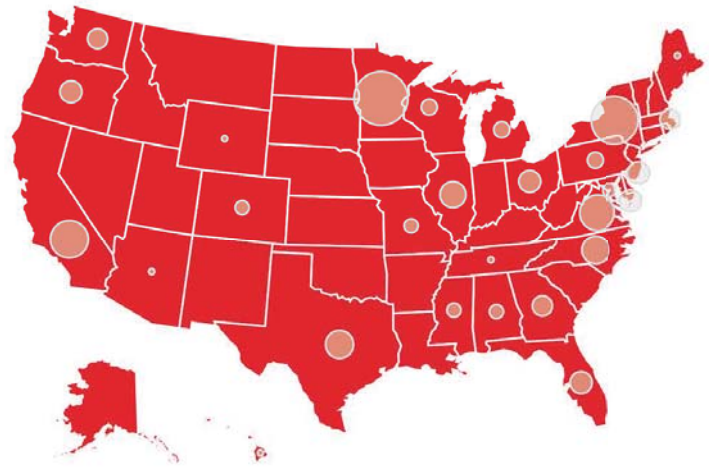
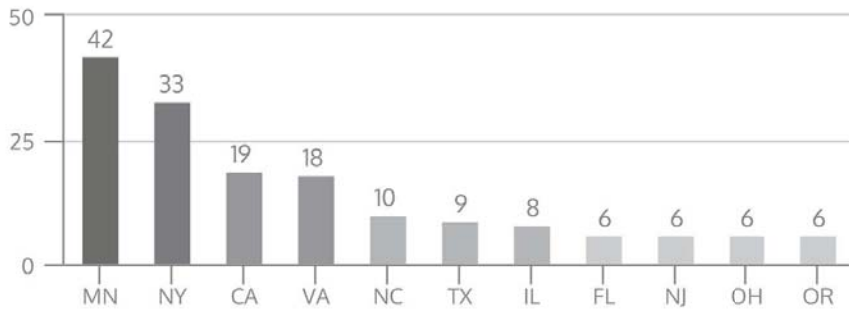
A CENTER OF EXCELLENCE OF THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY BASED AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND

Overview: Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States-Foreign Fighters (PIRUS-FF)

Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States - Foreign Fighters (PIRUS-FF) is a database collected by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) that contains over 100 variables on all phases - pre-travel, travel, and return - of the foreign fighter life cycle. The database currently includes information on 288 individuals who have been publicly identified in open sources as having left, attempted to leave, or expressed an interest in leaving the United States for the purpose of supporting the activities or interests of a foreign non-state armed group or foreign regime, and were motivated by religion, ethnicity, or other ideology. Because many foreign fighters have made multiple trips to a conflict zone, the PIRUS-FF data are coded only for their first known trip. Later versions of the database will include information on individuals' multiple travel attempts, when applicable.

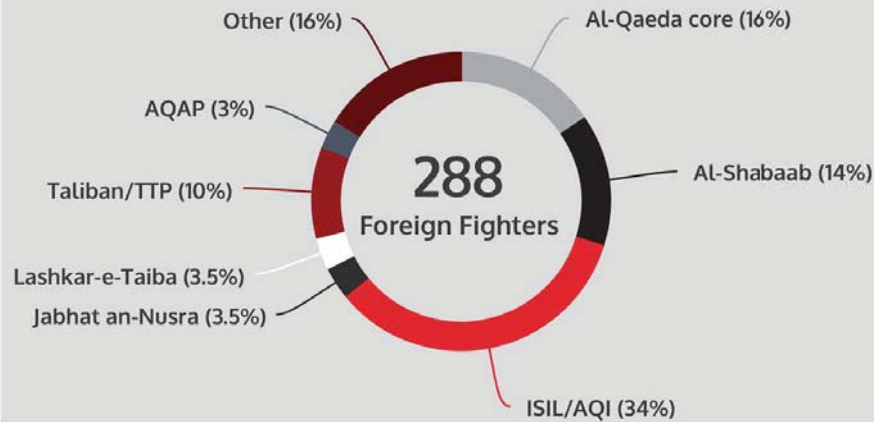
Foreign fighter "hot spots"

From 1980 to 2016, foreign fighters attempted to depart or departed for overseas conflicts from more than 100 cities in 32 states across the United States. During that span, there were some instances of concentrated foreign fighter activity in both geography and time. The dozens of Somali-Americans who left the Minneapolis/St. Paul area from 2007-2008 are one such example. However, since the ascent of ISIL starting in 2013, foreign fighter travel from the United States has been much more dispersed across the country. Individuals from at least 21 states have sought to join ISIL in Iraq and Syria since 2013.



Foreign militant groups in PIRUS-FF

The PIRUS-FF data show that U.S. foreign fighters have been associated with 27 foreign militant groups across 14 unique conflicts since 1980. In just a few short years, individuals traveling to join the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) have outpaced those that have sought to join both al-Qaeda core and al-Shabaab. ISIL/AQI-affiliated individuals make up 34% of the database, compared to 16% for al-Qaeda core and 14% for al-Shabaab. A significant number of U.S.-based individuals have also sought to join the Taliban in Afghanistan, typically out of a desire to engage in combat against U.S. forces. Despite the group's involvement in several high-profile attempts to launch attacks in the United States, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has drawn relatively fewer fighters from U.S. soil.



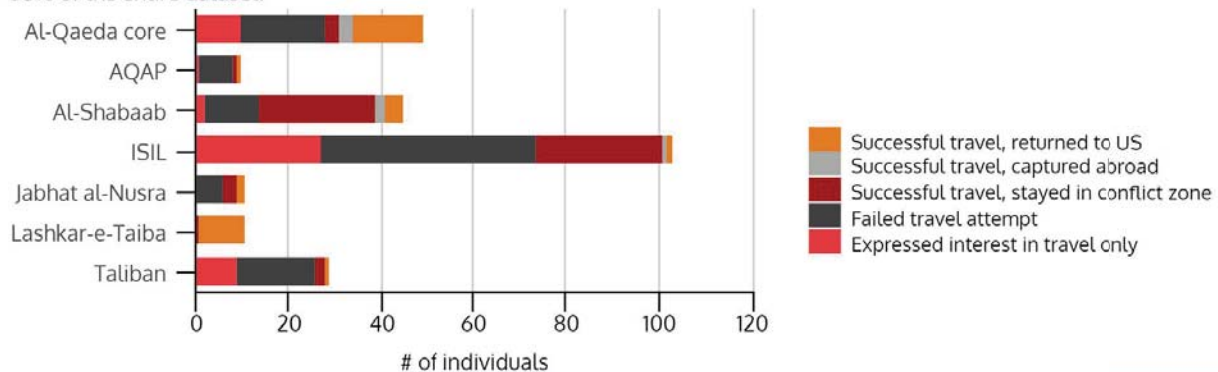
Median age

23 years old

Traveling to foreign conflict zones tends to be an activity dominated by young adults and that is a trend that has remained constant over time. For travelers who made a travel attempt between 1980 and 2000, the most common age was 19 years old. For those who made an attempt between 2001 and 2016, it was 20 years old.

Success rates for U.S. foreign fighters

Researchers and practitioners can use the PIRUS-FF data to compare relative success rates among foreign fighter groups. For example, only 14% of the individuals in the data aspired to join al-Shabaab, but they make up 23% of all travelers who successfully arrived in conflict zones, making it among the most successful groups by this measure. By comparison, 38% of all unsuccessful travelers were affiliated with ISIL, yet ISIL affiliated individuals account for 38% of the entire dataset.



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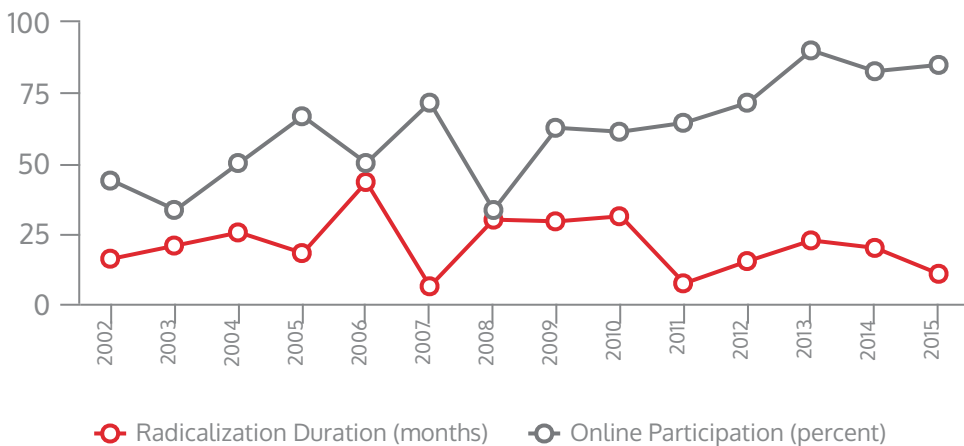
Foreign Fighter Radicalization

The Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States-Foreign Fighters (PIRUS-FF) database can be used to explore the radicalization processes and pathways of those who have aspired to join foreign conflicts. For example, the database can be used to assess how many U.S. foreign fighters experienced a religious awakening prior to radicalizing (50%) or how many experienced a traumatic event that may have contributed to their radicalization (38%). Below are some notable findings from the database that shed light on the pre-travel behaviors of U.S. foreign fighters.

This research was supported by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Science and Technology Directorate's Office of University Programs and the National Institute of Justice, Department of Justice (DOJ). The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Homeland Security or the Department of Justice.

Radicalization and Internet Usage

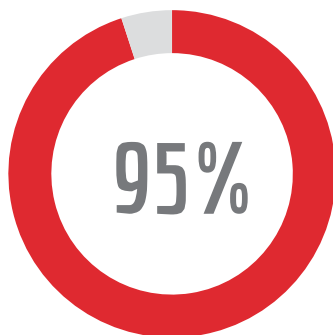
While variable, the PIRUS-FF data show that the average duration of radicalization (i.e., time from first adoption of radical beliefs to travel attempt) has been decreasing in recent years. In 2002, the average radicalization duration for individuals in the database was 16 months. The average duration decreased to just 10.6 months for individuals who attempted travel in 2015. Over the same period, the internet played an increasingly pivotal role in the radicalization of foreign fighters. The internet was a factor contributing to the radicalization of 43% of the individuals who attempted travel in 2002. By comparison, the internet contributed to the radicalization of 85% of the individuals who attempted travel in 2015. Note: 2016 cases were dropped due to lack of valid data.



Radicalization Duration

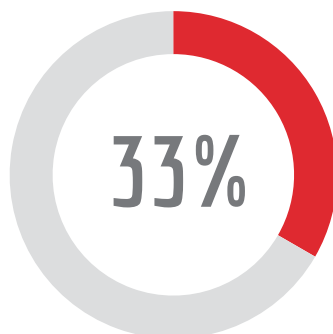
16 → 10.6 Months

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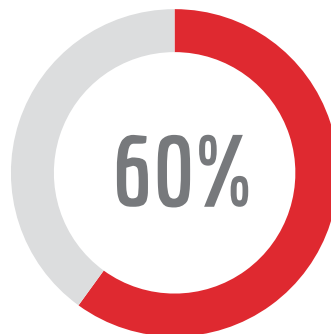
Internet Radicalization

The internet played a primary or contributing role in the radicalization of 95% of the foreign fighters listed in the database (since 2005). Those who radicalized wholly or partly online used the internet to view extremist materials, research conflicts, groups, and attack methods, and participated in online communities of like-minded individuals.



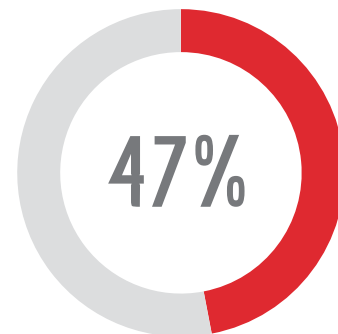
Social Media Use Abroad

Approximately one-third of the successful travelers in the database maintained an active presence on social media from conflict zones (since 2010). Most often, these individuals used social media to encourage others to travel, to document their experiences in the conflict zone, and to share with others tips for evading law enforcement detection.



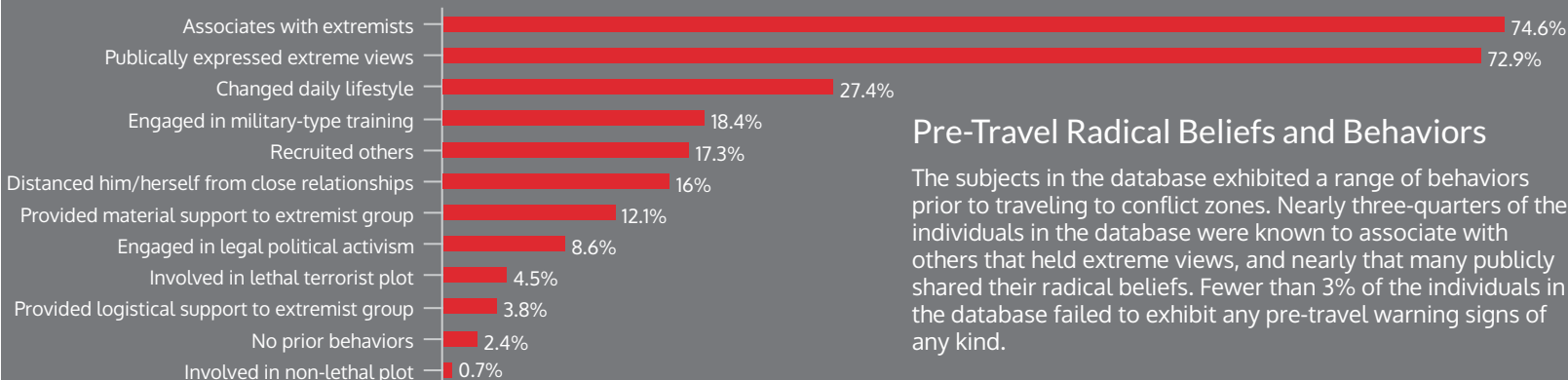
Online Travel Knowledge

Of all the individuals in the database who at least made an attempt to travel to a foreign conflict zone, about 60% used the internet as their primary source to gain information to travel (since 2005). Through websites, forums, blogs, and social media, subjects were able to retrieve information on travel routes and methods, border crossing points, travel supplies, and methods for avoiding detection.



Online Facilitation

47% of the individuals who made an attempt to travel to a foreign conflict zone since 2005 established relationships with online travel facilitators. Online facilitators often acted as liaisons between travelers and groups, helping individuals to locate safe-houses and to arrange escorts to conflict zones.



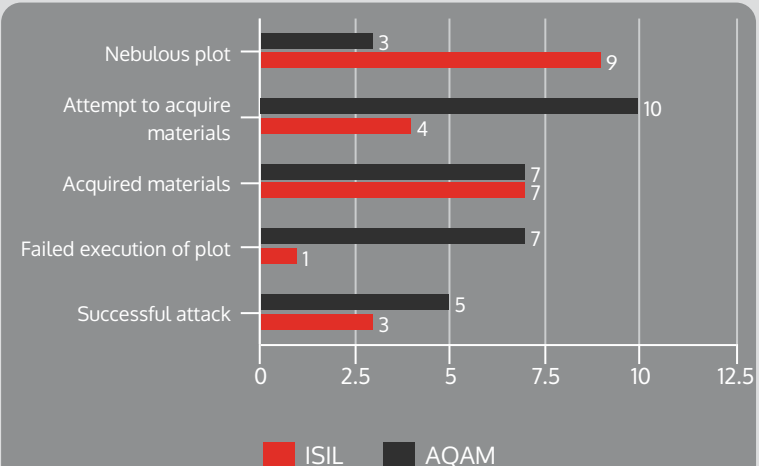
Pre-Travel Radical Beliefs and Behaviors

The subjects in the database exhibited a range of behaviors prior to traveling to conflict zones. Nearly three-quarters of the individuals in the database were known to associate with others that held extreme views, and nearly that many publicly shared their radical beliefs. Fewer than 3% of the individuals in the database failed to exhibit any pre-travel warning signs of any kind.

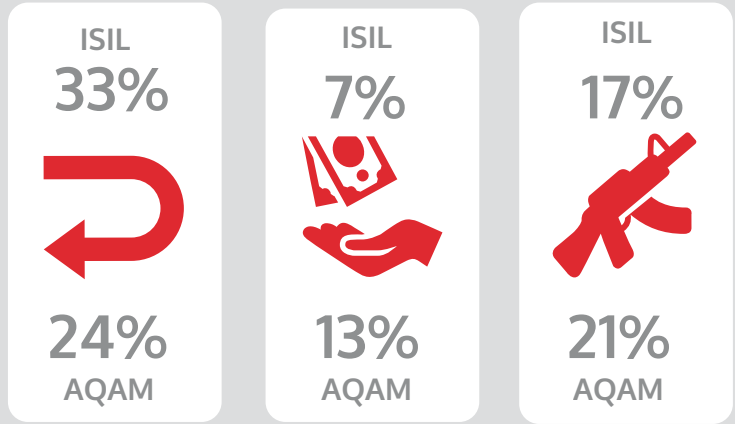
Comparing al-Qaeda and Islamic State Affiliated Foreign Fighters

The Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States-Foreign Fighters (PIRUS-FF) dataset contains information on 109 individuals who aspired to join the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and 158 individuals that sought to join al-Qaeda and Associated Movement (AQAM) groups. Below are some of the ways in which ISIL affiliated individuals differ from those who sought to join AQAM groups. Most important, travel success rates for those wishing to join ISIL have been noticeably lower than those seeking to join AQAM groups. Approximately 53% of AQAM affiliated individuals successfully made it to conflict zones, while only 28% of those seeking to join ISIL were successful in their attempts.

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73 of the 74 foreign fighters in the PIRUS-FF dataset who aspired, planned or attempted to execute plots against the U.S. homeland were affiliated with, or inspired by, ISIL or AQAM groups. In terms of plot success, ISIL-affiliated individuals fared poorly when compared to those connected with al-Qaeda and its affiliates. Three ISIL-related plots were successful, while the other 21 failed or were foiled. By comparison, individuals associated with al-Qaeda and its affiliates were responsible for 5 successful attacks in the United States, and tended to make more progress on their plots than their ISIL-affiliated counterparts.

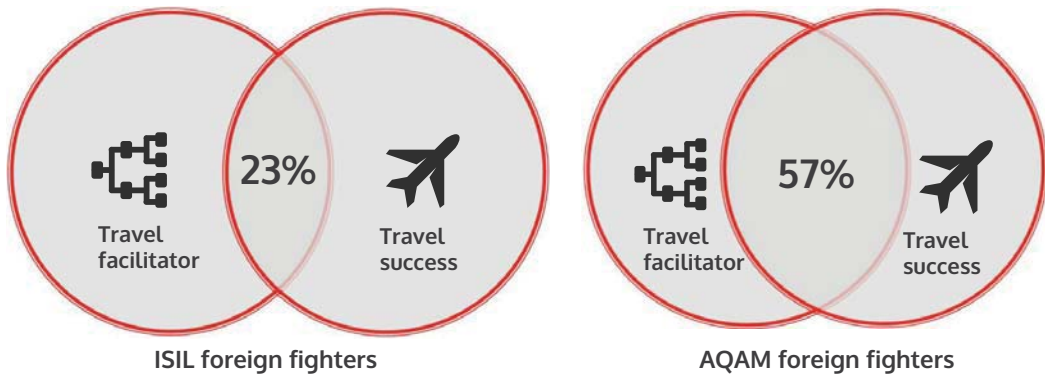


In the pre-travel phase, the majority of U.S. foreign fighters associated themselves with radical social groups and made expressions of their intentions to travel abroad. While comparatively uncommon, noticeable differences between individuals affiliated with ISIL and those linked to AQAM groups appear in three pre-travel behaviors. AQAM-affiliated individuals were more likely to provide material support to organizations and seek weapons training, while ISIL-affiliated individuals more frequently underwent rapid and noticeable changes in lifestyle.

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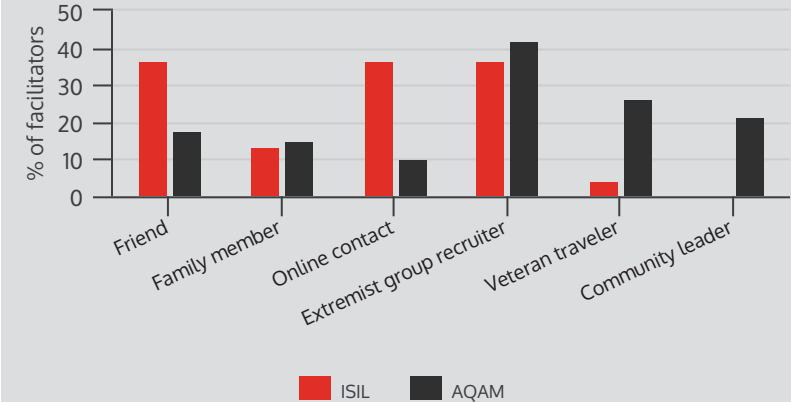
Travel Facilitators

A key component of foreign fighter travel is the facilitator. Since 2001, those who have sought to join groups in foreign conflict zones have consistently sought the help of facilitators. In fact, during that period, 59% of all individuals that aspired to join foreign groups were aided by at least one facilitator in travel preparation and execution. Those seeking to join ISIL connected with travel facilitators at a rate of 58%. The presence of a facilitator, however, does not guarantee successful arrival in a conflict zone. Only 23% of ISIL affiliated individuals with facilitator support made it to Iraq or Syria. Those affiliated with AQAM groups fared significantly better. Facilitators helped over half the individuals that sought to join AQAM groups successfully arrive in conflict zones.



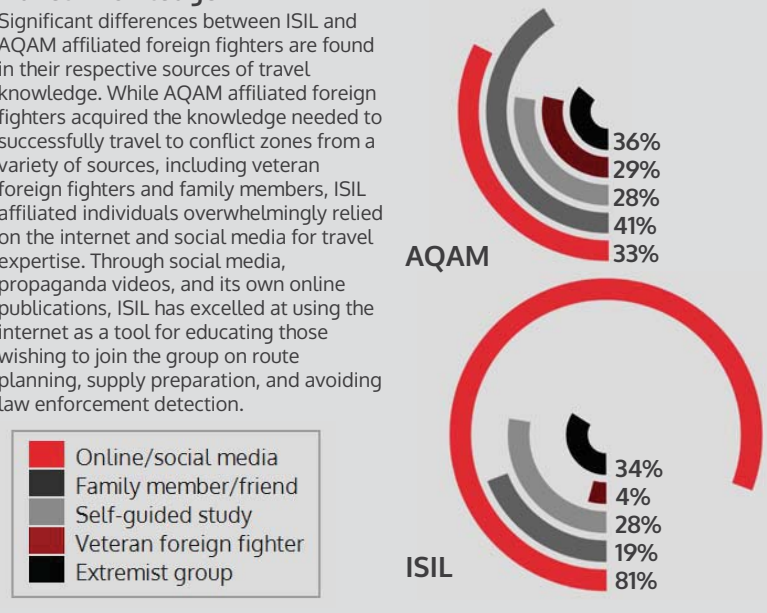
Facilitator Relationship

As noted above, U.S. foreign fighters seeking to join ISIL or AQAM groups regularly sought financial and logistical guidance from travel facilitators. The PIRUS-FF data show that the relationships between travel facilitators and aspiring fighters are diverse, as family members, friends, online contacts, and even face-to-face recruiters often support the efforts of those wishing to travel. ISIL-bound individuals connected with facilitators online nearly four times as often as those wishing to join AQAM groups. Meanwhile, many more AQAM facilitators were either veteran travelers or community leaders when compared to ISIL travelers.



Travel Knowledge

Significant differences between ISIL and AQAM affiliated foreign fighters are found in their respective sources of travel knowledge. While AQAM affiliated foreign fighters acquired the knowledge needed to successfully travel to conflict zones from a variety of sources, including veteran foreign fighters and family members, ISIL affiliated individuals overwhelmingly relied on the internet and social media for travel expertise. Through social media, propaganda videos, and its own online publications, ISIL has excelled at using the internet as a tool for educating those wishing to join the group on route planning, supply preparation, and avoiding law enforcement detection.



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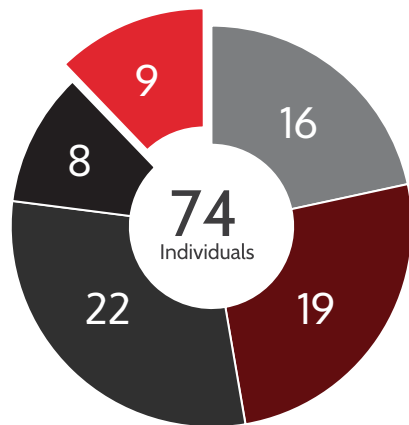
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Terrorism in the United States Involving Foreign Fighters

The Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States - Foreign Fighters (PIRUS-FF) dataset contains information on 74 foreign fighters that were involved in 56 distinct plots to attack the United States between 1980-2016. The vast majority (88%) of individuals were unsuccessful in their attempts. Nine subjects, however, were involved in six unique successful attacks that resulted in a combined 24 deaths and 1,330 injuries. The most lethal of those attacks--the bombing of the World Trade Center in 1993--killed six people and injured over 1000. The attack involved the participation of two individuals that had previously traveled from the United States to Afghanistan to fight against Soviet forces and later participated in post-conflict training camps. More recently, the December 2015 shooting in San Bernadino, CA, which resulted in 16 deaths and 24 injuries, was carried out by two individuals, one of whom was an U.S. citizen who had previously expressed interest in traveling to Yemen to join al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, a designated terrorist organization.

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- Involved in nebulous plot
- Involved in attempted materials acquisition
- Involved in successful materials acquisition
- Involved in unsuccessful attack
- Involved in successful attack

54%



41%



28%



23%



22%



15%



5%

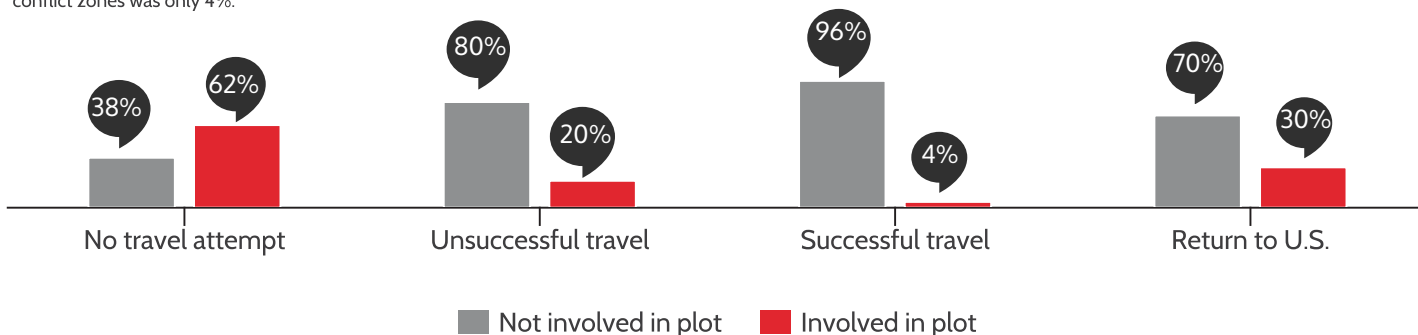


Suspicious Activity Reporting

Foreign fighters involved in U.S. terror plots engaged in a number of the behaviors featured on the Suspicious Activity Reporting (SAR) indicators list. 54% of the subjects acquired the expertise needed to launch attacks and 41% expressed or implied their intentions to launch attacks to others who were not involved in the plots. 28% of the individuals acquired bombing making and other materials, while 23% engaged in observation and surveillance of potential targets, 22% recruited others to assist in the plots. Finally, 15% of the individuals stockpiled weapons, while 5% photographed the intended targets.

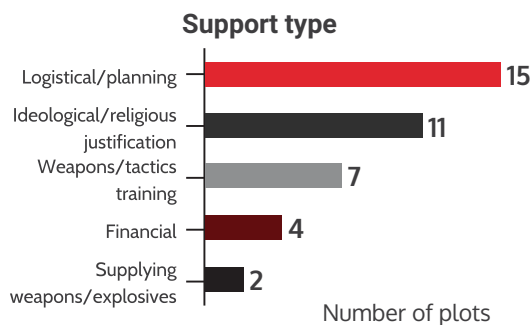
PLOT OUTCOMES

Foreign fighter involvement in plots to launch attacks in the United States varied significantly for the subjects in the database depending on how far they made it in the travel lifecycle. Those who successfully traveled to conflict zones and eventually returned to the United States were involved in plots at a rate of 30%. By comparison, those who publicly expressed an interest in traveling to conflict zones, but made no appreciable attempts to do so, were involved in domestic plots at the rate of 62%. Approximately 20% of those individuals who made unsuccessful attempts to travel to foreign conflicts were involved in domestic plots, while plot involvement among those who stayed in conflict zones was only 4%.



FOREIGN GROUP SUPPORT

Foreign terrorist organizations provided support to 24 out of 74 (32%) of the foreign fighters that plotted attacks in the United States. Al-Qaeda core supported the majority (54%) of these individuals by providing a combination of logistical, planning, ideological and financial help. However, this support did not significantly increase the individuals' chances of committing successful attacks. 12.5% of the individuals who received foreign group support committed successful attacks, which is only slightly higher than those that did not receive any foreign group support at all (12%).



Foreign terrorist organizations provided support to 32% of domestic plots committed by US foreign fighters

