

Understanding the Threat: What Data Tell Us about U.S. Foreign Fighters

OVERVIEW

The phrase has saturated the media: “foreign fighter,” individuals compelled by ideological or other convictions to join insurgencies and military actions outside their nations of residence. The mere mention of the term seems to spark the most pronounced fears about the terrorist threat to the United States, fears that American youth may be lured into combat by promises of glory and rewards, and will soon return as battle-hardened jihadists intent on wreaking havoc. Last week, Ali Saleh, a 22-year-old resident of Queens, New York, was arrested after making several failed attempts to join the Islamic State. Saleh’s story is not unique. Over the past 18 months, dozens of individuals, many of whom were seduced by ISIS’ finely tuned and social media-enhanced propaganda machine, have made attempts to travel to Iraq and Syria to join the terrorist group, causing FBI Director, James Comey, to proclaim that stopping the flow of fighters to foreign combat zones is among the “highest priorities” for the intelligence community. But, what do we actually know about U.S. foreign fighters? Is this truly a novel threat? Are returnees really more dangerous than others that may be intent on harming the United States? Are certain U.S. locales driving the problem?

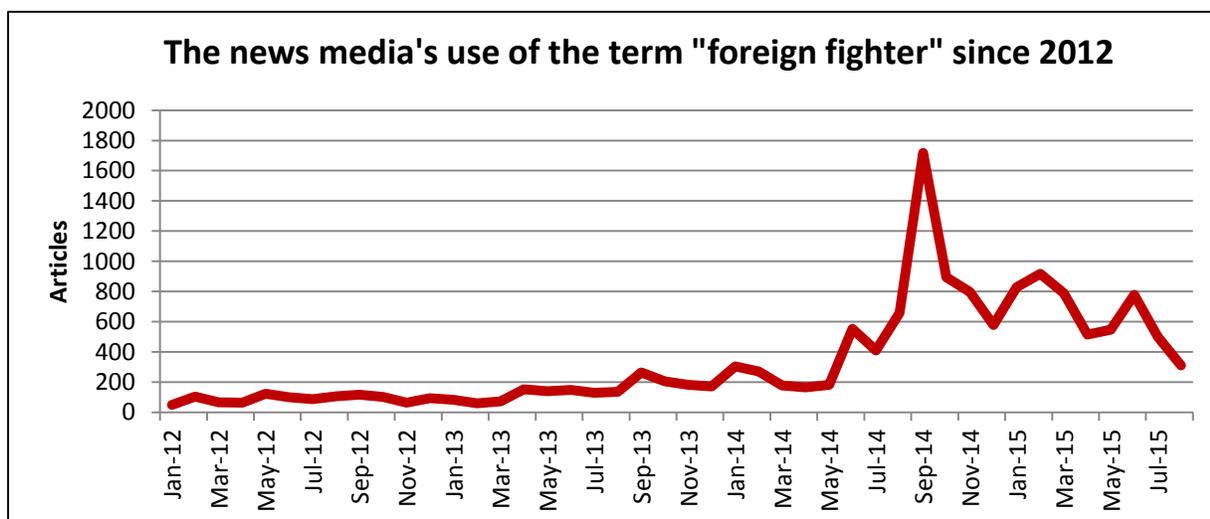
PROJECT BACKGROUND

Counterterrorism professionals have observed, and the news media has reported on, what appears to be a significant increase in the frequency of successful or unsuccessful attempts by Americans to travel abroad to participate in armed conflict. Much of the resulting public discourse surrounding U.S. foreign fighters is grounded in general observations and fear as opposed to sound empirical data, in part because good data on foreign fighters is hard to find. In an attempt to address this need, researchers at START have begun to compile a dataset of U.S.-based foreign fighters that captures information on all phases—pre-travel, travel, and return—of the foreign fighter life-cycle. The database currently includes information on approximately 250 individuals that have been publically identified in open-sources as having left, attempted to leave, or expressed an interest in leaving the United States to join foreign conflicts.¹

MAJOR FINDINGS

While data collection for the project is ongoing, an initial analysis of the data has revealed important findings, many of which run counter to commonly held beliefs.

1. The news coverage in recent months about U.S. foreign fighters portrays that the problem began with the ascent of ISIS and its rapid takeover of territory in Iraq and Syria. In fact, a quick search against the more than 30,000 unique news sources that make up the LexisNexis Academic archive shows that “foreign fighter” only became a term of widespread media use around mid-2014.



While ISIS' recruitment threat is serious and in many ways novel, the U.S. foreign fighter phenomenon is hardly new. START's data show that Americans have, in fact, sought to associate themselves with foreign conflicts well before the advent of search engines and well beyond transnational jihadism. Americans fought with the Afghan mujahidin in their anti-Soviet jihad; Americans operated in well-organized volunteer brigades on the Republican side of the Spanish Civil War; American citizens joined British and Commonwealth forces many months in advance of a U.S. declaration of war on the Axis powers in 1941; and, Americans with sympathy for Jewish nationalism flung themselves into the 1948 Arab-Israeli conflict. More recently, Americans have appeared on both sides of the unrest in Eastern Ukraine, and one [estimate](#) suggests that the number of Americans that have traveled to Iraq and Syria to join the Kurdish forces and Christian militias that are taking on ISIS is nearly the same as the number that have joined the terrorist group.

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Our data shows that, since 1980, more than 200 Americans have traveled to join more than 35 militant groups in well over a dozen unique foreign conflicts. Whatever the political visions and dynamics involved in these individuals' choices, our discourse on the U.S. foreign fighter phenomenon should not treat it as new or as a solely ISIS-related problem. Instead, we should take it for what it is: a historical behavior driven by diverse motivations that will last long after ISIS is gone.

Group	Expressed interest (did not travel)	Unsuccessful attempt (failed to reach conflict)	Unsuccessful attempt (arrested during or before attempt)	Successfully traveled (did not return)	Successfully traveled (returned to U.S.)	Total
Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)	11	4	28	11	2	56
al-Qa`ida core	6	6	10	10	17	49
al-Shabaab	2	2	5	24	5	38
Taliban	5	8	8	5	2	28
People's Protection Units (YPG)	0	0	0	12	2	14
al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula	2	3	4	3	1	13
Jabhat al-Nusra	0	0	4	4	4	12
Lashkar-e-Taiba	1	0	0	2	9	12
al-Qa`ida in Iraq	3	6	0	0	0	9
Afghan Mujahideen	0	0	0	0	6	6

Source: START PIRUS-FF Database

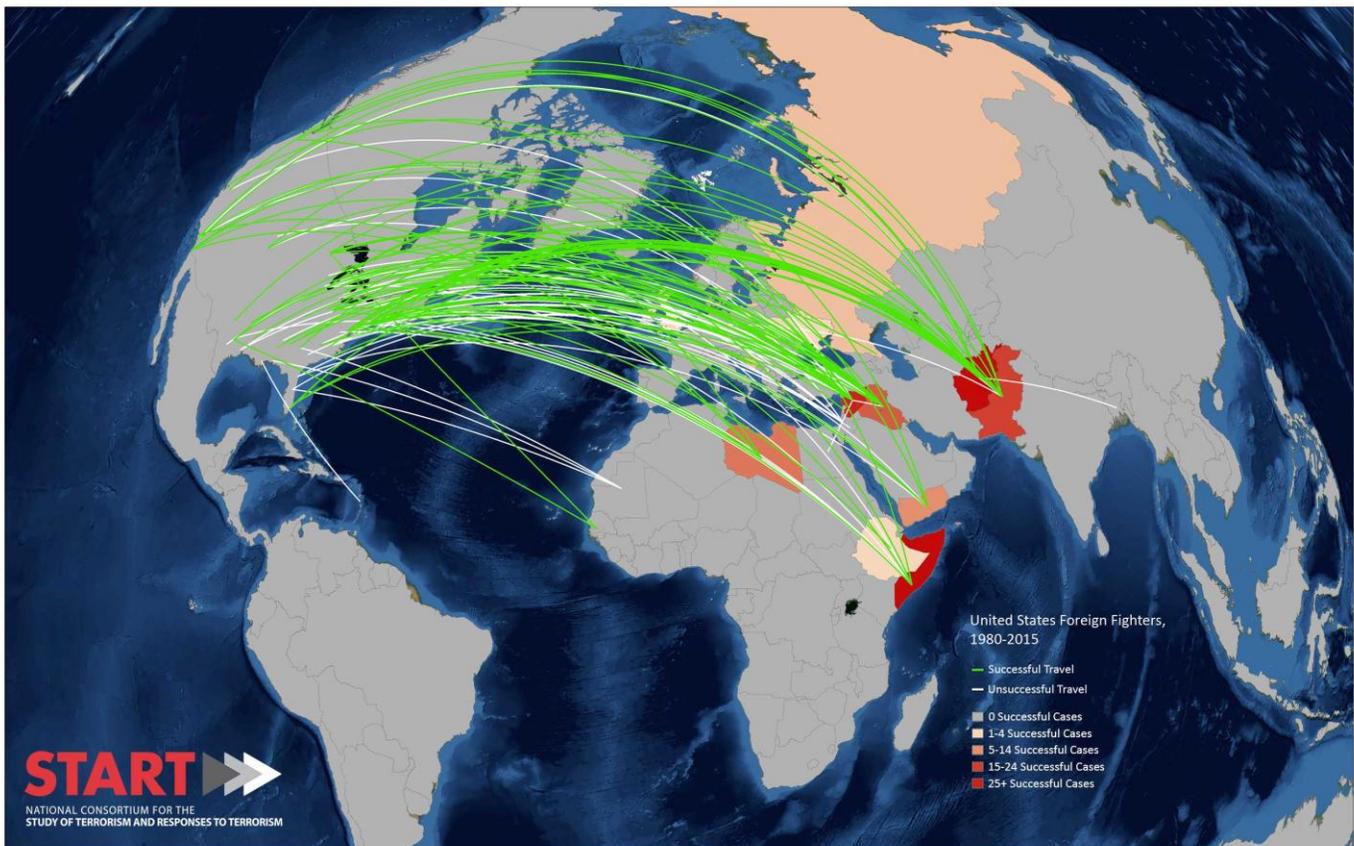
- While a certain amount of dread about foreign fighter returnees is warranted, empirical data suggest that it is less likely for the threat to emerge from those who return from battle. Many returnees disengage from the conflict disillusioned or disabled, although some certainly return with greater levels of capability and motivation to attack the homeland than when they departed. Of the 51 individuals in the data that were tied to terrorist plots in the United States, the majority expressed an interest in becoming foreign fighters but made no appreciable attempts to do so.¹¹ Instead, these individuals abandoned their plans to travel in favor of launching an attack in the United States. The reasons for their change of plans appear to be varied. Some of these individuals expressed frustration with financial or logistical obstacles to travel or detected law enforcement surveillance. Others were persuaded by the messages of the foreign groups themselves—narratives that evolved to emphasize the importance of supporting the cause in one's own backyard. ISIS' own narrative is evolving in a similar way. Once dominated by pleas for *hijrah* to the Islamic State, the group's message now highlights the importance of attacks in the West. For example, the foreword to the 10th issue of *Dabiq* describes the attacks conducted by jihadists in "the lands of the Crusaders" as answering ISIS' call to fight wherever Muslims can. In a full page graphic, it asks for Muslims to "join the caravan of Islamic State knights in the lands of the crusaders" to commit fresh violence. Such pleas, together with an increasing law enforcement focus to apprehend radicalized individuals as they prepare to leave, are likely to convince more of the group's sympathizers in the United States to forgo travel in favor of acting at home. Law enforcement, intelligence, and community striving to counter violent extremism should take account of the data and treat those that do not travel as seriously as their returnee peers.
- There is a sense in the current discourse that the process of radicalization and mobilization to the conflict zone occurs "overnight" and is unpredictable. The media is filled with stories of young American men and women, Muslim or not, vanishing without warning only to write emails from Syria and Iraq weeks later, such as [Hoda Muthana](#), a young woman who joined ISIS last November. These stories resonate with an audience that has little frame of reference through which to anticipate similar incidents and can create huge web traffic. However, the data indicate that these stories are outliers, at best. After analyzing the pre-travel decision-making of the individuals in the data, the START research team found—on average—a 19-month window between the individuals' first mentions of a desire to travel and their eventual attempts to do

so. Moreover, most of the individuals in the data made statements or engaged in behaviors during this window that could have served as warning signs.

- 73 percent of aspiring foreign fighters in the data openly interacted with radical social networks, while approximately 26 percent made notable lifestyle changes.
- Another 17 percent estranged themselves from previously significant relationships, and
- 55 percent openly expressed radical views.

It is true that all men and women can experience sharp, apparently uncanny changes or may seek new, and not necessarily reputable, relations. These indicators, however, can highlight a population of concern when ideological motivation or previous criminality is also evident. Due to the personal nature of these indicators, it will be up to families, community members, and other proximate segments of civil society to respond appropriately.

4. Finally, the current discourse often suggests that it is certain communities or locales within the United States that are driving the foreign fighter trend. News coverage of the phenomenon often spotlights the Somali-American community in Minnesota. Members of the government and U.S. intelligence community often ask researchers about departure “hot spots.” The data, however, shows that American foreign fighters have departed, or attempted to depart, from nearly 100 cities across the United States. The foreign fighter problem is not one that can be pinned on a particular community or tamed by focusing efforts in one locale. It is a nationwide phenomenon and should be treated as such, although more research is certainly warranted to understand the way in which one or more successful departures from a given community may increase the likelihood of additional foreign fighters emerging from that community.



BOTTOM LINE

It makes good sense to show concern over the foreign fighter trend. Both the journalism underscoring it and the propaganda attempting to drive it are proof of a present danger. Moreover, the truth about this danger is complicated and cuts across personal lives, ideological dispositions, geography, historical precedent, and changing extremist propaganda. However, to fully grasp the problem at hand, we must challenge conventional wisdoms and demand that even the casual inquiry take hard facts and good methodology into account.

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Map on page 3 was created by William Kammerer, START Researcher.



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ⁱ The database, Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States-Foreign Fighters (PIRUS-FF), is supported by grants from the Office of University Programs, United States Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the National Institute of Justice, United States Department of Justice (DOJ). The database includes adults that have been identified by their full birth names by news media sources. Thus, it excludes minors and individuals that have only been identified by aliases.

ⁱⁱ 41 percent of the individuals in the data tied to domestic plots expressed an interest in joining a foreign conflict but did not make attempts to do so. By comparison, 35 percent of the returnees in our data were connected to terrorist plots in the U.S.