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Jason Fritz & Joseph K. Young

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Transnational Volunteers: American Foreign Fighters Combating the Islamic State

Jason Fritz ^a and Joseph K. Young ^{b,c}

^aDepartment of Justice, Law & Criminology, American University, Washington, DC, USA; ^bDepartment of Justice, Law and Criminology, American University, Washington, DC, USA; ^cSchool of International Service, American University, Washington, DC, USA

ABSTRACT

Why do some people go abroad to engage in other people's wars? Some studies attempt to discern why individuals choose to fight in distant lands (Malet, 2013) or seek to count how many do so (Hegghammer, 2013). The term *foreign fighter* has been used nearly exclusively in recent research to describe transnational fighters who join with Islamist organizations, or more generally for individuals fighting with resistance groups against a state. However, little research has been done on the many transnational fighters who travel to fight against resistance groups or against Islamist organizations. Our paper examines these transnational militants who battle against the Islamic State, focusing on Americans who engage in such activities, often referred to as volunteers. Through a review of open-source media, we created a dataset of these individuals, recording demographic data such as each individual's military experience and stated purpose for becoming a transnational fighter. We show descriptive analyses on these data, and then compare these findings against current scholarship on Islamist transnational fighters. We argue that American volunteers and foreign terrorist fighters are phenomena with difference in degree, but not in kind.

KEYWORDS

Foreign fighters; Iraq; Islamic State; Syria; transnational volunteers

The rise of the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) since 2014 has driven a newfound interest in the phenomenon of foreign fighters, loosely defined as individuals who leave the comfort of their homes to engage in fighting for a cause and/or people with whom they self-identify. While we will explore existing definitions in due course, academics and journalists have given the preponderance of their attention to Sunni foreign fighters who have traveled to Iraq and Syria in order to fight with ISIS or other rebel groups, such as Al Qaeda Syrian affiliate Jabhat al Nusra.¹ Within this population, individuals who became transnational fighters from Western states have been of specific interest because of the potential threat they pose to their states of origin if they were to return after focused radicalization, mixed with their military training and experience. And yet, little attention has been given to those individuals from Western states who have traveled to Iraq and Syria to fight *against* ISIS.

We suspect that one reason these individuals have received less attention is that within the academic literature they have not been defined as foreign fighters because they are

fighting with non-state armed groups in support of a state or to maintain a status quo. The Kurdish militias allied with the Iraqi government in Baghdad are an example. The most commonly used definitions of *foreign fighters* require that the individual fight with an insurgent group. The first objective of this study is to explore definitions in the literature and propose that the definitional exclusion of non-insurgents is arbitrary and not theoretically informed.

The second objective of this study is to examine a sample of these individuals to understand who they are, from where they come, and why they chose to become transnational fighters. We focus exclusively on Americans because their foreign fighting is not illegal. It is legal as long as they join groups not designated as Foreign Terrorist Organizations by the U.S. Department of State, and they do not violate U.S. law.² Because their actions are legal, we are readily able to record a sample of American foreign fighters fighting against ISIS via open media. We then compare these individuals with pro-ISIS or Jabhat al Nusra foreign fighters. The examination of these individuals supports the general notion that they are quite similar to ISIS-inspired foreign fighters.

Our final objective is to propose hypotheses for future empirical testing. These include: that individuals who experience moral shock are more likely to become foreign fighters; that the individual pathways for becoming a foreign fighter are similar between jihadists and non-jihadists; that younger fighters are more likely to seek risk and status, and as a result are more likely to join an insurgency; and that the legality of becoming a foreign fighter has little impact on the decision to become one. While we do not formally test them here, this initial plausibility probe and discussion suggest including these militants into our general understanding of the foreign fighter issue.

What is a foreign fighter?

With some exceptions, the academic study of foreign fighters began in earnest in the mid-2000s during the U.S.-Iraq War when numerous individuals traveled to Iraq to attack U.S. forces there on behalf of insurgent groups. In spite of the long historical record of foreign fighters,³ the study of foreign fighters has focused intently on foreign jihadists who join insurgencies, such as in Afghanistan, Chechnya, Bosnia, Somalia, and Iraq. This focus has become more intense with the domestic security concerns raised by the flow of Western residents to the civil wars currently ongoing in Iraq and Syria, primarily to ISIS, Jabhat al Nusra, or other rebel groups in Syria. As noted by Hegghammer,⁴ empirical studies on foreign fighters attempt to explain the recruitment of foreign fighters in the West⁵ or their effect on the insurgency for which they fight.⁶ More recent work since has attempted to count the number of Western Sunni fighters in the Iraqi and Syrian civil wars and to develop generic profiles of these individuals.⁷

Scholars have used different definitions of the term *foreign fighters* throughout these works. In his book on the topic, Malet⁸ defines foreign fighters as “noncitizens of conflict states who join insurgencies during civil conflicts” (later reiterated by Malet⁹). Malet goes further in excluding other types of fighters from the category of foreign fighters: members of foreign militaries ordered into non-state armed groups; foreigners paid for their service in a state’s regular military; and members of private security companies. The essential elements of Malet’s definition are that the individuals a) are foreign, b) join an insurgency, and c) do so as a volunteer without expectation of pay. Malet continues this restrictive

definition, particularly towards insurgents, in subsequent works.¹⁰ Mostly adopting Malet's definition, Bakke¹¹ eases the material gain restriction in her definition of "transnational insurgents": "armed non-state actors who, for either ideational or material reasons, choose to fight in an intrastate conflict outside their home country, siding with the challenger to the state."

Cilluffo et al.¹² define foreign fighters as *violent extremists* from Western states who travel outside of the West to fight against non-Muslim factions. Bryan¹³ describes foreign fighters as "not agents of foreign governments, but they leave home typically to fight for a transnational cause or identity." Bryan acknowledges that foreign fighters are not exclusively jihadis, but notes that the foreign fighters of concern to Western states today are those who fight with Al Qaeda and similar groups. Paz¹⁴ does not specifically define the term foreign fighter, but examines *Arab volunteers* who fought with Al Qaeda in Iraq after May 2003. In his earlier work, Hegghammer¹⁵ expands Malet's definition to include foreign agents who join an insurgency, do not have citizenship or kinship links with the group they join, are not part of an "official military organization," and are not paid.

Other scholars present less restrictive definitions that include non-jihadists and non-insurgents. Moore and Tumelty¹⁶ refer to "non-indigenous, non-territorialized combatants who, motivated by religion, kinship, and/or ideology rather than pecuniary reward, enter a conflict zone to participate in hostilities." Mendelsohn¹⁷ does not limit foreign fighters to insurgent groups, but rather notes that foreign fighters are found wherever non-state armed groups are fighting. For his 2013 study, Hegghammer uses a more inclusive definition of foreign fighter than he did in 2010 by removing his previous restrictions on the individual joining an insurgency and lacking kinship ties. While Hegghammer does not explicitly require a lack of pay in his 2013 definition, this requirement appears to be implicit in his analysis. Moore¹⁸ prefers a looser definition that covers the combinations of motivations that drive mobilization, preferring the concept of transnational activism that addresses both combat and other volunteer activities, while allowing for "fictive kin" ties between the erstwhile foreigner and the cause he or she supports.

The literature on foreign fighters has tended to focus, with some exceptions, on transnational volunteers who join insurgent groups with little consideration for transnational fighters who join non-state armed groups that would not be considered insurgent groups. Table 1 shows that over half of the works cited above require the fighter to join an insurgency in order to be classified as a foreign fighter. As Mendelsohn¹⁹ noted, this is likely due to the policy interest of stemming the flow of insurgent fighters generally and jihadi insurgents specifically. The concern, particularly to Western states, is that these foreign fighters will return to their homes increasingly radicalized and with combat training and experience. Naturally, these individuals do present a security risk to their

Table 1. Foreign fighter definitional elements by author.

Author	Foreigner	Insurgency	Volunteer/Unpaid	Non-Government Agent	Lack of Kinship Links
Bakke (2013)	X	X		X	
Bryan (2010)	X		X		
Hegghammer (2013)	X	X	X	X	X
Malet (2013)	X	X	X	X	
Moore (2015)	X				
Moore and Tumelty (2008)	X		X		
Paz (2005)	X	X	X		

states of origin. Lost in this focus, however, is that the skills an individual develops fighting abroad makes them a more effective militant *regardless of who they are fighting for*. Timothy McVeigh, for example, developed the specialized skills that helped him perpetrate the worst domestic U.S. terrorist attack in history while serving in the U.S. military.²⁰

In other words, this does not account for foreign fighters who join pro-government or other counter-insurgent sub-state groups, possibly for similar reasons and equally for no expectation of pay, and there does not appear to be any theoretical reason for this omission. While Malet excludes pro-government foreign fighters, it is not an explicit omission, such as with individuals who join private military companies or state-affiliated militaries. Here Malet²¹ attempts to delineate the volunteer, i.e., unpaid, fighters who join insurgencies from those exclusively seeking profit as mercenaries. With regard to fighters with state-affiliated entities, he notes that they “enjoy legal protections, can reasonably expect to be compensated and, considering that states usually defeat insurgencies, they can expect to survive to enjoy their compensation.”²²

These assumptions, however, do not necessarily hold for fighters who join pro-state militant groups that are themselves non-state and are raised and organized much like an insurgency. This may be a rare phenomenon, but if fighters do not enjoy the legal protections of a state military, are unpaid, and have equitable expectations of survival, there is no theoretical reason that their joining a pro- and sub-state group should exclude them from analysis as foreign fighters. Indeed, as we will see below with American volunteers fighting ISIS, these fighters must make a choice to travel and fight, plan and pay their own way, and often pay for their own equipment. Such fighters from states other than the United States and Canada often break the law by engaging in transnational fighting. In the data coding appendix of his book, Malet²³ provides an expansive definition of insurgency that includes any irregular militia not in the pay of a state. However, this nuance is lost in Malet, Paz, and Hegghammer,²⁴ where *insurgency* is not specifically defined or is defined according to its more common usage as an *irregular rebel group*.

Neither the phenomenon nor the research of individuals mobilizing to fight with pro-state militias began with those who volunteered to fight against ISIS. The most recognized case is likely the International Brigades that fought on the side of the Spanish Republic during the Spanish Civil War, which Malet provides as a case study in his book. Jackson²⁵ estimates that as many as 32,000 fighters from over 50 countries joined the seven International Brigades. Jackson includes in his research analysis of the backgrounds of individuals and some general categories of rationales for these individuals to fight for the Spanish Republicans.²⁶ Similarly, Arielli²⁷ examined the more than 4,000 international volunteers who joined the Israeli armed forces in 1948–49. While these fighters were paid salaries, Arielli concludes they should not be classified as mercenaries as 95 percent of them were Jewish and overwhelmingly motivated to help establish a Jewish state, not profit as war entrepreneurs.²⁸

Arielli²⁹ also researched volunteers who sided with Croatia during the Yugoslav Wars (1991–1995), finding that 456 individuals from 35 countries had joined various Croatian militias. Arielli considered these fighters as volunteers because they chose to fight for various personal reasons, and while some received a salary, that salary was irregularly if ever paid. Importantly, he distinguishes these volunteers from both members of the Croatian diaspora and mercenaries, because the logics of these groups’ mobilizations

differ from his sample. More recently, Smyth³⁰ focuses on the thousands of Shia volunteers who fight on behalf of the Syrian and Iraqi governments against ISIS, noting that Iran or Hezbollah provide a salary competitive within these societies. Smyth argues that even though these fighters are given a salary, they are true believers motivated by jihad,³¹ suggesting they too would be covered under our expanded definition of foreign fighters. The empirical research of Arielli and Smyth present some nuance when considering the compensation of fighters as inclusion criteria for foreign fighters. Compensation itself is not exclusionary, but rather transnational combatants should be considered foreign fighters if the *primary reason* for their mobilization could reasonably be determined to be non-material.

Concern for definitions is not merely academic in this case or in the history of this type of foreign fighting. Choosing to risk one's own resources and life to join a far-off war certainly seems like a unique form of violence that needs to be explained. Because the individuals we study—and other pro-government fighters—are not jihadis does not negate the threat of violence they pose upon their return from fighting. This threat may be acute in Europe where outlaw motorcycle gangs and white nationalists have been volunteering to fight against ISIS.³² These individuals could be reasonably considered a threat upon their return as they could leverage their combat training and experience for their illicit or extremist activities. With this policy implication in mind, and for purely analytical reasons, we suggest that the generally-used definition of foreign fighter drop the insurgency element and replace it with a generic non-state armed group or irregular militia prescription. This would more accurately encompass the foreign fighter phenomenon while maintaining the intent of the insurgency restriction. As Goertz³³ maintains, “a good concept draws distinctions that are important in the behavior of the object.” Since we expect similar *behavior* from a person who voluntarily travels abroad to kill for or against a cause, we think both phenomena should be included in the definition of a *foreign fighter*.

Foreign fighters in the Syrian and Iraqi civil wars

The civil wars in Syria and Iraq have drawn over 20,000 foreign fighters from around the world.³⁴ The fighters have fought with many non-state combatant groups in these wars, including the Islamic State, Jabhat al Nusra, the Peshmerga, and Syrian rebel groups. After an analysis of the research on Sunni jihadi foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq, we will examine American foreign fighters who travel to Syria and Iraq to fight *against* ISIS. We then compare these two populations to explore the viability of expanding the definition of foreign fighter to include those individuals who volunteer to fight for non-insurgent sub-state armed groups.

Sunni foreign fighters

As mentioned above, most academic work on foreign fighters in the Syria-Iraq theater focuses almost exclusively upon Sunni foreign fighters with ISIS or Jabhat al Nusra. Because of the potential security threat these individuals pose to their states of origin, assuming these individuals intend to return to their home states, this policy focus is understandable. Research on Sunni foreign fighters generally falls into three categories: counting fighters based on their state of origin, determining the individual backgrounds of

each fighter who might contribute to their decision to mobilize, and attempts to ascertain the specific reasons why individuals become jihadists.³⁵

The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR) at King's College London has been putting together a database of Western foreign fighters; a video on their website indicates that they are conducting a snowball sample from social media, primarily from Facebook.³⁶ Once their researchers find foreign fighters on Facebook, they search that individual's posts and contact list to identify other radicalized individuals. ICSR estimated at the beginning of 2015, as many as 4,000 foreign fighters traveled from Western Europe to join Sunni jihadist groups in the Middle East.³⁷ ICSR's researchers estimate that approximately 100 Canadians and 100 Americans also became foreign fighters.³⁸

The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) at the University of Maryland compiled a database of Americans indicted in the United States for violent and non-violent radical crimes.³⁹ James et al.⁴⁰ focused on Islamist foreign fighters as a subset of this data, noting as of September 2015 that 13 Americans had successfully traveled to fight with the Islamic State while 43 others were indicted for attempting to do so. In addition, eight U.S. foreign fighters successfully joined Jabhat al Nusra while 14 successfully joined the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG).⁴¹

The Center on National Security⁴² at Fordham University Law School reached similar conclusions from their analysis of indictments through June 2015. While providing granular data on individual cases, the Center on National Security found that only three indicted Americans successfully traveled and joined the Islamic State out of 31 total aspirants. While the discrepancies between START and the Center for National Security are small in total, they present a high percentage of their total data. Vidino and Hughes⁴³ conducted a survey of ISIS in the United States, including actual and attempted online support, domestic plots, and foreign fighter mobilization. Like the Center on National Security, Vidino and Hughes provide correlates of individual cases, such as age, gender, place of origin, and conversion to Islam.

To compare types of foreign fighters, we compiled a database by conjoining data from the Center on National Security, U.S. House of Representatives Homeland Security Committee, and Kurzman.⁴⁴ Our inclusion criterion was that the individual must have traveled to Iraq or Syria with the intent to fight for either ISIS or Jabhat al Nusra. We excluded those who plotted to travel and those who traveled, but never made it as far as Iraq or Syria. We recorded the variables listed in [Table 2](#) for each individual.

Using the sources listed above, with some missing data filled by Google searches, we were able to compile a dataset with 21 full observations. Of interest, the average age of these foreign fighters was just over 25 years old. Ninety-five percent were believed to have traveled to Syria to fight, 86% were male, 75% of them allegedly joined ISIS (instead of Jabhat al Nusra or other groups), 51% were believed to have been killed while fighting, 35% are still at large or have whereabouts unknown, and 14% of them have been arrested after their return to the United States. Full descriptive statistics are provided in [Table 3](#).

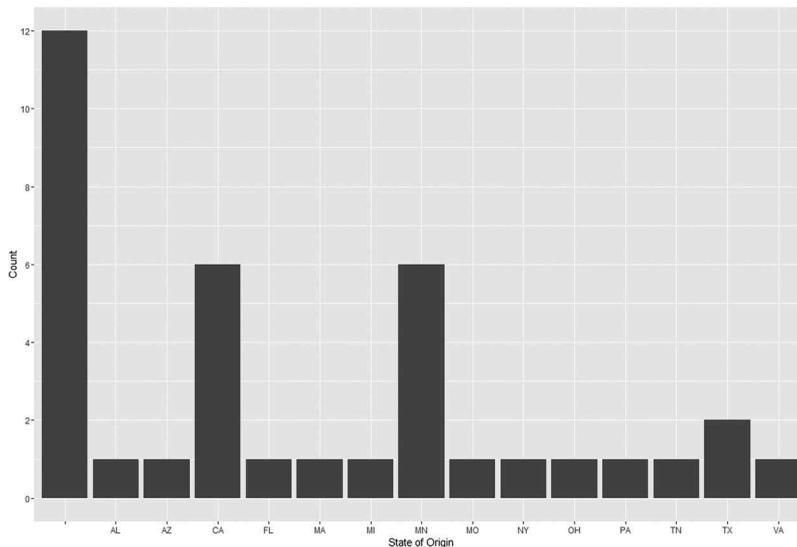
We also examined the states from which each fighter departed and plotted this distribution in [Figure 1](#). We were unable to determine the origin of 12 foreign fighters, all of whom were known by a pseudonym. California and Minnesota each produced six fighters. The latter is not surprising given the history of the Somali community there having produced foreign fighters for al Shabaab before the rise of ISIS. California presents

Table 2. American jihadi foreign fighters.

Variable	n	Type
Name	37	Qualitative
Pseudonym	37	Dichotomous
Age	21	Ratio
Male	37	Dichotomous
State	25	Categorical
Year of Travel	32	Interval
Syria	37	Dichotomous
ISIS	36	Dichotomous
Suicide Bomber	37	Dichotomous
Year of Death or Arrest	24	Interval
Death	37	Dichotomous
Arrest	37	Dichotomous
At Large	37	Dichotomous

Table 3. Descriptive statistics for American jihadi foreign fighters.

	n	mean	sd	se
Use of Pseudonym	37	0.35	0.48	0.08
Age	21	25.33	5.69	1.24
Male	37	0.86	0.35	0.06
Year of Travel	32	2013.41	0.87	0.15
Syria	37	0.95	0.23	0.04
ISIS	36	0.75	0.44	0.07
Suicide Bomber	13	0.15	0.38	0.10
Death/Arrest Year	24	2014.29	0.81	0.16
Death	37	0.51	0.51	0.08
Arrest	37	0.14	0.35	0.06
At Large/Unknown	37	0.35	0.48	0.08

**Figure 1.** Home states of American jihadi foreign fighters.

a newfound concern as it had not been recorded as a source of Islamic radicalization previously. Coupled with the terrorist attack in San Bernardino in late 2015, this could portend an increase in extremism in that state. Other than Texas with two fighters, the

remaining 11 states each produced one fighter. We note that The Center on National Security⁴⁵ lists New York as the state producing the greatest number of ISIS cases, but it appears that many of these cases were for facilitating ISIS or plotting and failing to join them to fight.

However, our data is missing the individual reasons that describe why they mobilized as foreign fighters. Such data is rarely available in open media accounts of Sunni fighters and most literature has focused on secondary or tertiary accounts or relied on the social and economic details of fighters to infer reasons. Exceptions to this have been primary-source accounts of mobilization rationales, either through interviews with the fighters themselves or captured ISIS documents. Early interviews include Mironova and Whitt,⁴⁶ who interviewed four jihadist fighters in Syria from Saudi Arabia, France, Russia, and Algeria. One major finding was that the defense of Muslims was a common factor among them, in spite of the variance between their origins and socio-economic backgrounds.

The most comprehensive sets of interviews come from Dawson, Amarasingam, and Bain⁴⁷ and Dawson and Amarasingam.⁴⁸ Some 60 foreign fighters were interviewed between the two studies, providing significant insight into why they became transnational fighters. Both works deal with the influence of individual socio-economic factors that push them to jihad versus existential crises that pull them. In sum, they find that religion played a major role—if not the primary role—in individual decisions to mobilize. This is due to the pervasiveness of religious discourse in their interviews, while actual socio-economic deprivation varied significantly. The role of religiosity, often marginalized over push factors because ISIS's foreign fighters exhibit limited Koranic knowledge, is confirmed by documents captured by ISIS, as discussed in Lebovich.⁴⁹ This current research suggests that the overwhelming reason ISIS foreign fighters mobilized was due to higher moral reasons instead of reasons related to relative deprivation.

Anti-Islamic State foreign fighters

Less discussed are fighters who travel to Iraq and Syria to fight against the Islamic State. According to most of the definitions provided above, these individuals would not be considered foreign fighters because they did not travel to fight with an insurgency. This is mirrored in press accounts where they are most often referred to as *volunteers* or *vigilantes*,⁵⁰ most likely to differentiate these individuals from jihadist foreign fighters. As with jihadists, becoming an anti-ISIS foreign fighter is illegal in many states. Even when fighters come from states that do not outlaw such actions, they can be reluctant to share information about themselves for fear of the risk it could present to their families. This study examines Americans who have left for Iraq or Syria in order to fight against ISIS. We have chosen this subset of anti-ISIS foreign fighters because some public information is available as their actions are not illegal in the United States and because we hypothesize that a common origin allows us to compare these fighters with Sunni jihadist foreign fighters.

To date, the most thorough research conducted on American anti-ISIS foreign fighters is Patin⁵¹ in *Bellingcat*, an open source and social media investigative journalism outlet. Patin compiled a dataset of American anti-ISIS foreign fighters according to three inclusion criteria: a) “photographic or video evidence that the individual is in Iraq or Syria fighting IS[IS] or intending to fight IS[IS]”; b) “indications that, when taken together, make it highly probable that the individual is in Iraq or Syria fighting IS[IS] or intending

to fight IS[IS]”; and c) “news reports describing an individual as being in Iraq or Syria fighting IS[IS] or intending to do so.”⁵² Included are two additional necessary-but-not-sufficient conditions: that “the individual is engaged or intends to be engaged in martial activity” and that “the individual is volunteering and therefore not getting paid.”⁵³

Using these methods, Patin⁵⁴ found that 108 Americans became anti-ISIS foreign fighters, with Texas being the state that provided the most (15% of the sample). Seventy-three of these individuals, at 68% of the sample, served in the U.S. military or the French Foreign Legion. No information is provided as to how many of these individuals experienced combat in Iraq or Afghanistan while serving in the U.S. military. Most other demographic descriptions were limited to smaller subsets of the total data. Patin⁵⁵ identifies three main groups that these fighters joined: The Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG and accounting for 52% of the sample), the Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga (either the Kurdistan Democratic Party or the Patriot Union of Kurdistan, and accounting for 40% of the sample), or a Christian militia (either Dwekh Nawsha or the Ninevah Plains Protection Units and accounting for 11% of the sample). Finally, Patin⁵⁶ presents the various rationales these anti-ISIS foreign fighters stated as their motivation for becoming a foreign fighter. These include: moral outrage at ISIS, Christianity, adventurism, nostalgia of military experiences, and/or displeasure with U.S. policy with regard to ISIS.

Methodology in creating American *volunteer* dataset

One drawback to Patin is that the dataset is not reproducible.⁵⁷ According to the study, “the specific means by which the American foreign fighters were identified will not be disclosed in order to protect the safety and privacy of the fighters and their families.”⁵⁸ To prevent this limitation and make our results replicable, our study will only consider American anti-ISIS foreign fighters who are mentioned, by name or by a pseudonym, in a reputable media outlet.

Following Hegghammer,⁵⁹ we conducted a keyword search of LexisNexis to initiate this research. As mass media seem to refer to anti-Islamic State foreign fighters as *volunteers*, our primary search string was:

“American” AND “volunteer” AND “fight against” AND “Islamic State”

The initial returns were 360 newspaper articles, 41 news transcripts, 30 newswire and press releases, and 26 web-based publications, many of which were not relevant as they returned many articles related to non-Americans. We ran this search initially on September 8, 2015 for that date and prior. We continued to run the search and variations of it, including the term *foreign fighter*, as well as conducting outlet-specific searches (such as CNN, *The New York Times*, BBC, etc.). We collected through November 15, 2015, when our dataset ends.

Analysis of American *volunteers*

For each foreign fighter, we recorded demographic data such as name, alias, age, religion, and home state. We then recorded the military experience for each individual as a dichotomous variable. Other military experience variables include branch of service, discharge year, and dichotomous variables for service in Iraq and/or Afghanistan. We then recorded a set of variables related to their time as foreign fighters: group affiliation in

Iraq or Syria, year departed for Iraq or Syria, time in theater (for those we know have returned to the United States), and any stated reason for having become a foreign fighter. Finally, we recorded a reference to the media whereby we found details on these individuals.

In total, we recorded 34 individuals who were reported in public media as having been, or are currently, a foreign fighter in Iraq or Syria fighting against the Islamic State. Of these, we have full demographic data for 22 individuals (excepting religion), full military experience data for 29 (excepting year of discharge), and full foreign fighting data for 29 individuals. Combining these, we have full data—barring the exceptions mentioned—for 23 anti-Islamic State foreign fighters. Table 4 provides descriptive statistics for the quantitative variables in our data. Of particular interest from this data is that 82% of these foreign fighters had reportedly served in the U.S. armed forces, with nearly half the sample having served in Iraq and 29% in Afghanistan. Three of these individuals had served in both theaters. Ten service veterans in our sample did not serve in either Iraq or Afghanistan.

Figure 2 shows the distribution of these foreign fighters by state of origin. With seven missing data points, Texas produced the most with five fighters. Three came from New Jersey, but these consist of a father and his two sons. Five states—Maryland, Michigan, North Carolina, Ohio, and Wisconsin—each produced two fighters, with nine other states producing one fighter each. The data suggests there is no discernible clustering of anti-

Table 4. Descriptive statistics for anti-ISIS foreign fighters.

	n	mean	sd	se
Age	23.00	32.57	8.80	1.83
Military Experience	33.00	0.82	0.39	0.07
Discharge Year	6.00	2009	7.49	3.06
Iraq Service	29.00	0.48	0.51	0.09
Afghanistan Service	28.00	0.29	0.46	0.09
Time in Theater	6.00	6.17	3.25	1.33

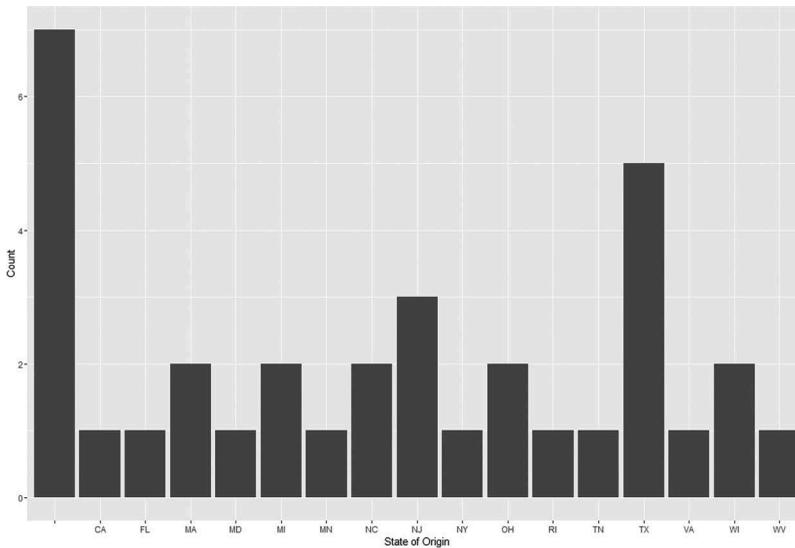


Figure 2. Home states of anti-ISIS foreign fighters.

ISIS foreign fighter sources and that it does not appear that joining is a communal activity, barring the family mentioned above.

We now explore the reasons these fighters gave to media about their rationale for becoming foreign fighters. Malet⁶⁰ presents theories to describe how recruiters create frames for potential fighters. However, these are theories germane to *recruitment* that are too general to describe individual motivations. For example, Malet describes social identity theory in some detail, a theory that contends that interactions between individuals and groups define their connection, not the psychology of individuals. Applied to foreign fighters, social identity theory predicts that recruiters would be more successful if their organization can provide a better bond with an individual than the recruit's existing social connections. This fails to explain why the recruit's existing social connections were inadequate and why the recruit was seeking a new connection in the first place.

We believe we need a more disaggregated tool to record individual motivations rather than these overarching theories. To paraphrase Jackson,⁶¹ there are as many reasons to go to Iraq and Syria as there are people who go. To categorize the demand side of foreign fighter recruiting, we adapt the typology of individual radicalization pathways presented by McCauley and Moskaleiko.⁶² We refer to them here as *mobilization* pathways, as *radicalization* is too pejorative and we theorize that these pathways are generalizable beyond terrorist radicalization and could be applied to any persons volunteering for extremely dangerous duties, such as Americans who volunteered for the military in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Table 5 lists and describes the pathways of McCauley and Moskaleiko,⁶³ of which we are most interested in personal motivation,⁶⁴ group grievance, and risk and status. We also use these pathways because they can be more readily compared to the statements made by the foreign fighters than the recruitment theories offered by Malet.

We coded each individual's primary rationale for mobilizing as a foreign fighter according to our adaptation of the pathways presented in McCauley and Moskaleiko⁶⁵ and based on each fighter's statements to reporters. Of those who stated a reason, we coded a primary rationale as either the reason that fighter seemed to stress or the reason stated first. We added a seventh pathway to those above, as three fighters used their religious ideology alone as a reason for becoming a transnational fighter. For example, Keith Broomfield, who was killed in battle in June 2015, told reporters that God had told him to fight against ISIS.⁶⁶ We also included here those who only discussed the morality of fighting against the evil of ISIS, such as was the reasoning provided by Dean Parker and a fighter who goes by the name

Table 5. Mobilization pathways modified from McCauley and Moskaleiko (2011).

Pathway	Description
Personal Motivation	Harm to self or loved ones can move individuals to hostility and violence towards perpetrators
Group Grievance	Threat or harm to a group or cause the individual cares about can move the individual to hostility and violence toward perpetrators
Slippery Slope	Small involvements in political conflict can create new forces moving an individual toward radicalization
Love	Love for someone already radicalized can move an individual toward radicalization
Risk and Status	The attractions of risk-taking and status can move individuals, especially young males, to radical political action
Unfreezing	Loss of social connection can open an individual to new ideas and new identity that may include political radicalization.

Azad.⁶⁷ Such language is ideological in nature and does not focus on the evil perpetrated on another group with which the fighter might identify in some way.

We do not make any assessment of the mental health of these foreign fighters. First, because we are unqualified to do so. Even if we were, it would be inappropriate to make such assessments without interacting with that individual and even more inappropriate to make such assessments public. Second, the literature on the psychopathology of terrorists suggests that terrorists do not in general suffer from psychiatric disorders. Without empirical evidence to the contrary, research has proposed that terrorist behavior is actually pro-social behavior with norms askew from those of the population at large.⁶⁸ As we propose that anti-ISIS foreign fighters are reflections of jihadist foreign fighters, we assume that the psychopathology of both groups are similar and we thus assume a lack of psychopathology amongst the anti-ISIS foreign fighters.

As seen in Figure 3, the preponderance of these fighters became transnational fighters because of some personal motivation or group grievance. The largest of these, some 44% of the fighters who stated a reason, were those with group grievances. Here we defined *group* expansively to include feelings of cohesion with any groups under attack from ISIS, such as Kurds, Christians, Yazidis, or children, women, or humans generally. Their grievance was that some group with whom they felt affinity was the victim of some barbarous other. One fighter who went by the name “Grim” wanted to combat the “murderers and rapists: people who burn people in cages, people who behead people.”⁶⁹ “Kamal” had interacted with Kurds during his deployment to Iraq while in the U.S. Army and felt he should assist them because he was able to.⁷⁰ Samantha Johnson deployed, leaving behind her three children, because she felt the need to assist the orphans and widows who became such as a result of ISIS’s atrocities.⁷¹

Eight individuals, representing 29% of those who publicly gave a rationale, presented reasons that focused on a personal motivation. “Scott” had served in Iraq in the U.S. Army and felt the need to return in order prevent the work he did then from being undone.⁷²

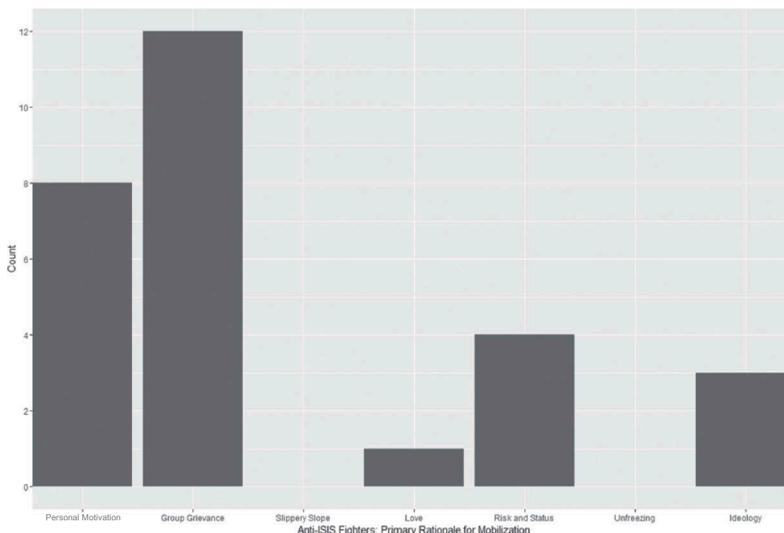


Figure 3. Primary mobilization rationale provided by anti-ISIS foreign fighters.

Jeremy Woodard, Jordan Matson, and Randy Roberts missed the camaraderie of military life and wished to reenter that lifestyle.⁷³ Ostensibly, they were unable to return to U.S. military service. Bruce Windorski was seeking closure on the death of his brother who was killed while serving in Iraq, while Jamie Lane mentioned his friends from service in the U. S. Marine Corps who were killed in Iraq.⁷⁴ Josh M., whose brother and father went with him, seemed frustrated that the recent reduction in U.S. military force sizes put him out of a job and likely became a foreign fighter to continue to serve.⁷⁵

Josh's Marine veteran father, Harry, was the sole fighter who provided love as his primary rationale in that he was following his sons as they had already decided to mobilize.⁷⁶ The remaining fighters were those who mobilized in order to seek risk or status. James M., the son of Harry and brother of Josh, wanted to gain more combat experience.⁷⁷ Justin Smith claimed he suffered from post-traumatic stress from his time serving in Iraq with the U.S. military and thought that fighting, which he claimed to love, might help him deal with it.⁷⁸ Patrick Maxwell was looking to "kill as many bad guys" as he could.⁷⁹ The last fighter we coded as looking for risk and/or status was Matthew van Dyke, who has made something of a career of engaging in foreign conflicts, beginning with the war in Libya.⁸⁰ His role in the fight against ISIS has been disputed, but that he has become something of a journeyman foreign fighter against forces as different as Muammar Gaddafi and ISIS suggests some element of thrill-seeking. With this factor and his attempts to garner attention for himself and his group, we coded his rationale as seeking risk and status.

The interaction of these mobilization pathways and the recruitment theories provided by Malet⁸¹ has multiple facets. At its most general, the pathways described above cause an individual to dissociate from his or her existing social network and enter a market in search of a new social network. Because the breakage is relatively extreme in its effect, these individuals provide a demand for not just a social network, but a social movement to compensate for that breakage.⁸² Grievances, desire for risk and status, and religious ideology push these individuals into this marketplace, where they are met on the supply side and pulled by social networks and movements.⁸³ McCauley and Moskalenko generally describe the demand side, while Malet describes the supply side of this transaction.

Much of the social movement literature focuses on the use of individual relationships in recruiting. Indeed, the recruitment theories proposed by Malet⁸⁴ center on some element of individual, if not actually personal, connection with the movement joined. In this case, we are concerned with why individuals chose to leave their homes and fight in a war in which they may have only a tenuous connection. Although the specific mechanisms at work elude us, threats in the form of political or social change have been connected with mobilization, and that these mobilizations have been effective with individuals with personal grievances even if the individual's grievances are only loosely related to the cause of the movement they ultimately join.⁸⁵

But this does not address how individuals join movements of relative or complete strangers. Jasper and Poulsen⁸⁶ suggest that moral shocks create the mechanism by which individuals join movements of strangers. An individual's disgust at some offense, purposefully framed for recruitment, causes them to seek out a means of redress and builds on their existing beliefs. Unlike the fighters in our dataset who were fighting to address personal motivations, such as no longer serving in the U.S. military, or in search of risk and status, this mechanism connects would-be fighters with group grievances or religious/moral reasons with recruiters. These fighters need to search out the recruiters themselves,

but the shocks they observe on cable news outlets and in newspapers are enough for them to seek out and join a foreign movement.

While the military veterans of our sample seemingly fit into our categorization, some additional commentary on these foreign fighters is warranted. We posit that prior military experience could have three likely effects with regard to anti-ISIS foreign fighting. First, that veterans dislike their disconnection from military life and wish to reexperience that lifestyle and its senses of purpose and camaraderie. Second, for Iraq War veterans specifically, that ISIS's success in Iraq had counteracted their own efforts thereby, cheapening the sacrifices they and their former comrades made. For these fighters, transnational volunteering allows them to act against this loss. These first two effects would fall under personal motivations in our mobilization categorization. The third effect we would expect is that Iraq War veterans had developed a salient bond with the Iraqi people and they therefore mobilized in order to address a group grievance in protecting the Iraqi people. However, we have not observed cases where military veterans cum foreign fighters felt that they were their own transnational community, as a sort of private citizen emergency service. Likewise, we have not observed that veterans knew each other from their time in the U.S. military.

Comparing American anti- and pro-ISIS foreign fighters

Because of the limited individual-level data available on those who fought for ISIS or other Sunni jihadi groups in Syria or Iraq, it is difficult to conduct a comparison of the groups at the individual level.⁸⁷ However, some comparison is noteworthy. First, it appears that these populations are of roughly equal size even though one is committing a serious crime while the other is not. Our sample sizes were roughly equal, but according to Patin and Neumann⁸⁸ there have been between 100 and 200 American anti-ISIS fighters and between 100 and 200 Sunni American fighters. The illegality of fighting with designated terrorist groups appears to have little effect on the choice to fight or not, but further study is required. We cannot make inferences on the equivalence about these populations outside of the United States, but suspect that the number of pro-ISIS fighters increases with geographic proximity to Syria and Iraq.

The only quantitatively comparative variable common between the two datasets is age. For this we find that anti-ISIS fighters, with a mean age of 32.5 years, are on average older than the pro-ISIS fighters, who had a mean age of 25.3 years. This difference in means is statistically significant at the 0.002 level. It is not surprising because many of the anti-ISIS fighters were military veterans. These fighters likely finished their schooling and spent up to 8 years in military service before some mobilizing factor caused them to transition from civilian life to foreign fighting. The prevalence of older war veterans amongst pro-government militias was observed in studies on Spain, Israel, and Croatia,⁸⁹ but there is little evidence that age itself is a causal factor in choosing to fight for a pro-government militia. The pro-ISIS fighters were, on average, mobilized earlier in their professional lives. Their younger age suggests the possibility that risk-seeking behavior affects their mobilization.

Proposed hypotheses and next steps

Foreign fighters, particularly those who join illegal organizations, such as ISIS, are a quintessentially hard to reach population. That said, we are particularly interested from

both theoretical and practical perspectives in understanding why these people choose to become foreign fighters at all. While the population we study here, American anti-ISIS foreign fighters, is interesting in and of itself, we propose that these individuals could also be used as proxies to better understand illicit foreign fighters, and foreign fighters universally. These anti-ISIS fighters have on average been willing to discuss their experiences with reporters, and we believe they could continue to do so with academic researchers. And while their backgrounds generally differ from the jihadist foreign fighters, no research currently exists to suggest their mobilization mechanisms differ from the jihadist fighters.

Under that assumption, we suggest further research to test a number of hypotheses to better understand the interactions between personal motivations and the recruiting efforts of social movements, in this case between non-state armed groups and foreign fighters. Based on our analyses of the literature and the initial data we have collected we propose the following testable hypotheses:

H₁: Individuals who experience a moral shock and identify with the aggrieved group will be more likely to seek to volunteer for fighting abroad.

H₂: Individual pathways for joining or volunteering against ISIS will be similar to those joining ISIS.

H₃: Younger recruits seek risk and status and thus are more likely to fight against a government than for it.⁹⁰

With the limitations of our data presented here, we propose these hypotheses be given a probe of their plausibility. Our analysis is preliminary, but we hope that it is a basis for future work on this topic that has been overlooked by previous research.

Another line of research would be to expand the population of anti-ISIS foreign fighters beyond the United States and to include fighters from European states, Australia, and East Asia, where such fighting is often illegal or fraught with personal liability. This expanded population would provide variation on the legality of pro-government foreign fighting, allowing us to test the following hypothesis:

H₄: The illegality of becoming a foreign fighter has little to no effect on an individual's decision to become a foreign fighter.

This hypothesis is based on the idea that whatever grievance or need that drives an individual exceeds their concern for the legal consequences of breaking the law in their home jurisdiction. With a larger sample of fighters from states where foreign fighting is illegal, such comparative analysis can be conducted to empirically test this hypothesis.

Beyond examining these data, we hope to do interviews with these volunteers.⁹¹ Given that they have not done anything illegal, we hope to gain insight into their pathways to violence that otherwise might be difficult or impossible to glean. This more ethnographic research would complement and hopefully validate what we have done so far.

We argue that the currently used definition of foreign fighter that restricts such a designation to individuals who fight with insurgencies is non-theoretical and that the term

foreign fighter should include any individual who joins any non-state armed group without expectation of pay or monetary benefit. We then examine one subset of individuals who would be covered under this expanded definition: American foreign fighters combating ISIS in Iraq and Syria. We propose that these individuals deserve further research, including expanding this sample beyond the United States, in order to test hypotheses about foreign fighters heretofore unanswerable because of a lack of data.

Disclosure statement

The authors report no conflicts of interest. The authors alone are responsible for the content and writing of the article.

ORCID

Jason Fritz  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0347-9275>

Joseph K. Young  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5727-0026>

Notes

1. We recognize that Jabhat al Nusra had changed its name in 2016, but during the time period covered in this study the group was called Jabhat al Nusra and as such we use that name for Al Qaeda's affiliate in Syria.
2. The legality of this sort of foreign fighting is not unique to the United States, but other states may have different, more liberal liability concerns for those engaged in foreign fighting.
3. David Malet, *Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identity in Civil Conflicts* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013), 33–54.
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7. Hegghammer, "Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists' Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting" (see note 4), 3; Michael Noonan and Phyl Khalil, "North American Foreign Fighters," *Journal for Deradicalization* 1, no. 1 (2015): 67, 73–74; Peter R. Neumann, "Foreign Fighter Total in Syria/Iraq Now Exceeds 20,000; Surpasses Afghanistan Conflict in the 1980s," International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR), King's College London (2015).
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9. David Malet, "Foreign Fighter Mobilization and Persistence in a Global Context," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 27, no. 3 (2015): 456.
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18. Cerwyn Moore, "Foreign Bodies: Transnational Activism, the Insurgency in the North Caucasus and 'Beyond,'" *Terrorism and Political Violence* 27, no. 3 (2015): 411.
19. Mendelsohn, "Foreign Fighters—Recent Trends" (see note 17), 195
20. Stuart A. Wright, *Patriots, Politics, and the Oklahoma City Bombing* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 7.
21. Malet, *Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identity in Civil Conflicts* (see note 3), 9.
22. *Ibid.*
23. *Ibid.*, 220.
24. David Malet, "Why Foreign Fighters?: Historical Perspectives and Solutions," *Orbis* 54, no. 1 (2010): 107; David Malet, "Foreign Fighter Mobilization and Persistence in a Global Context," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 27, no. 3 (2015): 458–59; Paz (see note 14), 3; Hegghammer, "Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists' Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting" (see note 4), 8.
25. Michael Jackson, *Fallen Sparrows: The International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War* (Philadelphia, PA: American Philosophical Society, 1994), 18.
26. This estimate does not include the 5,000 or so men who were foreign fighters in Spain but not part of the International Brigades. *Ibid.*, 39.
27. Nir Arielli, "When Are Foreign Volunteers Useful? Israel's Transnational Soldiers in the War of 1948 Re-Examined," *Journal of Military History* 78, no. 2 (2014): 704.
28. *Ibid.*, 707–8.
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38. *Ibid.*
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41. The YPG is not listed by the U.S. Department of State as a Foreign Terrorist Organization and unlike the other groups tracked by START, it is not illegal to join it as an American. The YPG presents an interesting case in that they are not pro-government in the sense that the Peshmerga in Iraq are, and are hostile to the Assad regime while fighting against ISIS. However, because the Syrian regime abandoned the Kurdish region of the state in 2012, Syrian Kurd areas became *de facto* autonomous. As such, we count Americans who fight with the YPG in our dataset as they are fighting to maintain this autonomy for Syrian Kurds.
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51. Patin (see note 50).
52. *Ibid.*, 2.
53. *Ibid.*
54. *Ibid.*, 3–8.
55. *Ibid.*, 13–18.
56. *Ibid.*, 19–31.
57. The importance of replication in empirical social sciences is best explained by Jens B. Asendorpf, Mark Conner, Filip De Fruyt, Jan De Houwer, Jaap J. Denissen, Klaus Fiedler, Susann Fiedler, David C. Funder, Reinhold Kliegl, Brian A. Nosek, et al., "Recommendations for Increasing Replicability in Psychology," *European Journal of Personality* 27, no. 2 (2013).
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59. Hegghammer, "Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists' Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting" (see note 4), 3–4.
60. Malet, *Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identity in Civil Conflicts* (see note 3).
61. Jackson, *Fallen Sparrows: The International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War* (see note 25), 42.
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as their mobilizing motivation that they missed the camaraderie of military service. Our adjusted term is more accurate here, even if this example could be viewed as a grievance stemming from separation from military service.

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84. Malet, *Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identity in Civil Conflicts* (see note 3).

85. Nella Van Dyke and Sarah A. Soule, "Structural Social Changes and the Mobilizing Effects of Threat: Explaining Levels of Patriot and Militia Organizing in the United States," *Social Problems* 49, no. 4 (2002): 513–514; Wright (see note 20), 40–42.
86. James M. Jasper and Jane D. Poulsen, "Recruiting Strangers and Friends: Moral Shocks and Social Networks in Animal Rights and Anti-Nuclear Protests," *Social Problems* 42, no. 4 (1995), 498–99.
87. We acknowledge that our data is selected on the "dependent variable," i.e., selecting those who went to fight against ISIS, but note that as we are not conducting hypothesis testing and are only proposing hypotheses to test this is not a concern. As noted by Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 23, "in the early stages of a research program, selection on the dependent variable can serve the heuristic purpose of identifying the potential causal paths and variables leading to the dependent variable of interest. Later, the resulting causal model can be tested against cases in which there is variation on the dependent variable." This research program, including a follow-on study, complies with this concept.
88. Patin (see note 50), 1; Neumann (see note 7).
89. Jackson (see note 25), 99–101; Arielli, "When Are Foreign Volunteers Useful? Israel's Transnational Soldiers in the War of 1948 Re-Examined" (see note 27), 705–6; Arielli, "In Search of Meaning: Foreign Volunteers in the Croatian Armed Forces" (see note 29), 6–7. Importantly for the case of foreign fighters in Israel (1948), Israel forces sought out veterans of World War II, whereas no such targeted recruitment seemed to occur in the cases of Spain, Croatia, or Syria and Iraq.
90. "Government" here refers to the government engaged in civil conflict, not the government of the foreign fighter's origin. Per the discussion of the YPG in note 41 above, "government" also refers to political entities that may not be states but are interested in maintaining the status quo.
91. Our research team has already conducted roughly a dozen interviews with American anti-ISIS foreign fighters as a pilot for this follow-on research.