

The Other Foreign Fighters

**An Open-Source Investigation into
American Volunteers Fighting the Islamic
State in Iraq and Syria**

A `bellingcat` Investigation

Table of Contents

Table of Contents..... i

Introduction..... 1

Methodology.....2

 Anonymity2

Data3

 Who Goes.....3

 Home States3

 Prior Military Service5

 Gender and Age.....8

 Education.....9

 Civilian Occupation9

 Duration Abroad 10

Groups13

 YPG.....13

 Peshmerga15

 Christian Militias17

Motivations19

 Moral Outrage or Dismay – Wanting to Do Something.....22

 Christianity.....23

 Adventure or Boredom.....26

 Missing Combat, Missing Military Camaraderie, or Trouble Adapting to Civilian Life28

 Dissatisfaction with US Policy, Iraq War Progress Being Erased, or Prospect of American Deaths Being in Vain29

Conclusion.....32

Acknowledgments.....33

Appendix A: Peshmerga Legion Application, Requirements, and Kit List.....34

Appendix B: Nationalities.....36

Introduction

The foreign fighter phenomenon as it relates to the ongoing conflict in Iraq and Syria has been well documented by governments, the media, and the academic literature.¹ Estimates vary, but the general consensus is that between 20,000 and 30,000 foreigners from more than 100 countries have traveled to Syria to fight with various Sunni jihadist groups.² Of those, roughly 150 to 200 are American citizens.³ This report seeks to shed light on a related, yet understudied phenomenon, namely, that of Americans traveling to Iraq and Syria to fight *against* the Islamic State (IS).⁴ While there have been a number of vignettes in the media highlighting particular Americans or groups of Americans who have traveled abroad to combat IS, this is the first systematic study, relying solely upon open-source information, to provide a concrete understanding of not only the scale of the anti-IS American foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria, but also their backgrounds and motivations.⁵

The report is divided into four sections. First, the study's methodology is discussed, along with the rationale behind anonymizing certain Americans' identities. The second section delves into the data captured about the Americans, which includes statistics on who goes and which groups they join. Section three examines the motivations of the Americans, which are illustrated through direct quotes and profiles of specific individuals. The concluding section presents the study's findings and suggests avenues for further research.

¹ See, e.g., Hegghammer, Thomas. "Number of Foreign Fighters from Europe in Syria Is Historically Unprecedented. Who Should Be Worried?" November 27, 2013. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2013/11/27/number-of-foreign-fighters-from-europe-in-syria-is-historically-unprecedented-who-should-be-worried/>; Seldin, Jeff. "Progress Seen in Stemming Flow of Foreign Fighters to IS." July 17, 2015. <http://www.voanews.com/content/progress-seen-stemming-flow-foreign-fighters-islamic-state/2867432.html>; Kohlmann, Evan, and Laith Alkhouri. "Profiles of Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq." *CTC Sentinel* 7, no. 9 (2014): 1-5. <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/profiles-of-foreign-fighters-in-syria-and-iraq>; Zelin, Aaron. "The Saudi Foreign Fighter Presence in Syria." *CTC Sentinel* 7, no. 4 (2014): 10-14. <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-saudi-foreign-fighter-presence-in-syria>; Heinke, Daniel, and Jan Raudszus. "German Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq." *CTC Sentinel* 8, no. 1 (2015): 18-21. <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/german-foreign-fighters-in-syria-and-iraq>; Weggemans, Daan, Edwin Bakker, and Peter Grol. "Who Are They and Why Do They Go? The Radicalization and Preparatory Processes of Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighters." *Perspectives on Terrorism* 8, no. 4 (2014): 100-10. <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/365>; Byman, Daniel. "The Homecomings: What Happens When Arab Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria Return?" *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 38, no. 8 (2015): 581-602. <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1057610X.2015.1031556>; Klausen, Jytte. "Tweeting the Jihad: Social Media Networks of Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 38, no. 1 (2014): 1-22. <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1057610X.2014.974948>; Hegghammer, Thomas, and Aaron Zelin. "How Syria's Civil War Became a Holy Crusade." *Foreign Affairs*, July 3, 2013. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2013-07-03/how-syrias-civil-war-became-holy-crusade>.

² "Ministerial on Information Sharing to Counter Foreign Terrorist Fighters." February 18, 2015. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2015/02/237575.htm>; Rasmussen, Nicholas. Hearing before the House of Representatives Committee on Homeland Security, "Countering Violent Islamist Extremism: The Urgent Threat of Foreign Fighters and Homegrown Terror." February 11, 2015. <http://www.dni.gov/files/documents/Newsroom/Testimonies/11%20Feb%20HHSC%20Foreign%20Fighter%20Travel%20Rasmussen%20SFR.pdf>; 7453rd Security Council Meeting, "Action against Threat of Foreign Terrorist Fighters Must Be Ramped Up, Security Council Urges in High-Level Meeting." May 29, 2015. <http://www.un.org/press/en/2015/sc11912.doc.htm>.

³ Archick, Kristin, Paul Belkin, Christopher Blanchard, Carla Humud, and Derek Mix. "European Fighters in Syria and Iraq: Assessments, Responses, and Issues for the United States." Congressional Research Service, April 27, 2015. <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R44003.pdf>; Jones, Seth. Hearing before the House of Representatives Committee on Homeland Security. "US Homeland Security and the Threat from Syria and Iraq." June 24, 2015. http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/testimonies/CT400/CT433/RAND_CT433.pdf.

⁴ IS is by far the main belligerent in the eyes of nearly all of the American foreign fighters.

⁵ This report's use of the term "foreign fighters" slightly differs from both David Malet's and Thomas Hegghammer's definitions (see Malet, David. *Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identity in Civil Conflicts*. Oxford University Press, 2013 and Hegghammer, Thomas. "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad." *International Security* 35, no. 3 (2011): 53-91. http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/files/The_Rise_of_Muslim_Foreign_Fighters.pdf, respectively), which maintain that foreign fighters "join" (in the case of Malet) or "join and operate within the confines of" (in the case of Hegghammer) an insurgency. The American volunteers that are the subject of this report do not belong to an insurgency *per se*, but do meet the rest of the foreign fighter criteria laid out by Malet and Hegghammer. This being the case, perhaps the prevailing definition of "foreign fighters" should be amended to incorporate individuals, such as the Americans in this study, who join militias or establish independent groups in a conflict state, but are engaged in combat that would not typically be considered an insurgency.

Methodology

The subtitle of this report describes this study as an “open-source investigation.” “Open source” here means information gathered from unclassified sources, of course, but also information that is freely and publicly available on the internet. That is, none of the information contained in this report originated from paid subscription services or the author’s personal contacts (with one exception).⁶ Moreover, none of the American foreign fighters have been contacted or “followed” by the author. In addition to maintaining the study’s open-source character, this approach also has the benefit of not prompting changes in the Americans’ online behavior.

Each of the following criteria is sufficient for an American’s inclusion into the dataset analyzed in this report:

- *Photographic or video evidence* that the individual is in Iraq or Syria fighting IS or intending to fight IS⁷
- *Indications that, when taken together, make it highly probable* that the individual is in Iraq or Syria fighting IS or intending to fight IS⁸
- *News reports* describing an individual as being in Iraq or Syria fighting IS or intending to do so

Two additional criteria are necessary but not sufficient for inclusion into the dataset:

- The individual is engaged in or intends to be engaged in *martial activity*, whether that means acting in a combat role or training others⁹
- The individual is *volunteering* and therefore not getting paid, as opposed to a private military contractor or a member of the United States armed forces

This conservative approach, which requires near or complete certainty that an individual is an American foreign fighter in order to be included in the dataset, serves to eliminate false positives (i.e., the inclusion in the dataset of individuals who are not American foreign fighters), thus providing a reliable, low-end figure. A limitation of this approach is that it likely excludes individuals who may very well be American foreign fighters, meaning that the conclusions drawn from the dataset and applied to American foreign fighters as a whole is contingent on the included subjects being representative of those who have been omitted.

Anonymity

Unlike the vast majority of open-source work, which emphasizes methodological transparency and replicability, 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. This report will nonetheless attempt to strike a balance between protecting the subjects’ identities and providing enough

⁶ The sole exception is that the identity of the first American foreign fighter discovered by the author was revealed using a paid subscription tool. Nonetheless, the individual’s information is freely and publicly available and could have been found using conventional, free, open-source methods.

⁷ The word “intending” is used deliberately so as to include new arrivals and others who have yet to see combat.

⁸ The following factors, when combined, strongly suggest that an individual is abroad fighting IS: the creation of an online *nom de guerre*; social media inactivity beginning during a timeframe consistent with the individual being abroad; prior military experience; new social media friendships with individuals known to be foreign fighters, American or otherwise; comments of concern and care from friends and family (e.g., “be safe,” “we miss you,” “keep your head down over there,” “we’re praying for you”); comments suggesting an individual is abroad fighting IS (e.g., “go kill ISIS for me”); and belonging to online groups associated with foreign fighters.

⁹ This condition excludes Americans who have traveled to Iraq and Syria for solely humanitarian purposes.

information to yield insights into their backgrounds and motivations. American foreign fighters who have given numerous interviews to the media using their actual names will not be anonymized.¹⁰

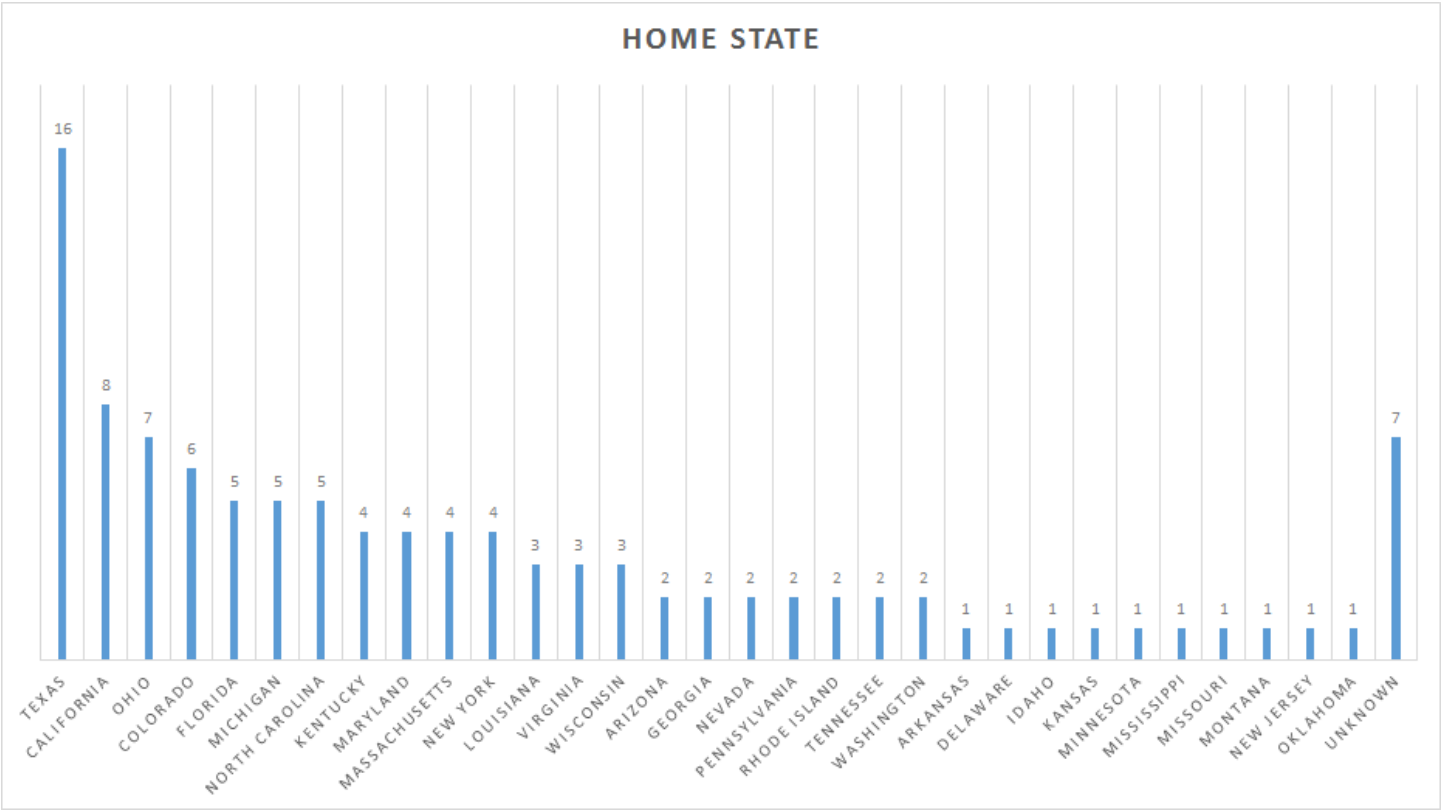
Data

This report is based on research conducted over the course of four weeks in July and August 2015. The two principal sources of data analyzed in this report were derived from social media and news reports. Facebook supplied the vast majority of American foreign fighter identities, accounting for 88 (81%) of the individuals in the dataset. News reports by outlets ranging from local newspapers to well-known national publications supplied 16 (15%) of the subjects, while YouTube, LinkedIn, and Twitter each revealed the identities of a single American foreign fighter. As mentioned above, the first American foreign fighter identified was discovered using a paid subscription tool. All told, at least 108 private American citizens have volunteered to fight IS in Syria and Iraq, a figure that increases weekly. Again, this is a low-end figure reflective of the conservative criteria described above requiring near or complete certainty that an individual is or has been abroad fighting IS. The remainder of this section delves into the data gathered about the Americans, providing insight into who goes and which groups they join.

Who Goes

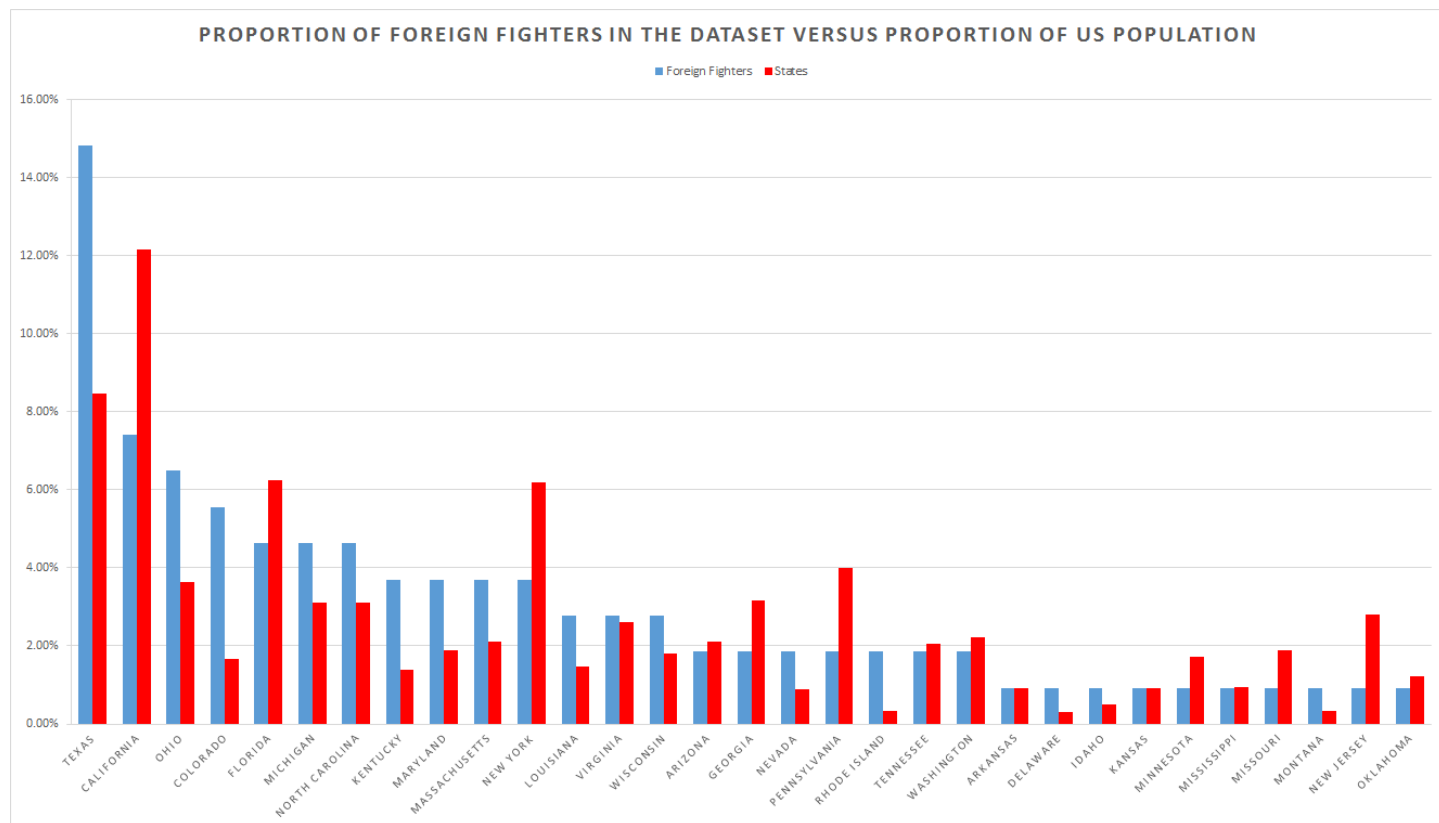
Home States

The American foreign fighters hail from 31 states across the US. At 16 (15%), Texas is overwhelmingly represented with double the amount of foreign fighters of the next state, California. The home states of seven (6%) of the Americans could not be identified and were included in the charts below as “unknown.”



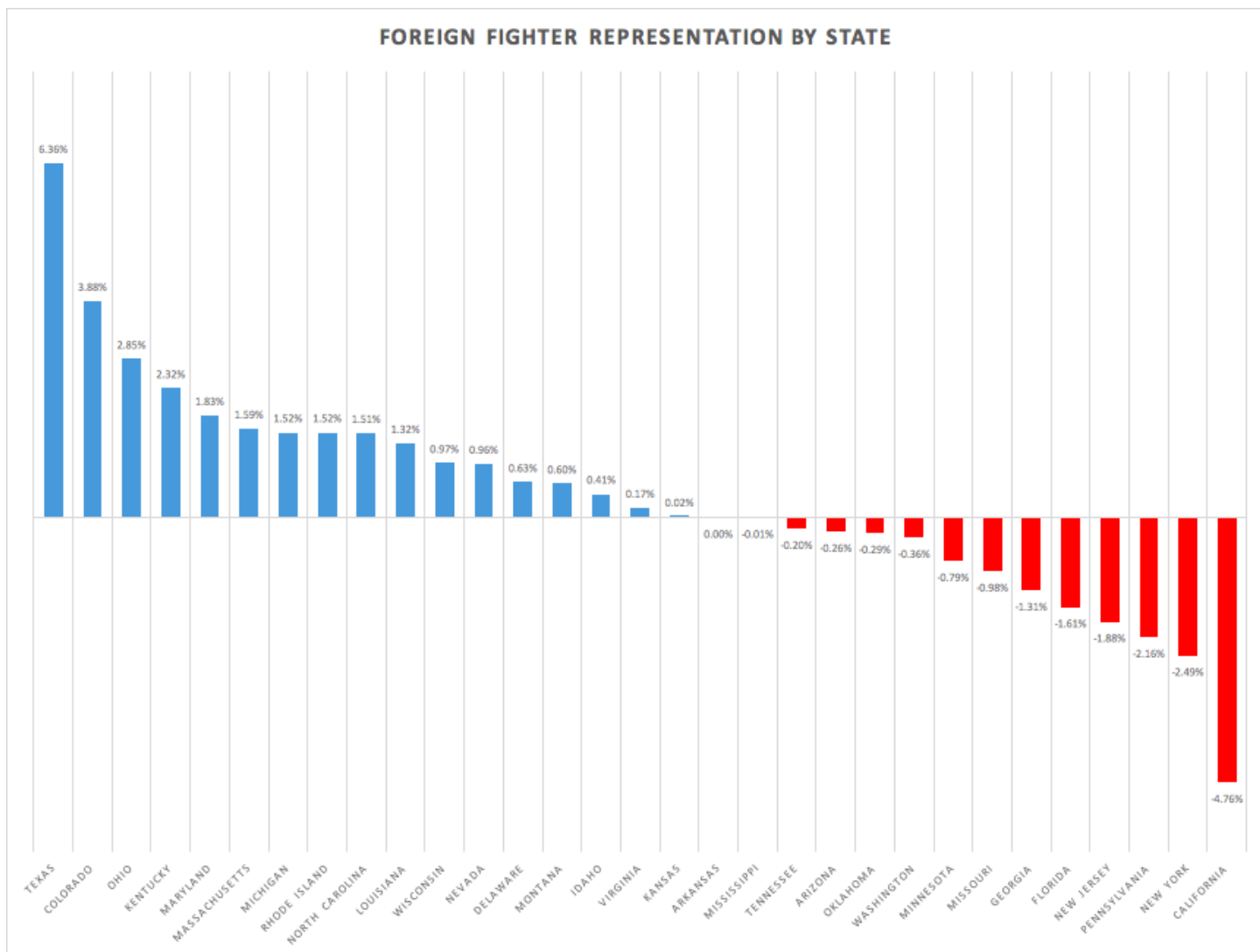
¹⁰ Note, pseudonyms given to the Americans in this report are not based on their actual names.

All else being equal, one might expect that the states with the largest populations would, on average, also be the states with the largest numbers of foreign fighters. Keeping in mind the 6% of the subjects whose home states are unknown, the following chart shows that this is the exception rather than the rule. Using US Census Bureau data from 2014, the chart compares the share of foreign fighters per state with each state's population (as a proportion of the US population).¹¹



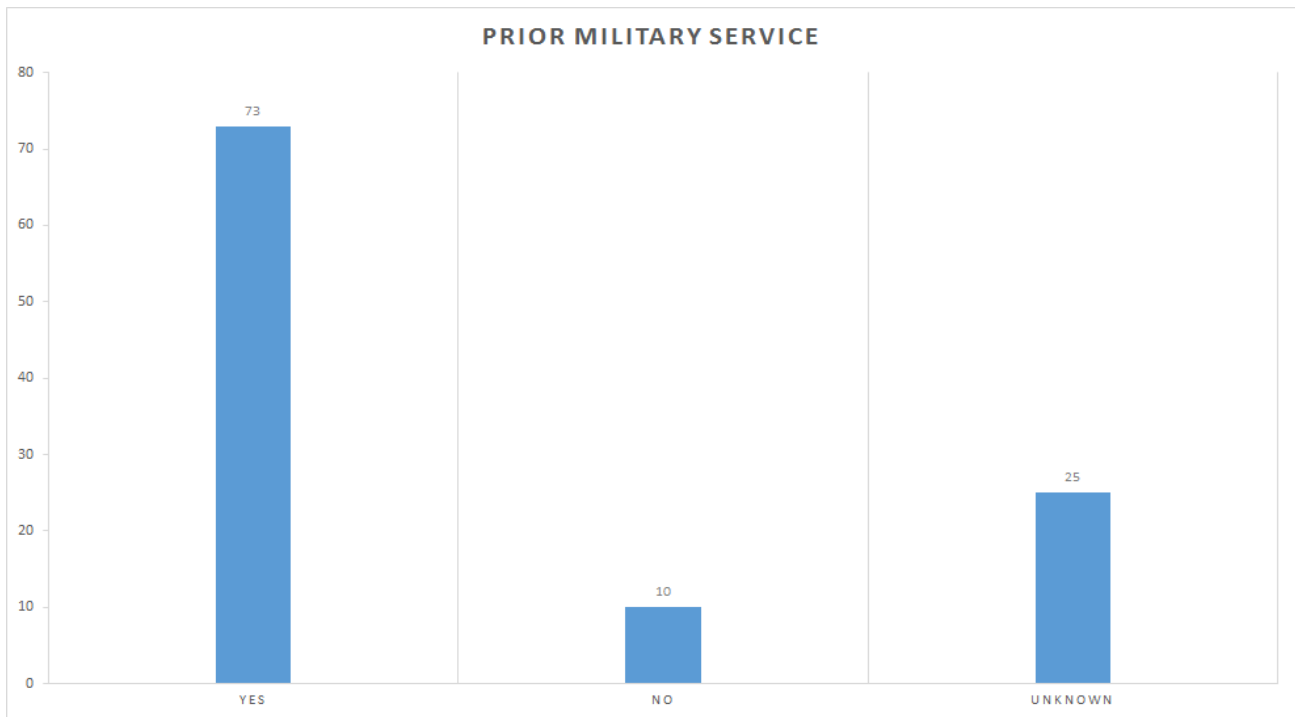
As can be seen, Texas, Ohio, and Colorado are the three most over-represented home states among the foreign fighters. On the opposite side of the spectrum, fewer foreign fighters than would be expected (based on population alone) hail from California, New York, and Pennsylvania. The chart on the following page better illustrates these differences, showing the states with more (blue columns) and fewer (red columns) foreign fighters when controlling for population.

¹¹ It should be noted that only tentative conclusions should be drawn from this data given that the foreign fighter sample size for some states is so small, and the addition of a single foreign fighter could considerably alter the results.



Prior Military Service

Of the 108 American foreign fighters in the dataset, 73 (68%) have served in the armed forces of the United States or, in the case of two Americans, the French Foreign Legion. Ten (9%) of the Americans in the dataset have stated explicitly, whether in media interviews or elsewhere, that they have no prior military experience. The military background of 25 (23%) of the Americans is unknown. Anecdotally, it seems that a sizable portion of the individuals in the “unknown” category likely do not have prior military experience, judging from their online footprint.



Given the preponderance of military experience, this would seem to explain the differences in the preceding section between how many Americans come from which states. The data, however, is somewhat ambiguous. The table below arranges American foreign fighters' home states from greatest to least according to the number of veterans living in each state as a share of the state's total population.^{12, 13} While it is true that the top three states and bottom three states have the highest and lowest proportion of veterans, respectively, Texas, which has the highest representation of foreign fighters, has among the lowest proportion of veterans among the states analyzed. Oklahoma and Washington, which are in a three-way tie with Delaware for having the highest proportion of veterans, are both underrepresented in the cohort of foreign fighters. Notably, Alaska and Maine, whose veteran population is roughly 10% along with Montana and Virginia, are not represented at all in the foreign fighter data.

State	Foreign Fighter Representation	Veteran Population
Montana	0.60%	10%
Virginia	0.17%	10%
Delaware	0.63%	9%
Oklahoma	-0.29%	9%

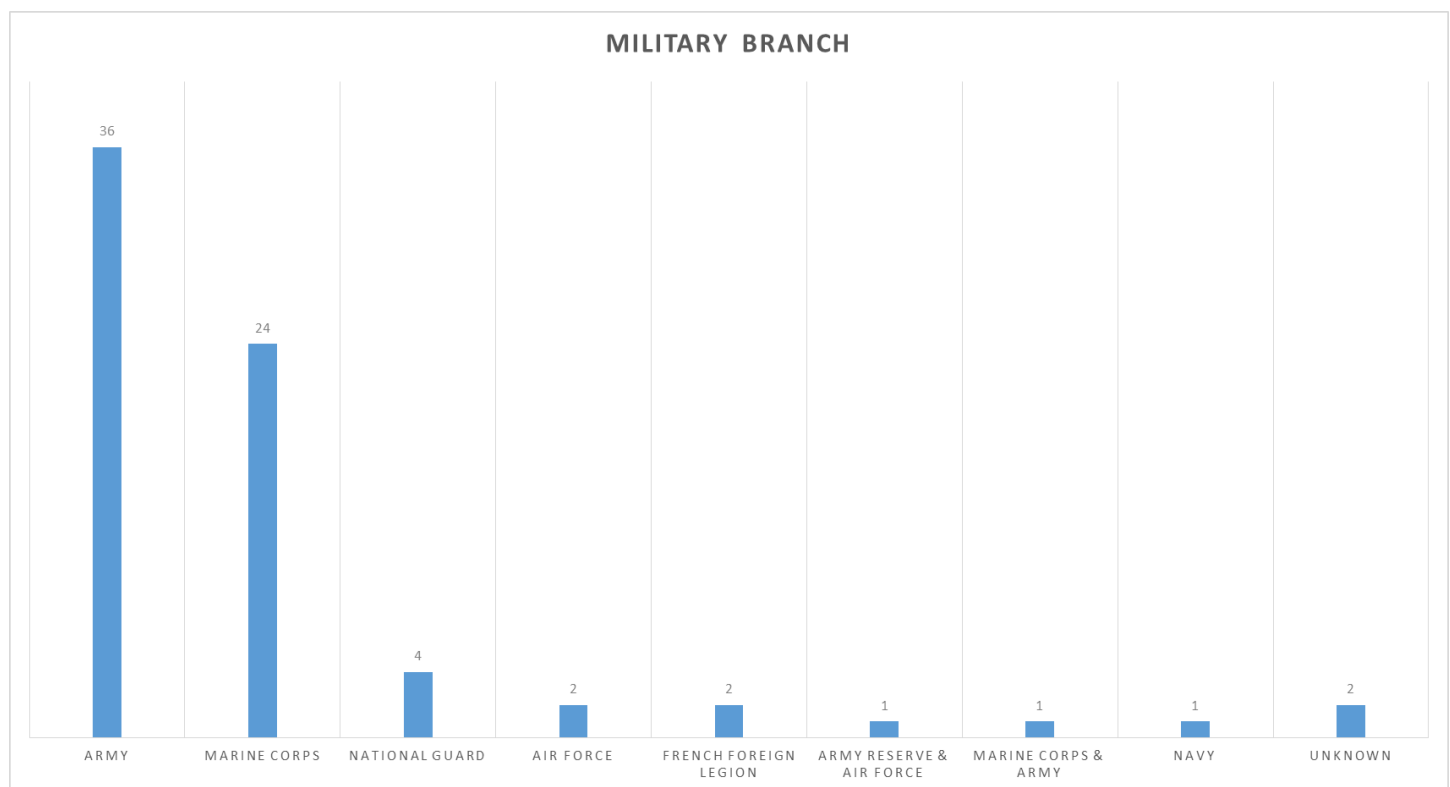
¹² Chokshi, Niraj. "What Each State's Veteran Population Looks Like, in 10 Maps." November 11, 2014. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/govbeat/wp/2014/11/11/what-each-states-veteran-population-looks-like-in-10-maps/>.

¹³ Stated another way, the "foreign fighter representation" column presents the difference between the share of each state's foreign fighters and each state's population as a share of the total US population. For example, 2.78% of the foreign fighters are from Virginia, while the Commonwealth represents 2.61% of the US population, meaning Virginian foreign fighters are slightly over-represented by 0.17%. This figure for each state is then compared with each state's veteran population as a proportion of each state's total population to test the hypothesis that a state's veteran population could explain why some states are home to greater or fewer numbers of foreign fighters than would be expected taking in to account population alone.

State	Foreign Fighter Representation	Veteran Population
Washington	-0.36%	9%
Colorado	3.88%	8%
Kentucky	2.32%	8%
North Carolina	1.51%	8%
Nevada	0.96%	8%
Idaho	0.41%	8%
Kansas	0.02%	8%
Arkansas	0.00%	8%
Tennessee	-0.20%	8%
Arizona	-0.26%	8%
Missouri	-0.98%	8%
Georgia	-1.31%	8%
Florida	-1.61%	8%
Ohio	2.85%	7%
Maryland	1.83%	7%
Michigan	1.52%	7%
Rhode Island	1.52%	7%
Louisiana	1.32%	7%
Wisconsin	0.97%	7%
Mississippi	-0.01%	7%
Minnesota	-0.79%	7%
Pennsylvania	-2.16%	7%
Texas	6.36%	6%
Massachusetts	1.59%	6%
New Jersey	-1.88%	5%

State	Foreign Fighter Representation	Veteran Population
New York	-2.49%	5%
California	-4.76%	5%

With the exception of the Coast Guard, every branch of the US armed forces is represented among the American foreign fighters, though the Marine Corps and Army predominate. Of the 73 veterans, roughly half served in the Army, and approximately one third served in the Marines. Two Americans served in multiple branches. While three of the four Americans who served in the National Guard served in the Army National Guard (ARNG), it is unclear whether the fourth American also served in the ARNG or rather the Air National Guard. Two Americans served in the Air Force, one in the Navy, and two served in the French Foreign Legion, as noted above. Finally, two individuals undoubtedly served in the military, though which branch is unknown.

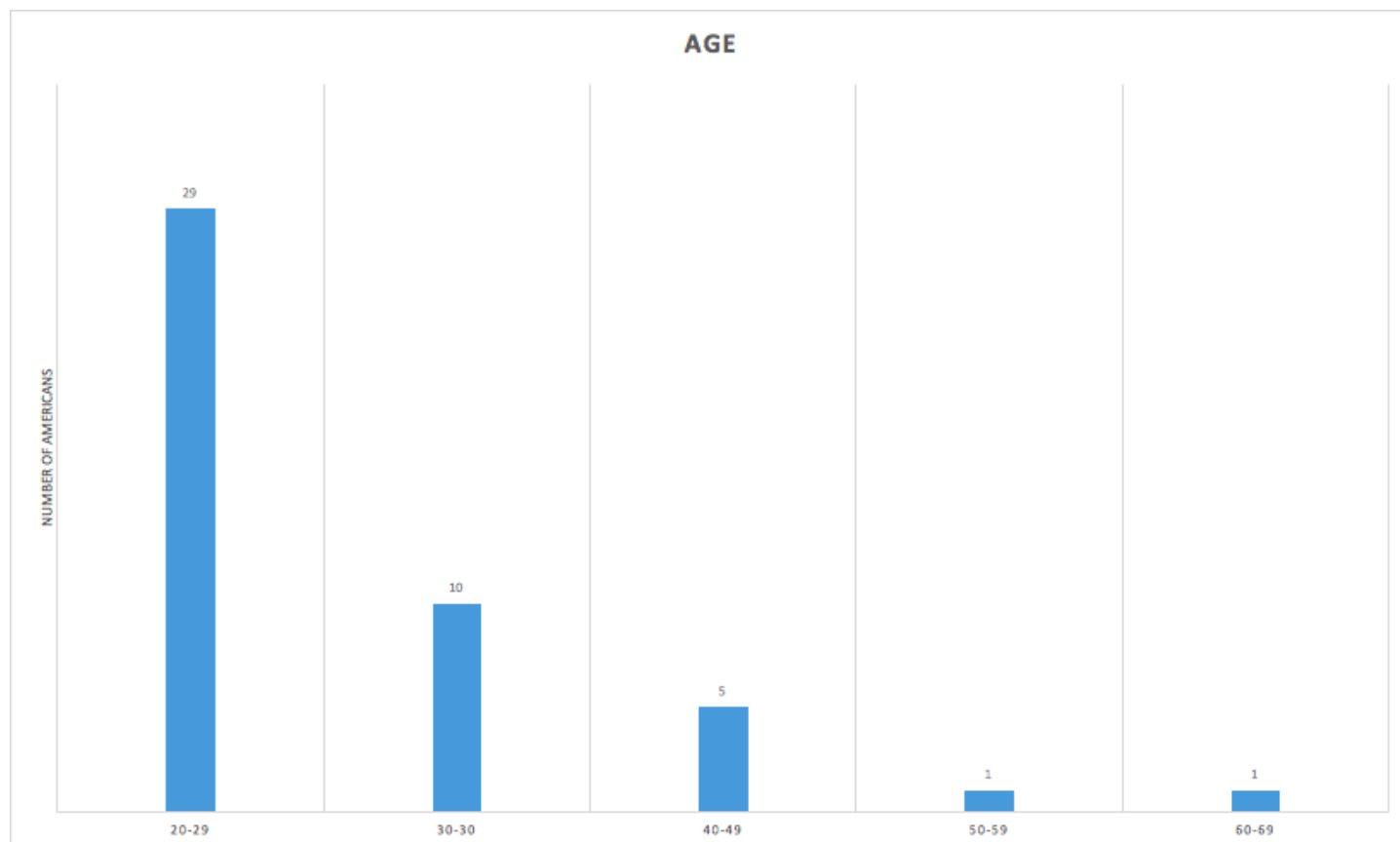


Gender and Age

The cohort of American foreign fighters in this study is overwhelmingly male. Indeed, there is only one female – Samantha Johnston – in the 108-person dataset.¹⁴ The ages of the Americans are less homogenous, ranging from 23 to 61. Unfortunately, the ages of only 38 of the Americans were publicly available. Taking into account another eight Americans' high school graduation years – assuming they graduated at age 18 – the average age of this subset of American foreign fighters is 31, and the median

¹⁴ Johnston has granted numerous interviews. See, e.g., Melugin, Bill. "North Carolina Mom Travels to Iraq to Join Kurds in ISIS Fight." June 16, 2015. <http://www.fox46charlotte.com/story/29337231/exclusive-north-carolina-mom-travels-to-iraq-to-join-kurds-in-isis-fight>.

age is 29. Anecdotally, this figure seems to be representative of the American foreign fighters as whole, who seem to predominantly be in their 20s and 30s.



Education

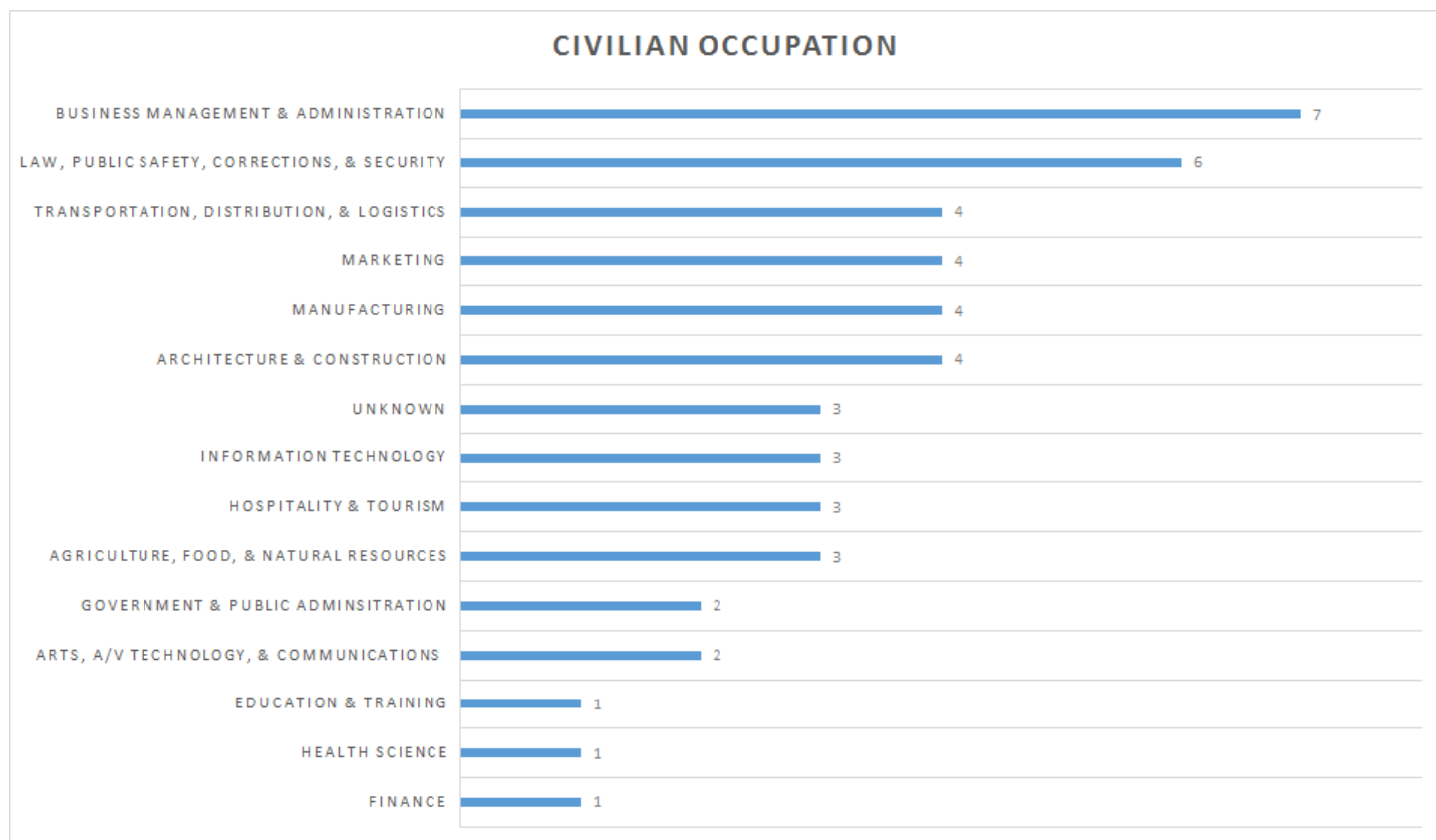
As with the data on the Americans' ages, information regarding their completed education is similarly sparse; the education levels of only 48 (44%) of the individuals in the dataset could be established. Unlike age, however, education cannot be readily surmised through photographs, so it is difficult to determine whether the available data – which in and of itself is likely incomplete – is representative of the American foreign fighters as a whole. With these caveats in mind, 30 of the 48 Americans for which education data is available have at least some college education. This includes those who dropped out of college as well as those with associate's, bachelor's, or, in two instances, master's degrees. The remaining 18 Americans have high school educations. Note, this data does not take into account professional certifications or education gained through the military.

Civilian Occupation

As mentioned above, nearly three quarters of the individuals in the dataset have some form of military experience. Before factoring in military service, the civilian occupations of 48 (44%) of the individuals in the dataset could be discerned; including military service increases that figure to 94 (87%). This subsection focuses on the Americans' civilian backgrounds. Coding the civilian occupations in accordance with the US Department of Education's 16 "career clusters," it is evident that there is no overriding, common background among the American foreign fighters when military service is excluded.¹⁵ That said, the "law,

¹⁵ "Career Clusters and Programs of Study." <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/cte/factsh/career-clstrs-prgrms-study-fs080528qa-kc.pdf>.

public safety, corrections, and security” and “business management and administration” career clusters characterize more than a quarter of the identified civilian occupations in the dataset.



The following truncated list of occupations serves to illustrate the myriad non-military backgrounds of the American foreign fighters:

- Animal handler
- CEO, private equity fund
- Commercial diving supervisor
- Commercial painter
- Computer numeric controlled (CNC) machinist
- Emergency medical technician (EMT)
- Grocery store manager
- Gunsmith
- Oil rig laborer
- Police officer
- Security guard
- Sex club owner
- Software engineer
- Truck driver

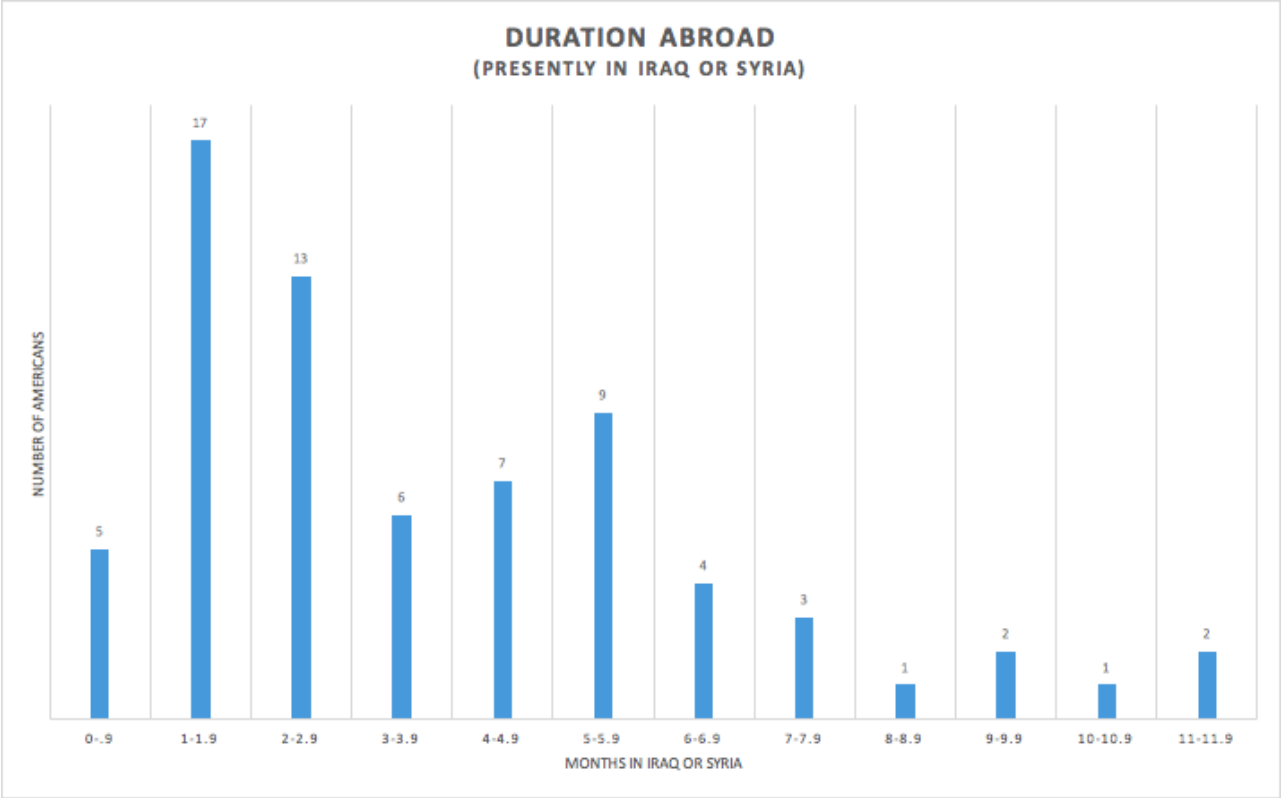
Duration Abroad

Because of the conservative methodology used, in which the subjects in the dataset are known to be American foreign fighters with absolute certainty or a very high probability, data was collected on all 108 Americans pertaining to the timeframe they traveled abroad, making it among the most complete categories in the dataset. Even so, a degree of subjectivity was required in analyzing the Americans’ time

abroad in the face of incomplete information, and the figures and analysis in this section should therefore be regarded as somewhat rough approximations.

In a majority of cases, for instance, the exact arrival and departure dates are not known, but the months that the individuals arrived or left are. These cases were coded as if they had arrived and left on the same day both months to avoid over-estimating their time abroad.¹⁶ Another, perhaps more important, factor affecting the data in this section is the imprecise means by which duration is coded when an individual's social media posts are inaccessible over a period of time, whether because of inactivity or privacy settings. The necessarily subjective approach used in these cases is that the first indication of their departure or arrival (as the case may be) is recorded in the dataset as the month they left for Iraq or Syria or returned to the US.¹⁷ This method cuts both ways, tending to either under- or over-estimate time spent abroad. While not ideal, this approach provides a reasonable estimate of a subject's time abroad given the open-source information available. In addition, there are several cases in which the subjects' arrival date or departure date could not be estimated with any degree of certainty. In these instances – accounting for 7% and 6% of the dataset, respectively – the duration of their time abroad could not be determined and is thus not included in the analysis below.

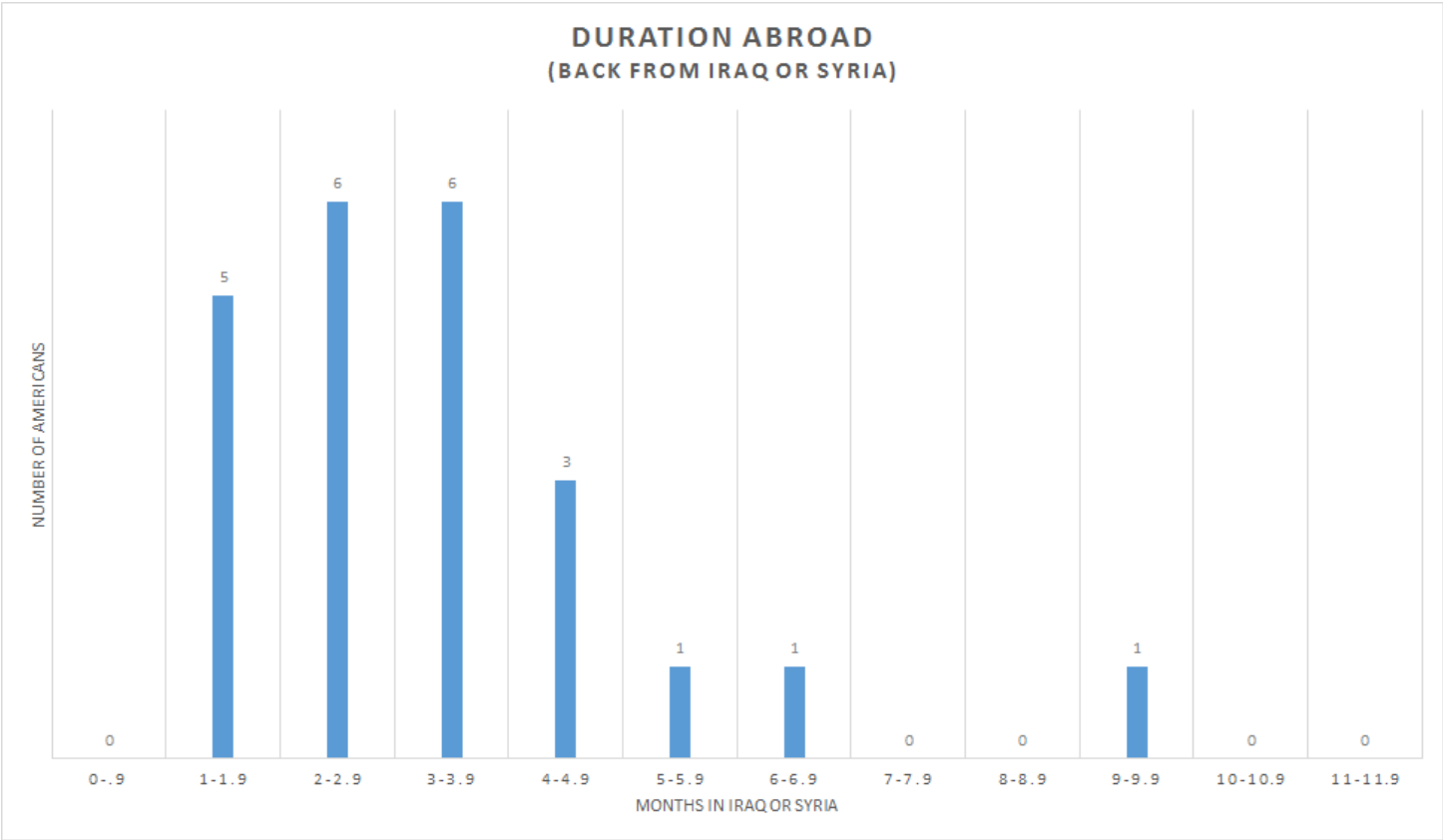
The following graph is a static measurement as of 13 August 2015 depicting the time spent abroad by 70 American foreign fighters judged to be presently in Syria and Iraq. Of these individuals, 49% have likely arrived within the last three months. Five American foreign fighters have arrived in the first half of August alone. The data also shows that 19% of the Americans currently abroad have spent between 6 and 12 months in Iraq or Syria.



¹⁶ For example, if an individual is known to have departed for Iraq and Syria in March and arrived back in the US in July, that would be coded as, say, March 1 to July 1, or four months. An approach that would lend itself to over-estimating the time abroad would be to code such a case as March 1 to July 31, or five months.

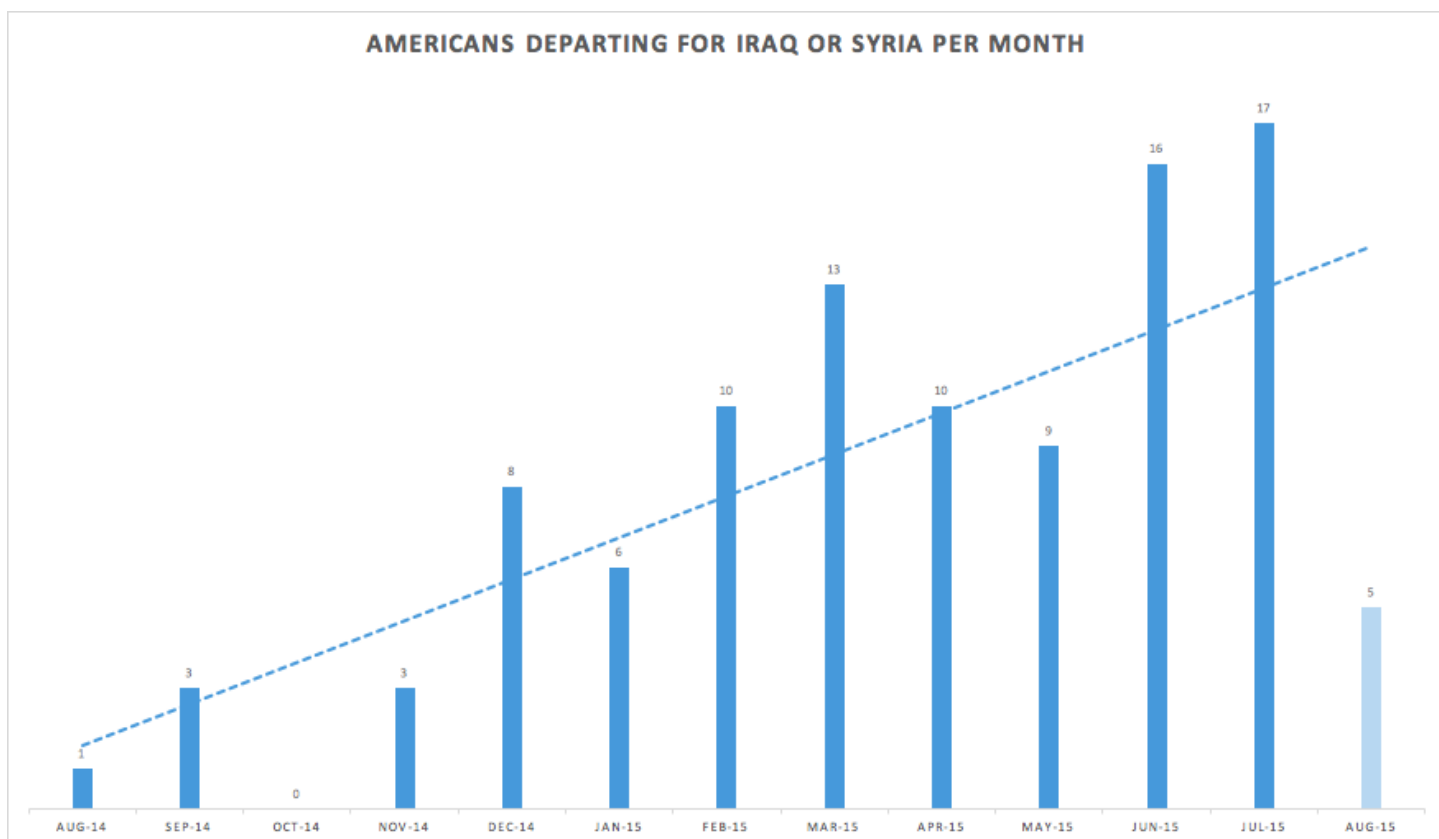
¹⁷ It should be underscored that what is being described here is not the approach used for *identifying* American foreign fighters, but determining their dates of departure and return.

Of the 24 Americans in the dataset whose departure and return dates are known, none were abroad for less than a month. The vast majority (71%) stayed between one and four months, with one outlier staying more than nine months.



Plotting the number of American foreign fighters arriving in Iraq and Syria each month since last September shows that, if anything, the phenomenon is on the rise.¹⁸ Given that IS’s barbarity has remained constant since the first American foreign fighters began taking up arms against the group late last year, it seems likely that the main factor behind this upward trend is increased awareness. Whether through the multitudinous interviews with American foreign fighters in traditional media or continual, active recruitment through social media, the fact that Americans are fighting IS overseas has become relatively well known, even if the scale of the phenomenon has not.

¹⁸ Because the research for this project concluded on 13 August 2015, the data for that month is incomplete and, therefore, depicted in a lighter shade of blue. A simple projection of the data available for August implies that an additional seven foreign fighters can be expected to leave for Syria or Iraq before the month’s end.



Another factor that no doubt has contributed to this trend is the growth and maturation of groups of Westerners in Iraq and Syria with the connections, funding, and know-how needed to bring aboard an increasing number of recruits.

Groups

This section discusses the three main groups that the American foreign fighters join in Syria and Iraq, namely, the YPG, the Peshmerga, and various Christian militias. It should be noted that, in at least half a dozen cases (very likely more), Americans have switched between groups. In all of the documented instances, the Americans started out with the YPG in Syria and then made their way to the Iraqi theater, whether to fight with the Peshmerga or Christian militias.

YPG

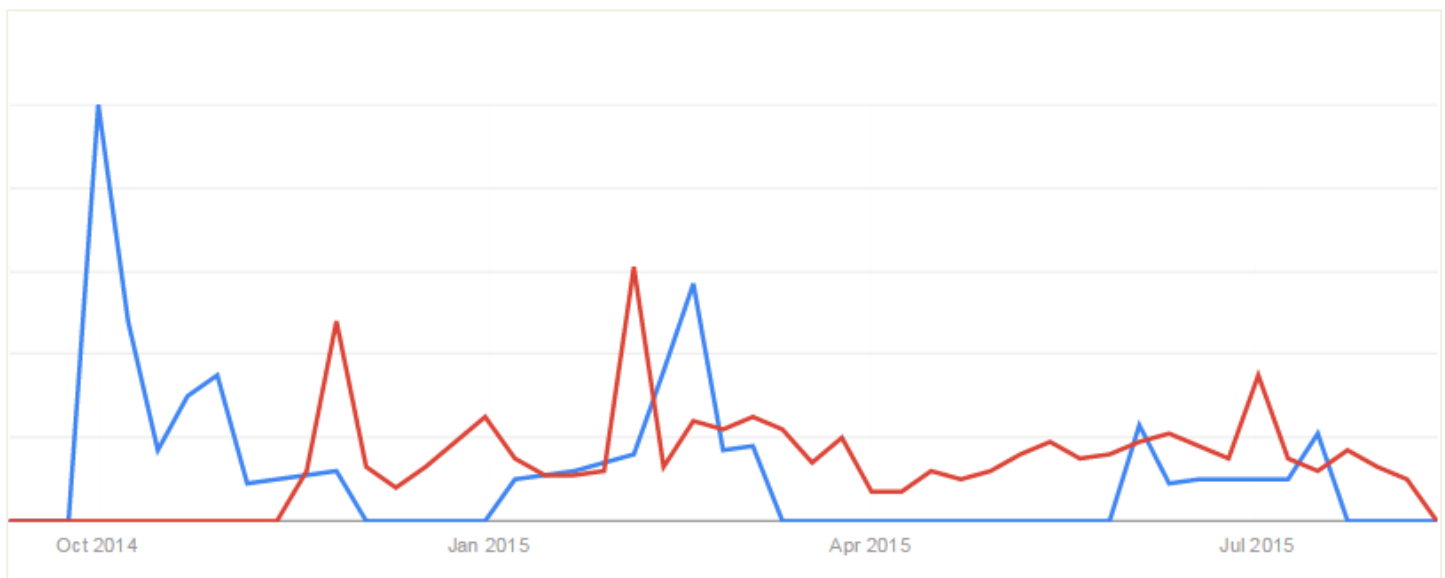
The People's Protection Units (YPG) are the main defense force of the Supreme Kurdish Council, which governs the *de facto* autonomous, non-contiguous areas of northern Syria referred to by Kurds as "Western Kurdistan" or "Rojava." The YPG, which espouses a secular-leftist ideology, was publicly established on 19 July 2012 in the midst of an uprising by Kurds against the Syrian government in Rojava. But, according to the group's official spokesman, Redur Khalil, the YPG had been organizing surreptitiously since its official founding year of 2011.¹⁹ Khalil stated in 2013 that the YPG has "more than 35,000 fighters of both sexes," a figure that he attributes to a general mobilization decreed by the YPG after attacks from several rebel groups, including Jabhat al-Nusra and IS.²⁰ Benefitting from US air support and other aid, which began in October 2014 as the YPG sought to defend and then retake Kobane,

¹⁹ Lund, Aron. "Syria's Kurdish Army: An Interview with Redur Khalil." December 25, 2013. <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=54016>.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

the group has produced a string of successes against IS in recent months. The Kurdish militia seized the strategic border town of Tel Abyad, a main choke point for IS's supply route from Turkey to IS-held territory, and captured the town of Ain Issa, just 30 miles from Raqqa City, the capital of IS's so-called caliphate.²¹

There are 56 (52%) American foreign fighters in the dataset that are known to have fought with the YPG²² This is the largest group in the dataset, which might be expected given that the YPG was, in many ways, at the forefront of the effort to actively recruit Westerners to join the fight against IS. Jordan Matson, a 29-year-old Army veteran from Wisconsin with no combat experience, was the first American to arrive in Rojava in September 2014 and has since served as the YPG's poster boy and main mouthpiece for Western foreign fighter recruitment, conducting numerous interviews in the Western press in which he was able to tout the YPG's cause.²³ The YPG also launched an official Facebook page in October 2014 called "The Lions of Rojava," which enjoins Westerners to "join [the YPG's] Lions of Rojava Unit and send ISIS terrorists to hell and save humanity." As Matson's celebrity grew, so did awareness of and interest in the Lions of Rojava, as can arguably be seen in the following Google Trends graph, which presents relative interest in "Jordan Matson" (blue) and "Lions of Rojava" (red) over time, as measured by Google searches:²⁴



Although, Matson's role was and still is critical to the YPG's recruitment of Westerners, some of the first Americans seem to have found the Lions of Rojava page independent of Matson, judging from interviews and other information.

Two other factors likely account for the comparatively large number of Americans joining the YPG, as opposed to groups in Iraq. First, even if these individuals were spurred to action by events in Iraq, such as

²¹ Callimachi, Rukmini. "Inside Syria: Kurds Roll Back ISIS, but Alliances Are Strained." August 10, 2015. <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/10/world/middleeast/syria-turkey-islamic-state-kurdish-militia-ypg.html>.

²² One American foreign fighter's affiliation is unknown.

²³ See, e.g., Watson, Ivan, Gul Tuysuz, and Dana Ford. "'At Peace' in War: A Former US Soldier Battles ISIS." October 27, 2014. http://www.cnn.com/2014/10/27/world/meast/syria-former-us-soldier/index.html?hpt=hp_t2. As of this writing, Matson is back in the US lobbying Congress for recognition of Rojava's independence: Matson, Jordan. "Lobbying for Rojava/CombatLifeSaver." July 22, 2015. <http://linkis.com/X9vYQ>.

²⁴ Google Trends. https://www.google.com/trends/explore#q=%22jordan%20matson%22%2C%20%22lions%20of%20rojava%22&date=9%2F2014%2012m&cmp_t=q&tz=Etc%2FGMT%2B4.

the Sinjar massacre, there was no network of Westerners in place with the Peshmerga in Iraq until roughly February 2015.²⁵ The YPG, then, was the only game in town early on for Americans wanting to join an established group of Westerners fighting alongside the Kurds against IS. Second, many of the groups that became well established in Iraq with the Peshmerga sought to recruit only those with previous military experience. The YPG, on the other hand, has always been willing to accept volunteers with no military background. This is reflected in the dataset: of the 56 Americans with the YPG, 59% are known to have had prior military experience, compared to 77% with the Peshmerga.

The only American volunteer known to have died fighting IS is Keith Broomfield, a Massachusetts native who joined the YPG in late February. He was killed after stepping on a land mine outside of Kobane on 3 June 2015 at the age of 36.²⁶



Broomfield's martyr photo, a tribute created by the YPG for those who die fighting on their behalf

Peshmerga

The Peshmerga (Kurdish for "those who face death") are the military forces of the autonomous Kurdish region of Iraq under the auspices of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). There is no unified command and control of the Peshmerga, which number anywhere between 80,000 and 240,000;²⁷ the force is split into two factions under Iraqi Kurdistan's two main political parties – the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK).

Like the YPG, the Peshmerga have been on the frontline in the battle against IS. Beginning in the summer of 2014, the jihadist militant group, after a series of victories in both Syria and Iraq, turned its sights on Iraqi Kurdistan, forcing the Peshmerga into a hurried retreat and reaching within 13 miles of the Kurdish

²⁵ While a group calling itself the 1st North American Expeditionary Force had been established in northern Iraq to aid the Peshmerga in December 2014, it was formed by and focused its recruiting efforts on veterans of the Canadian military rather than Westerners writ large. See, e.g., Paraszczuk, Joanna. "Canadian Who Joined Kurdish Militia To Fight IS Has Returned Home." January 28, 2015. <http://www.rferl.org/content/isis-canada-fighter-kurdish-iraq-syria-islamic-state/26817865.html>.

²⁶ Connor, Tracy, Abigail Williams, and Ammar Cheikh Omar. "American Keith Broomfield Killed Fighting Against ISIS in Syria." June 11, 2015. <http://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/american-keith-broomfield-killed-fighting-against-isis-syria-n373066>.

²⁷ Beaumont, Peter. "How Effective Is ISIS Compared with the Iraqi Army and Kurdish Peshmerga?" June 12, 2014. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/12/how-battle-ready-isis-iraqi-army-peshmerga>.

capital, Erbil.²⁸ This same offensive saw the systematic, genocidal persecution of the Yazidi population, most notably in Sinjar, which resulted in direct military and humanitarian intervention by the US.²⁹ IS has since been pushed back from Erbil, and the Peshmerga have retaken a number of towns and villages, resulting in a tenuous stalemate along multiple fronts across northern Iraq.³⁰

As early as February 2015, Ministry of Peshmerga officials expressed their displeasure with foreigners attempting to join their ranks, citing, among other things, the need for more weapons, not more men.³¹ While the KDP and its Peshmerga forces have fallen in line with the official KRG stance, the PUK has not and continues to allow groups of foreign fighters to operate with it, most notably a group called the "Brothers of Kurdistan," which, in recent weeks, has rebranded itself as "Peshmerga Legion." The group's website describes the outfit as an "irregular Peshmerga unit" of Western volunteers "who have taken a stance against the tyranny that is the Islamic State and the unthinkable acts of cruelty that has set upon the Kurdish people in Iraqi Kurdistan." It goes on to highlight the military background of Peshmerga Legion's members ("we possess a vast variety of military skill sets") and insists that those who join "WILL BE PLACED ON THE FRONT LINES AND SEE COMBAT" [emphasis in the original].

There are 43 (40%) American foreign fighters in the dataset that have fought with the Peshmerga. As noted above, 77% of these individuals have prior military experience, which, at least for Peshmerga Legion, is ostensibly required to join the group.³²



Other requirements, per their website, include:

A willingness and capability to be trained in a basic mix of coalition infantry tactics; a basic military fitness level, with no existing medical conditions requiring drug dependency; a clear understanding of the Peshmerga and their command structure; [and] an offer of commitment for at least 12 weeks (with a 4-week probationary period)

²⁸ Waziri, Hoshang, and Lydia Wilson. "Haunted By Their Past: Kurds and the Islamic State." *CTC Sentinel* 8, no. 6 (2015): 21-24. <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/haunted-by-their-past-kurds-and-the-islamic-state>.

²⁹ Chulov, Martin, Julian Borger, Richard Norton-Taylor, and Dan Roberts. "US Troops Land on Iraq's Mt Sinjar to Plan for Yazidi Evacuation." August 13, 2014. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/13/us-ground-troops-direct-role-evacuate-yazidis-iraq>.

³⁰ "All Quiet, for Now, as Peshmerga Hold the Line against ISIS." May 8, 2015. <http://rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/050820151>.

³¹ "Peshmerga Frown on Foreign Volunteers." February 16, 2015. <http://rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/16022015>. KRG officials have since reiterated this stance: Hawramy, Fazel, and Raya Jalabi. "US Civilians and Veterans Leave Home for Isis Fight with Help from Social Media." April 18, 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/18/us-volunteers-isis-fight-veterans-recruitment>.

³² Given that there are a number of individuals in the group lacking prior military experience, this seems to be a preference rather than a hard and fast requirement.

The group's full list of requirements for joining, along with its recommendations on what to bring to Iraq, can be found in Appendix A.

Christian Militias

Dwekh Nawsha and the Nineveh Plains Protection Units (NPU) are the two principal Assyrian Christian militias that the American foreign fighters join. Established by the Assyrian Patriotic Party and the Assyrian Democratic Movement, respectively, both militias were formed in response to IS's offensive in northern Iraq in June 2014, which forced more than 100,000 people to flee from their homes and villages, including some 30,000 Christians.^{33, 34}

Meaning "self-sacrificers" in Aramaic, the ancient language of Christ, Dwekh Nawsha aims to "show the world that Assyrian Christian people are not afraid of the fight for their rights and can defend their land if they have support," according to the Assyrian Patriotic Party's Secretary General, Emmanuel Khoshaba.³⁵ Dwekh Nawsha fights alongside the KDP Peshmerga and receives materiel and funding from the Kurds.³⁶ Consisting of roughly 250 men, Dwekh Nawsha has accepted a handful of Westerners into its ranks, among them 12 Americans, making up 11% of the dataset.³⁷ Khoshaba explained to Al-Monitor in July that "most of those foreign fighters have combat experience. They gave their training to the guys. They are very helpful."³⁸ Indeed, from what can be gathered from open-source information, all but one of the Americans with Dwekh Nawsha have prior military experience, and, of those, nearly all have served abroad. One of their number, Louis Park, a Marine Corps veteran and the second American to join the group, told Al-Monitor in July 2015 that "politics" prevented the Westerners with Dwekh Nawsha from joining the front lines in combat roles against IS until very recently, maintaining that the KRG was "worried about a Westerner getting hurt."³⁹ Shortly after the Al-Monitor piece was published, however, Park posted to his Instagram account that he was "hit with more political shit again, still doing good out here on the front, but we have to sort through bureaucracy, once again, in order to maintain that."⁴⁰ He went on to say,

Why would it be so hard to accept this well-trained and experienced individual, who is transparent in cause and motivation, dedicated enough to pay his way to help, better qualified in multiple ways [than] the average soldier here, more motivated, costs you nothing, raises [morale], brings support, and has already proven both his worth and trustworthiness on the battlefield? It's just a brief run around this time and hopefully won't take [too] long to sort out. It is distracting from the mission, however, when we could be focused on holding this line and gathering equipment, and preparing for what may come.⁴¹

³³ Cetti-Roberts, Matt. "Inside the Christian Militias Defending the Nineveh Planes." <https://medium.com/war-is-boring/inside-the-christian-militias-defending-the-nineveh-plains-fe4a10babeed>.

³⁴ Malas, Nour. "Iraq's Christians Take Up Arms to Fight Islamic State." February 3, 2015. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/iraqs-christians-take-up-arms-to-fight-islamic-state-1423017266>.

³⁵ Lucente, Adam. "Iraqi Christian Militia Draws Foreign Fighters." July 24, 2015. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/07/iraq-militia-christian-volunteers-ypg-assyrian.html>.

³⁶ Cetti-Roberts, Matt. "Inside the Christian Militias Defending the Nineveh Planes." <https://medium.com/war-is-boring/inside-the-christian-militias-defending-the-nineveh-plains-fe4a10babeed>.

³⁷ "Christians Reclaim Iraq Village from ISIS." November 13, 2014. <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/christian-iraq-village-kurdish-peshmerga-fighters-bakufa-isis/>.

³⁸ Lucente, Adam. "Iraqi Christian Militia Draws Foreign Fighters." July 24, 2015. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/07/iraq-militia-christian-volunteers-ypg-assyrian.html>.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Park, Louis. Instagram.

⁴¹ Lightly edited for clarity.

A week later, Park posted again, saying, "I'm getting tired of this. I've been putting my life on the line at the front and doing a lot for the Peshmerga for an extensive period of time. But here in [KDP], somebody still has to have a problem with that."⁴² Park left for the US later that week after meeting with the new group of volunteers slated to take his place on the front line.⁴³ "Dwekh was great, the Peshmerga were great, but the politics were shit. The new group of volunteers seem ready to fit the shoe, and there is every chance I will be coming back to them. Let's see how life goes."⁴⁴

Unlike Dwekh Nawsha, the NPU operates independent of the Peshmerga. Lacking aid from the Iraqi government in Baghdad and the KRG, the group relies on donations from Assyrian Christians living abroad to pay for their uniforms and weapons.⁴⁵ Roughly 330 of the NPU's 4,000-man force have been trained by Sons of Liberty International (SOLI), a company founded by Matthew VanDyke that bills itself as "the first security contracting firm run as a non-profit" whose goal is to provide "free security consulting and training services to vulnerable populations to enable them to defend themselves against terrorist and insurgent groups."⁴⁶

VanDyke cuts an interesting – if controversial – figure.⁴⁷ A 36-year-old filmmaker, former reporter, and self-described freedom fighter with a master's degree from Georgetown University's competitive security studies program, VanDyke traveled to Libya in March 2011 to fight alongside the revolutionaries there, only to be captured by pro-government forces and held as a prisoner of war in solitary confinement for 166 days.⁴⁸ He was able to escape as a result of a prison uprising and subsequently returned to combat until November of that year, when Muammar Gaddafi was killed.⁴⁹ Now, as the CEO of SOLI, VanDyke is in Iraq with veterans of the US military "helping to raise and train a Christian army to fight ISIS."⁵⁰ VanDyke and one of his current volunteer trainers, an ex-paratrooper with the US Army, are the only two individuals in the dataset coded as being affiliated with the NPU.⁵¹

⁴² Park, Louis. Instagram.

⁴³ The name of the group to which these individuals belong has been intentionally omitted for reasons of security given the extremely poor operational security exhibited by the group's leadership.

⁴⁴ Park, Louis. Instagram.

⁴⁵ Cetti-Roberts, Matt. "Inside the Christian Militias Defending the Nineveh Plains." <https://medium.com/war-is-boring/inside-the-christian-militias-defending-the-nineveh-plains-fe4a10babeed>.

⁴⁶ For the 4,000 figure, see: Moore, Jack. "'4,000-Strong' Christian Militia Formed to Fight ISIS in Northern Iraq." February 4, 2015. <http://europe.newsweek.com/4000-strong-christian-militia-formed-fight-isis-northern-iraq-304371>. For the SOLI quotes, see: Sons of Liberty International. 2015. <http://www.sonsoflibertyinternational.com/>.

⁴⁷ Although SOLI describes itself as operating on a "non-profit business model," SOLI is not a registered 501c3 non-profit organization. As the CEO of the firm, VanDyke's inclusion into the dataset is the sole ambiguous instance in which an included individual may not meet the criterion of volunteerism. Nonetheless, the rationale for his inclusion is his claim to have spent \$12,000 of his own money to support SOLI (which, because of the free services it provides, relies solely on donations), SOLI's (unofficial) public stance as a non-profit, and his assertion that "the entire point of SOLI was to be all-volunteer." See, McLaughlin, Jenna. "This Guy from Baltimore Is Raising a Christian Army to Fight ISIS...What Could Go Wrong?" May 28, 2015. <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2015/04/matthew-vandyke-isis-assyrian-army>.

⁴⁸ VanDyke, Matthew. LinkedIn. (VanDyke's LinkedIn information is consistent with news reports about him elsewhere.)

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ VanDyke, Matthew. Facebook.

⁵¹ Linehan, Adam. "Meet the American Taking the Fight to ISIS." June 11, 2015. <http://www.maxim.com/maxim-man/strategy/article/exclusive-report-meet-american-taking-fight-isis>.

Motivations

The American foreign fighters have expressed a wide range of reasons for traveling abroad to fight IS. For the purposes of this section, the Americans' motivations are broken out into discrete, ideal types and illustrated through profiles and quotations of specific individuals whose identities are anonymized.⁵² It should be noted, however, that none of the following motivations are mutually exclusive, and each American likely has a combination of motivations for fighting IS that do not perfectly fit into a single category. Perhaps the best embodiment of this is a 29-year-old American foreign fighter from Meridian, Mississippi named Jeremy Woodard. Jeremy's professed and purported reasons for fighting IS span the range of motivations discussed in this section, namely:

- Moral outrage or dismay
- Christianity
- Adventure or boredom
- Missing military camaraderie, missing combat, or trouble adapting after service
- Displeasure with US policy

Woodard, who was among the first Americans to arrive in Syria in the fall of 2014, is an Army veteran, having served a total of eight years, including 18 months in Iraq in 2006 and 2007 and a year in Afghanistan as a specialist in an infantry battalion.⁵³



Woodard (far right) in Iraq in 2006

⁵² As mentioned in the subsection on anonymity at the beginning of this report, individuals who have granted numerous media interviews that do not use *noms de guerre* will not be anonymized.

⁵³ Muir, Jim. "Islamic State: The US Volunteers Who Fight with Syria's Kurds." October 21, 2014. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29705167>.

After paying his way to Turkey and smuggling across the border, he joined the YPG in Syria.⁵⁴ Speaking with the BBC, Woodard indicated that he found in Rojava a comradeship lacking in the US after leaving the military: "I'm living the kind of life I really want. It's not much, but I feel like I'm the richest person in the world right now, with what I have – friends that you can actually count on."⁵⁵ Later, after leaving Syria to join the Peshmerga in Iraq, Woodard spoke to PBS about the difficulties he encountered with civilian life in the US after serving his country: "It was hard to get a job. You barely can get a job at McDonald's flipping a burger. They look at you, they see your resume for serving in the US Army honorably, but they look at you like you're a hazard, you know, you're going to hurt somebody."⁵⁶ He went on to say, "It's an escape, yes. It's like a vacation here. It's kind of sick to say. After I graduated, I went straight to the Army. I was 17 when I went in. And I just know war. That's it. I'm still searching. Searching for what, I don't know, searching for a part of myself, where I belong. I belong in a place like this."⁵⁷ Even after fighting IS abroad, during which time Woodard fully acknowledges and understands that he might be killed, he does not intend to return to his home state, telling one of his friends in May that he is "Not going back to [Mississippi] man. Sorry to say I have to go to a different state to start over. That's the only way. You know how it is there man. Anyways, I gave all my shit away before I left."⁵⁸



⁵⁴ "US Veteran Joins Ground War against ISIS." October 20, 2014. <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/us-security-guard-jeremy-woodard-fights-isis-in-syria-with-kurds/>. Anecdotaly, it seems that the vast majority of American foreign fighters first arrive in either Sulaymaniyah or Erbil in northern Iraq, regardless of whether they intend to join the YPG or Iraqi groups.

⁵⁵ Muir, Jim. "Islamic State: The US Volunteers Who Fight with Syria's Kurds." October 21, 2014. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29705167>.

⁵⁶ "Why Some Americans Are Volunteering to Fight the Islamic State." July 21, 2015. <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/americans-volunteering-fight-islamic-state/>.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Reference withheld.

In multiple interviews, Woodard also expressed his dismay at the atrocities being committed by IS and the seeming lack of action on the part of the US and the international community. In an interview with Voice of America (VOA) in October, Woodard explained that “Just seeing what ISIS was actually doing to the people here – it got me really mad, and it felt like I should have to do something. I’ve got military



experience, and I figured that coming over here I can actually help out more than sitting at home, reading Facebook, watching the news, just getting even madder. So coming here pretty much gave a lot of people hope that other people from America, UK, and around the world is [sic] actually wanting to do something to help out instead of just sitting back and watching.”⁵⁹ He reiterated this point in the same interview, saying, “I came here because I was sitting at home, watching the news, reading Facebook about what Daesh was doing – ISIS – killing innocent people, raping women and children, selling them into slavery, running everybody from their homes, trying to just take over. Killing innocent people that couldn’t even defend themselves. So, I took the initiative, saved up my money, got on a plane, came here to join YPG to help fight.” He echoed these sentiments speaking with the BBC, saying, “ISIS has been killing innocent people; raping women, children; selling children into slavery;

running everybody from their homes. I can’t put my daughter in that situation and my own family – what if they were over here and that was happening to them? Someone needed to come over here, show a little bit of hope to the people that other people and countries do care and want to get involved to fight against these people.”⁶⁰ The VOA interview ends with Woodard enjoining the US government to “please put troops on the ground.”⁶¹

Woodard claims to have killed two IS fighters in his first firefight in Syria, which he says lasted 24 hours. “I’ve killed two. In my first battle....Hopefully my numbers will go up. Never thought I’d be over in Syria killing people, but they’ve killed innocent people.”⁶² Naturally, Woodard has no reservations about killing IS fighters, telling the BBC that doing so is “doing a good deed to the world. I mean, all of them need to get wiped out ... there is a war, and we have to eliminate them.”⁶³ Woodard also referenced the sacrifices made by the service members who fought in Iraq, telling PBS, “All those people who got killed over here for fighting for a cause, I didn’t want them to die in vain.”⁶⁴

⁵⁹ “Hevpeyvîna Dengê Amerîka Ligel Şervanê YPG Yê Amerîkî Jeremy Woodard.” October 26, 2014. <http://www.dengeamerika.com/media/video/2496770.html#>.

⁶⁰ Muir, Jim. “Islamic State: The US Volunteers Who Fight with Syria’s Kurds.” October 21, 2014. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29705167>.

⁶¹ “Hevpeyvîna Dengê Amerîka Ligel Şervanê YPG Yê Amerîkî Jeremy Woodard.” October 26, 2014. <http://www.dengeamerika.com/media/video/2496770.html#>.

⁶² “US Veteran Joins Ground War against ISIS.” October 20, 2014. <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/us-security-guard-jeremy-woodard-fights-isis-in-syria-with-kurds/>

⁶³ Muir, Jim. “Islamic State: The US Volunteers Who Fight with Syria’s Kurds.” October 21, 2014. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29705167>.

⁶⁴ “Why Some Americans Are Volunteering to Fight the Islamic State.” July 21, 2015. <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/americans-volunteering-fight-islamic-state/>.

Finally, although he does not wear his faith on his sleeve like some of the other American foreign fighters, Woodard's uncle described him as being a Christian whose religious beliefs also played a role in his decision to fight IS. Speaking with Mississippi's *Clarion Ledger* newspaper, Stephen Woodard said, "Our family, we're all believers in the Christian faith.... There are Christians being persecuted by ISIS. They are just a target is what they are, along with everyone else who doesn't believe in their beliefs."⁶⁵

Moral Outrage or Dismay – Wanting to Do Something

Moral outrage and dismay at IS atrocities and the resulting urge to do *something* is ostensibly the main motivation of the majority of American foreign fighters. The plight of the Yazidis, in particular, struck a chord with many of the Americans; as of this writing there are still Americans arriving in Iraq and Syria who cite the August 2014 Sinjar massacre as one of the main reasons they decided to join the fight. For instance, shortly after arriving in Iraq in July, William A., who has no prior military experience, told a Swedish television station that he "saw a video of a young boy – when they ran the Yazidis up into the mountains – getting on a helicopter, and he was so afraid. And I just thought to myself if I was him how afraid I would be, and I would hope that someone would come and help me."⁶⁶ Dean Parker, another American foreign fighter with no military background, said in an interview with VOA that he had known about the Syrian civil war but had not been paying close attention to it until IS's offensive against the Yazidis in Sinjar. He described watching a video shot by the BBC of an Iraqi humanitarian mission to Mount Sinjar:

*As they were taking off, there was this one mother holding her son about 10 or 11 years old, and he was dressed like he was getting ready for school that morning. They didn't know Daesh was coming, and instead of going to school, they were literally running for their lives. And she was holding him, and he was looking right in the camera, and just the fear, the sheer terror in this young child's eyes – it was like he was looking through the camera, looking right at me, and, I mean, I became almost – I became physically ill. I started crying and stuff, I mean I've never been moved by anything like that in my life. Just the fear on that child's face was just overwhelming. So right then and there I decided I was going to come. I had like a knee-jerk reaction, and I went and I bought a plane ticket right then.*⁶⁷

Parker ended up pushing his departure date back 30 days to avoid making a rash decision, but during that time he said he "had no second thoughts."

Nicholas B., who served in the US Army and was also described as being mesmerized by images of besieged Yazidis, likewise followed the events taking place in Kobane late last year.⁶⁸ As with the IS's Sinjar offensive, the media coverage surrounding the siege of Kobane is cited by a number of American foreign fighters as being the catalyst behind their decision to fight IS.

Many of the Americans, however, do not cite specific battles or events, but rather refer in general terms to the heinous acts carried out by IS fighters on a daily basis. Dan Q., for example, said that he was "disgusted with what was going on....I watched the numerous beheadings and heard about them enslaving women and raping them. I thought that all the Americans who previously fought in Iraq here were in danger of having done so in vain, so I decided to do something about it."⁶⁹ In a nearly 500-word post

⁶⁵ Apel, Therese. "Mississippi Man Travels to Syria to Fight ISIS." October 21, 2014. <http://www.clarionledger.com/story/news/2014/10/21/mississippi-man-fights-isis/17652007/>.

⁶⁶ Reference withheld.

⁶⁷ Civiroglu, Mutlu. "American YPG Fighter Dean Parker Tells His Story." December 18, 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pP5Tj8oZ8OA>.

⁶⁸ Reference withheld.

⁶⁹ Reference withheld.

explaining his decision to fight IS, Herman M., a former infantryman in the US Army, similarly mentioned “the women who are being enslaved” as well as “the children being burned and starved and beheaded” and “the men who are losing their lives for absolutely no reason. That’s why I came to Iraq.”⁷⁰

Another American foreign fighter put it succinctly:⁷¹



Christianity

“We all come here for different reasons. Religion is a major one.”⁷² Herman M., in the same post referenced above, acknowledged a motivation that could be considered a subset of the previous section. That is, for a number of the American foreign fighters, the moral outrage and dismay that compelled them to act is directly connected to their strong Christian faith. William A., in the same Swedish television interview mentioned above, said that after “months thinking about it,” he is afraid of what lies ahead of him in Iraq in Syria, but he is “more afraid of doing nothing and God’s watching.”⁷³ Jordan Matson spoke specifically of his coreligionists when he told *USA Today* in October of last year, “I couldn’t just sit and watch Christians being slaughtered anymore.”⁷⁴

Apart from Matson, the American foreign fighter most associated with his Christian beliefs, thanks to a host of profiles in the Western press, is Brett Felton, a devout Catholic.⁷⁵ Felton is a 28-year-old from Troy, Michigan, who deployed to Iraq from July 2006 to October 2007 with the US Army’s 10th Mountain

⁷⁰ Reference withheld. Lightly edited for clarity.

⁷¹ Reference withheld.

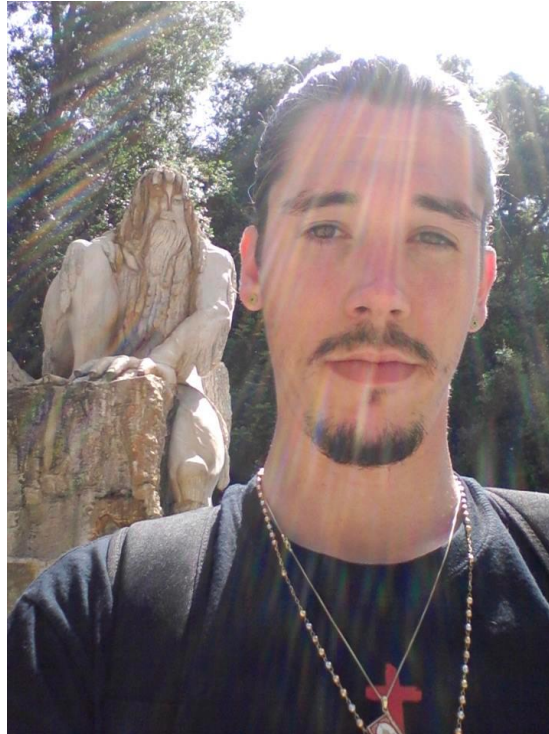
⁷² Reference withheld.

⁷³ Reference withheld.

⁷⁴ Sophie, Cousins. “American Explains Why He’s Fighting ISIL.” October 7, 2014.
<http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2014/10/06/jordan-matson-joins-kurds-against-islamic-state/16796487/>.

⁷⁵ While Felton used the last name “Royales” as a pseudonym early on, he no longer does so.

Division, 2nd Battalion, 14th Infantry Regiment.⁷⁶ After being discharged in 2007 as a disabled veteran, having been wounded by a roadside bomb, he took a job with General Dynamics Land Systems as a technical writer and began studying business management at Baker College.^{77, 78} In 2013, Felton enrolled in the Near Eastern Studies program at Wayne State University, where his research interests included early Christianity, jihadism, Arabic, and Jesus Christ.⁷⁹ In August 2014, Felton skipped out on his study abroad program at Lebanese American University in Beirut to travel to northern Iraq to join Dwekh Nawsha, making him the first known American to join the fight against IS.



Felton in Lebanon at the Jeita Grotto on 28 July 2014

Speaking with Reuters in February of this year, Felton explained why he joined the fight against IS and how it differed from his tour in Iraq nearly a decade ago: "Here I'm fighting for a people and for a faith, and the enemy is much bigger and more brutal."⁸⁰ The same Reuters piece contends that Felton, at that time, had been the only Western foreign fighter with Dwekh Nawsha to engage in combat thus far.

In an interview with AFP, Felton cited his combat experience as one of the reasons he felt obligated to assist the fledgling Christian militias: "I have a lot of combat experience, and this is a huge asset – a huge tool here – because I can take all of these skills and everything I've learned through many trials, many tribulations, and give it to my brothers here." Indeed, weeks later, a CBS *60 Minutes* crew filmed Felton

⁷⁶ Felton, Brett. LinkedIn. <https://www.linkedin.com/pub/brett-felton/32/657/290>.

⁷⁷ "Former US Soldier Joins Militia to Defend Christian Faith in Iraq." March 21, 2015. <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/former-us-soldier-joins-militia-defend-christian-faith-iraq/>.

⁷⁸ Felton, Brett. LinkedIn. <https://www.linkedin.com/pub/brett-felton/32/657/290>.

⁷⁹ Felton, Brett. Academia. <http://wayne.academia.edu/BrettFelton>.

⁸⁰ Coles, Isabel. "Westerners Join Iraqi Christian Militia to Fight Islamic State." February 15, 2015. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/02/15/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-foreignfighters-idUSKBN0LJ0LI20150215>.

training Christians in basic military methods, such as how to enter and secure a room, check for suicide vests, and evacuate the wounded.⁸¹



Felton was recently unflatteringly portrayed in a piece by *The New Republic*, in which a 25-year-old member of Dwekh Nawsha suggested that the Felton is merely canvassing for donations, saying, "Your God is not my God. Your God is a businessman."⁸² As of this writing, Felton has raised \$17,045 in less than two months as part of a crowdfunding campaign to pay for his expenses for an "African Mission."

"I've spent most of my life helping those disenfranchised and in-need communities. From the homeless, to the Veterans and onto persecuted families in the Middle East which have suffered the most ruthless of acts which our "humanity" has to offer. Now it's time we go to Africa and put the spotlight on living conditions there. Remember, most of us have kids, nephews, cousins and if we saw them live in these conditions we would do everything we could to stop and prevent such conditions. [Every one] of us knows "what we do unto the least of them, we do unto Me" says Christ. So to this I say, are you willing to help even the least fortunate of them all?"⁸³

Others motivated by Christianity, such as Ben T. and Bill O., compare the systematic persecution of Christians with the Holocaust, with the former saying, "It's happening. It's happening right now. I'm not going to sit back and wait for somebody else to handle it....I just felt like it was what God was calling me to do."⁸⁴ Bill O., a veteran of the war in Iraq, also echoed Brett Felton's contention that Christians are in dire need of proper training: "We are going over there and we are going to fight with the little guys....We want

⁸¹ "Lone Vet Returns to Iraq to Fight ISIS." March 22, 2015. <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/lone-vet-returns-to-iraq-to-fight-isis-defend-christianity/>.

⁸² Percy, Jen. "At War in the Garden of Eden." August 9, 2015. <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/122439/war-garden-eden>.

⁸³ Felton, Brett. "Soldier of Christ – African Mission." June 26, 2015. <http://www.gofundme.com/xxckvs>.

⁸⁴ Reference withheld.

to give them a fighting chance. They are ignorant, not by any fault of their own, but they do not know basic combat life-saving techniques."⁸⁵

Adventure or Boredom

Likely because of its self-serving nature, seeking adventure is rarely mentioned by the American foreign fighters as a motivation for fighting IS abroad. Nonetheless, adventure is undeniably part and parcel of packing one's bags and flying halfway across the world with the intention of fighting in a war zone. Patrick Maxwell, who served in Iraq as a Marine in 2006, said as much in an interview with *The New York Times*: "It was also a chance to have a story that no one else could beat, I guess, and have an adventure while I'm doing it....When I'm enlisted, I'm there to serve my country, protect my country, obey the orders of the officers appointed over me. As a private citizen, I'm going to have an adventure, essentially, and that's my own business."⁸⁶ He also maintained that he became disillusioned after seeing more Americans arrive whose motivations seemed less than respectable, describing them as "guys who had nothing to live for and just wanted to lay down bodies."⁸⁷



Maxwell with a Kurd and another foreign national

Another American foreign fighter, Bob D., may very well be in Iraq fighting IS for the noblest of purposes.⁸⁸ Judging by his social media posts alone, however, a thirst for adventure seems to be a significant factor in his decision. In late 2012, Bob D. posted online that he intended to get in touch with a recruiter to inquire about joining the US Army. He succeeded, only to be kicked out of Basic Training, according to someone

⁸⁵ Reference withheld.

⁸⁶ Philipps, Dave, and Thomas James Brennan. "Unsettled at Home, Veterans Volunteer to Fight ISIS." March 11, 2015. <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/12/us/disenchanting-by-civilian-life-veterans-volunteer-to-fight-isis.html>.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ All of the references concerning Bob D. will be withheld.

who knew him. The following year, Bob D. started a courier business, but by the fall, it had seemingly been abandoned, and he was uploading pictures of himself in Ukraine posing with weapons.



His stint in Ukraine did not last long; he was back in the US by mid-November, posting about “another day” at the sheet metal plant.



In February of this year, Bob D. posted a rant contrasting America’s willingness to fight the British during the Revolutionary War with Ukraine’s supposed fecklessness in the face of Russian aggression. His next post came a month later, saying he “[needs] a war,” and that that war would be against IS.

Two more months passed during which Bob D. entered and fought in a local mixed martial arts competition. In June, he posted the ticket for his connecting flight to Iraq with the caption, "Heading to Frankfurt." His next posts were photos in Iraq after he had arrived.



Again, without speaking to Bob D. personally and by inferring his motivations solely through his online activity, it is possible that the foregoing interpretation is mistaken. It may very well be that Bob D. travelled to Iraq after being outraged at the atrocities being committed by IS or out of a feeling of obligation toward religious minorities and others who could not defend themselves. Nonetheless, none of this is immediately apparent from what is available on social media. Instead, it seems that Bob D., like Patrick Maxwell – and no doubt many others – joined the fight against IS to have an adventure.

Missing Combat, Missing Military Camaraderie, or Trouble Adapting to Civilian Life

According to a Pew Research Center study conducted in 2011, nearly half (44%) of the veterans who served after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks reported having a difficult time transitioning to civilian life.⁸⁹ By their own accounts, that statistic includes a number of the American foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria, some of whom count themselves as being among the 11% to 20% of post-9/11 veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).⁹⁰ A number of the foreign fighters also describe themselves as either missing combat or longing for the camaraderie associated with military service – two factors likely amplified among those whose reentry into civilian life was difficult.

Henry J., a 29-year-old Texan who did two tours in Afghanistan, recognized these hardships in the Americans he found himself fighting alongside: "[I'm an] Afghanistan veteran. 101st Airborne Division. I'm currently in Iraqi Kurdistan....I work [with] several other combat vets that volunteer their skills and efforts

⁸⁹ Morin, Rich. "The Difficult Transition from Military to Civilian Life." December 8, 2011. <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2011/12/08/the-difficult-transition-from-military-to-civilian-life/>.

⁹⁰ Gradus, Jaimie. "Epidemiology of PTSD." 2014. <http://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/PTSD-overview/epidemiological-facts-ptsd.asp>.

mainly because it's the right thing to do, [but also because] many have had trouble adjusting to civilian life. We are warriors, what can I say?"⁹¹

And what better, clear cut reason for a warrior to take up arms once more than to defeat IS, an enemy consistently described as nothing less than pure evil – a reason that would seem to resonate the strongest with those who served in a combat role. As Adrian Bonenberger, a writer and Afghanistan combat veteran, told *The Guardian*, for many veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, "their skill set was fighting and infantry....Then they came back [to the US] and they were qualified for very few jobs....For those people, who felt alienated from society and didn't have sufficient social networks there to help them back in, to reintegrate them into the civilian world, there must be – and I know because I've felt it myself – a powerful draw to go and use those skills that you've accumulated and those experiences you had overseas and the acclaim you got when you were fighting the enemy."⁹²

Indeed, a reference to the ability to help, using the skill sets developed and honed in the military, is common among the American foreign fighters who have served. As mentioned in the subsection on Christianity, Brett Felton referred to his military experience as being a "huge asset" he could share with his "brothers" in Dwekh Nawsha. Louis Park, speaking with Time, came to the same conclusion: "So I'm like, I have the ability to go help these people. I might as well go do that....I felt almost called to it. This is the answer to my prayers and the problems I was having."⁹³ Mark T., citing his deployment to Afghanistan and three deployments to Iraq along with the bevy of training courses he completed, tells prospective donors on his crowdfunding page that he will use his experience to help the Kurds fight IS.

Some of the American foreign fighters have admitted in interviews to not just having PTSD, but actively seeking out war in order to cope with it. In an interview, Bryan G. said that he suffered from PTSD and that several attempts at treatment had failed. After selling all of his belongings, he bought a one-way ticket to Iraq. "I'm having a great time out here. I feel more comfortable here than I ever felt in America....In the States, there is too much idle time, too much time just doing nothing or sitting around and drinking, or anything like that. It's better here. Like I have said countless times, I get to do my job. I love my job." When asked if he thinks he will ever return to the US, Bryan G. replied, "I mean, I won't like it, but I will have to go back eventually."⁹⁴ Another American, Jamie Lane, who served as a machine gunner in Iraq from 2004 to 2008, told the AP in April, "In order to aid my recovery from PTSD, I have taken it upon myself to fight on my terms, against an enemy I know is evil....It is redemption, in a sense."⁹⁵

Dissatisfaction with US Policy, Iraq War Progress Being Erased, or Prospect of American Deaths Being in Vain

A common refrain among the Americans is that the US government's response to IS has been inadequate. For instance, when asked what brought him to Rojava, Nelson R., from Texas, replied, "The way Daesh is doing people, man. What they did to the Yazids – our governments won't step in, and, you know, there's all

⁹¹ Reference withheld. Lightly edited for clarity.

⁹² Hawramy, Fazel, and Raya Jalabi. "US Civilians and Veterans Leave Home for Isis Fight with Help from Social Media." April 18, 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/18/us-volunteers-isis-fight-veterans-recruitment>.

⁹³ Collard, Rebecca. "Meet the Americans Who Have Joined an Iraqi Militia to Fight ISIS." March 27, 2015. <http://time.com/3761211/isis-americans-iraqi-militias/>.

⁹⁴ Reference withheld.

⁹⁵ Salama, Vivian, and Bram Janssen. "US Vets Return to Mideast to Battle past and Present Demons." April 14, 2015. <http://news.yahoo.com/us-vets-return-mideast-battle-past-present-demons-063120343.html>.

this politics involved. They're providing air strikes, but the governments weren't doing shit about it, by God we will."⁹⁶

Some go further, not only maintaining that the US should be doing more, but asserting that in failing to do so, Washington is responsible for the erasure of the progress made in Iraq during the American occupation, meaning that the deaths of American service members there were in vain. After learning of the beheadings of Americans James Foley and Steven Sotloff, Chris E. said he was "infuriated ... that the US were not willing to set boots on the ground....I was already ill from us pulling out of Iraq so soon, anyway."⁹⁷ Despite feeling that "nothing was accomplished" during his two tours in Iraq, another American, Garret H., said that "[IS] undid all the work we were trying to do."⁹⁸ Charlie R., from Ohio, similarly decried IS "taking over cities that hundreds of Marines and soldiers died for."⁹⁹

Bill O., who served in Iraq as an Indirect Fire Infantryman (i.e., an infantryman specializing in mortars), was the most strident in his criticism, even calling the President a "traitor." When asked by a friend on Facebook where the photo below was taken, Bill O. replied, "a tiny (100yd x 100yd) joint security station operated by both US and Iraqi personnel. Every one of these guys is most likely dead now since we abandoned their country. These men wanted peace. Obama failed to establish a proper security forces agreement and pulled us all out causing the vacuum that created ISIS. Our president is a traitor and caused my brothers' and sisters' deaths to be in vain."¹⁰⁰



Finally, Jordan Matson explained to CNN in October of last year that "two years of almost no foreign policy in the region – while these people threatened American citizens, and bring harm to us" was one of the many reasons behind his decision to join the fight against IS. And although he ended up with the YPG in Syria, he also made reference to "all of the American brothers that have died over there – all the American

⁹⁶ Reference withheld.

⁹⁷ Reference withheld.

⁹⁸ Reference withheld.

⁹⁹ Reference withheld.

¹⁰⁰ Reference withheld.

veterans that have died over there – and paid their lives for that country so they could have a democracy. That just resonated in my mind. And I couldn't live with myself letting that country fall, and all my brothers' lives be for nothing."¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ Watson, Ivan, Gul Tuysuz, and Dana Ford. "At Peace' in War: A Former US Soldier Battles ISIS." October 27, 2014. http://www.cnn.com/2014/10/27/world/meast/syria-former-us-soldier/index.html?hpt=hp_t2.

Conclusion

This report's main finding is that there have been at least 108 Americans who have volunteered to fight the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria between August 2014 and the beginning of August 2015.

Other key findings include the following:

- As of 13 August 2015, 70 of the Americans appear to still be abroad.
- The Americans hail from at least 31 states across the US; more foreign fighters come from Texas than any other state.
- More than two-thirds of the Americans have prior military experience.
- With the exception of the Coast Guard, every branch of the US armed forces is represented among the Americans, with the Marine Corps and Army predominating.
- The age range of the Americans is between 23 and 61; anecdotally, the Americans appear to be in their 20s and 30s on average.
- Ranging from software engineers to surf instructors, there is no one-size-fits-all occupation or career field – other than military service – that characterizes the Americans.
- The three primary groups that the Americans join are – in order of popularity – the YPG, PUK Peshmerga, and Dwekh Nawsha.
- A wide range of motivations inspire the Americans to fight IS, not the least of which is a sense that *something* needed to be done in the face of IS's continuing barbarity.

There are a number of related topics that were not included in this study for want of time but are nonetheless promising avenues for future research. The non-American cohort of volunteers fighting IS, for instance, is just as large – if not larger – than their American counterparts. Citizens of the United Kingdom, especially, seem to be well represented in the anti-IS foreign fighter contingent. (See Appendix B for a full list of nationalities observed by the author to be in Iraq or Syria fighting IS.) It is important, however, for prospective researchers to be cognizant of the strict laws in some countries, which prohibit their citizens from taking up arms with *any* foreign group, and anonymize their subjects accordingly. Another topic ripe for further examination is the ubiquitous use of crowdfunding sites like GoFundMe, Indiegogo, and Fundrazr, which allow sympathetic members of the public to help cover the costs of equipment, travel, food, and other items.

Acknowledgments

- Author: Nathan Patin

Special thanks to Bellingcat team member Klement Anders for his feedback regarding the statistics found in this report.

Appendix A: Peshmerga Legion Application, Requirements, and Kit List

All of the information in this appendix was derived from Peshmerga Legion's website and lightly edited for clarity.

The initial application to join Peshmerga Legion consists of the following questions:

1. Age?
2. Who did you serve with? Dates?
3. What was your MOS (specialization)?
4. Can you afford both flights here and home?
5. Do you have \$200 a month for your planned stay?

The following is the list of requirements to join in full:

1. Effective communication in the English language.
2. Former Military (operational tours a benefit but not essential).
3. A willingness and capability to be trained in basic mix of coalition infantry tactics.
4. A basic military fitness level, with no existing medical conditions requiring prescribed drug dependency.
5. An offer of commitment for at least 12 weeks (with a 4 week probationary period)
6. Capability to self-fund transport to operational theatre and preparations for an exit strategy.
7. Finance your own kit and equipment. (\$200 a month for personal upkeep/spending)
8. A clear understanding of the Peshmerga and their command structure.
9. A clear understanding of the situation in Kurdistan and ISIS.
10. Be prepared to join a front line unit.

Whilst we are a volunteer force and fully understand that any man willing to lay down his own life in the protection of others is an asset, we must ensure the integrity of our unit therefore must exclude any individual that has criminal convictions for the following offences:

- Offences of a sexual nature.
- Convictions for Class A substances.
- Convictions for theft or robbery.

Finally, the following is the group's suggestion for "a very basic list of kit" that new volunteers are expected to obtain themselves, as opposed to a weapon and ammunition, which are provided upon arrival:

- Plate carrier
- Front/rear plates - Level 3 or 4 PLATES & BODY ARMOUR CAN BE PURCHASED IN COUNTRY FOR U.S. TRAVELERS [emphasis in the original]
- Two pairs of good boots
- At least two pairs of [Multi-Terrain Pattern (MTP)] uniform
- THE REASON FOR MTP IS SO THAT EVERYONE HAS THE SAME UNIFORM [emphasis in the original]
- An MTP bush/boonie hat or cap
- At least two [Under Body Armor Combat Shirt (UBACS)]
- 6 pairs of 100% cotton boxer shorts
- 8 pairs of good boot socks
- Some basic downtime clothes
- Some [physical training (PT)] gear

- *Lightweight sleeping bag*
- *Wash kit*
- *Foot care kit*
- *Personal med kit (there is a market where you can buy kit and equipment but it's best to bring what you can with you)*
- *Camelback with carrier*
- *Weapons cleaning kit*

Appendix B: Nationalities

Private citizens of the following countries are or were in Iraq and Syria fighting IS:

- Australia
- Brazil
- Canada
- China
- Denmark
- Finland
- France
- Germany
- Greece
- Iran
- Italy
- Netherlands
- New Zealand
- Portugal
- Romania
- Russia
- South Korea
- Spain
- Sweden
- Switzerland
- United Kingdom