

This reference aid about “foreign fighters” focuses on US persons who attempt to or are successful in traveling overseas to join a [designated foreign terrorist organization \(FTO\)](#). Such activity is illegal and may result in federal criminal charges against alleged offenders.¹ This reference aid also discusses the threat foreign fighters may pose to the United States, their demographics and geographic dispersal, varied motivations, preferred overseas destinations, and common pre-travel behavioral indicators.

Key Points

- **Threat to the United States:** US foreign fighters can pose a threat to the United States by receiving training from FTOs and then returning home to conduct attacks or engaging in the online recruitment of US persons to commit attacks or travel to join an FTO.^{2,3}
- **Demographics:** Military age males have comprised the majority of US foreign fighters, but women and minors have increasingly traveled over the past few years.⁴
- **Geographic Dispersal:** US foreign fighters have been geographically dispersed, as they have hailed from across the United States.⁵

Varied Motivations

There are typically a diverse set of factors that contribute to an individual’s decision to pursue travel to join an FTO.⁶ A review of recent cases, however, revealed some of the most common motivations.⁷ These included a desire to:

- Support violent extremist causes such as fighting for the Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham’s (ISIS) self-declared caliphate;^a
- Defend their ancestral homeland or ethnic group from perceived threats; and
- Seek adventure and new life experiences.

Popular Overseas Destinations

Since the attacks of September 11, 2001, US persons have attempted or succeeded in traveling to join violent extremist groups, especially in Syria, Iraq, and Somalia, as well as in Afghanistan, Mauritania, Pakistan, and Yemen.^{8,9,10,11}

Syria and Iraq

- There are approximately 290 US persons, as of August 2017, who have traveled or attempted to travel to Syria and Iraq potentially to fight or otherwise support the conflict.¹² This includes those who are there now, those who have been stopped from traveling, and those who have returned.¹³ Approximately three dozen Americans have died after traveling to partake in this conflict.¹⁴
- Fewer US persons have traveled or attempted travel to Syria and Iraq since mid-2015 likely because of Turkey’s increased border security, deterrence from arrests in the United States, ISIS’s encouragement that supporters commit attacks at home, and the group’s ongoing battlefield losses.¹⁵
- The ongoing civil war in Syria, which created increased opportunities for FTOs such as ISIS to operate and recruit, was triggered by the Syrian Government’s violent crackdown on pro-democracy protests during the first half of 2011.¹⁶

Somalia

- In the years prior to Syria’s emergence as the preeminent destination for aspiring US foreign fighters, Somalia had been a popular conflict zone for Somali Americans—often from Minneapolis and its surrounding areas—and other Muslim Americans to travel to.¹⁷
- Americans began traveling to Somalia to join al-Shabaab—a FTO that would later publicly align itself with al-Qa’ida—in 2007.¹⁸ Over two dozen US persons have been publicly identified as having joined the group since that

^a ISIS is also commonly referred to by others as ISIL, which stands for the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, or Daesh, which is the acronym for the derogatory Arabic-language name al-Dawla al-Islamiya fil Iraq wa ash-Sham. Ash-Sham is a historical term often previously used to describe the area between the Mediterranean Sea and the Euphrates River, and Anatolia (in present day Turkey) and Egypt. The group calls itself the Islamic State or IS.

time, and others were arrested before they could successfully travel.¹⁹ Beginning in 2010, the rate of attempted and successful travel steeply declined.²⁰

- Ethiopia's 2006 military incursion into Somalia initially inspired many of these US persons—especially those with ancestral ties to Somalia—to join al-Shabaab's fight against Ethiopia and Somalia's Western-backed government.²¹

Common Pre-Travel Activities of Aspiring US Foreign Fighters

A US Government review of recently arrested US persons who aspired to travel or succeeded in traveling to fight with or support FTOs. This review produced the below list of common, observable activities by many of the individuals leading up to their planned travel.²² Some of the observed activities include constitutionally protected activity, which by itself may not be indicative of criminal activity associated with terrorism.

Posting on the internet or social media sites public comments or links that promote FTOs or stating one's desire to pursue travel to join such groups;
Consuming and sharing violent extremist messaging calling for Westerners to travel to become foreign fighters and support FTOs;
Communicating with known or suspected US or overseas-based violent extremists in person or on social media sites;
Expressing a desire, either in person or online, to become a foreign fighter to support FTOs or marry a foreign fighter living in an overseas conflict zone;
Attempting to recruit others to pursue travel overseas to join FTOs;
Requesting or receiving in-person or online travel facilitation support to join a FTO, including guidance on travel routes, safe houses, and contact information for facilitators;
Applying for a new passport or attempting to obtain a fraudulent passport by individuals who have expressed a desire to travel overseas to engage in or support violence;
Researching or discussing methods to evade traveler screening, such as expressing a desire to use fraudulent documents, circuitous travel routes, or departures from the United States to an overseas conflict zone via a land border or maritime vessel;
Unusual attempts, which might arouse suspicion in a reasonable person, to determine one's watchlist status through interactions with law enforcement or private sector personnel;
Concealing travel history, possibly to avoid detection of activities related to supporting violence;
Newly engaging in firearms or physical training while expressing a desire to go overseas to engage in or support violence;
Destroying electronic media and deactivating social media accounts that individuals previously used to post their support for FTOs or their causes;
Using cover stories to mask nefarious activities, such as plans to travel overseas to engage in or support violence; and
Giving away or selling possessions such as cars and electronics, maxing out credit cards, taking out money from student loan accounts, or borrowing money from friends and relatives, in conjunction with an expressed desire to travel overseas to engage in or support violence.

Additional CVE Resources

For additional information on CVE-related research and analysis, strategies and frameworks, toolkits, organized networks, and grants, please visit the [interagency CVE Task Force's website](#).

- ¹ Center for Security Studies in Zurich, Switzerland; "Foreign Fighters: An Overview of Responses in Eleven Countries;" MAR 2014; pg. 16.
- ² Senate Select Committee on Intelligence; Hearing entitled "Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community;" Statement of James R. Clapper-Director of National Intelligence;" 9 FEB 2016; pg. 5.
- ³ House Committee on Homeland Security; "Final Report of the Task Force on Combatting Terrorist and Foreign Fighter Travel;" SEP 2015; pg. 14.
- ⁴ House Committee on Homeland Security; "Final Report of the Task Force on Combatting Terrorist and Foreign Fighter Travel;" SEP 2015; pg. 16.
- ⁵ National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START); "Overview: Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States-Foreign Fighters (PIRUS-FF);" APR 2016; pg. 1.
- ⁶ Unclassified version of "Radicalization Dynamics: A Primer;" JUN 2012; pg. 5.
- ⁷ Homeland Security Advisory Council; "Foreign Fighter Task Force: Interim Report;" Spring 2015; pg. 8.
- ⁸ United States District Court for the District of Oregon; "United States of America v. Jeffrey Leon Battle, Patrice Lumba Ford, Ahmed Ibrahim Bilal, Muhammad Ibrahim Bilal, Habis Abdulla Al Saoub, October Martinique Lewis;" Indictment; 3 OCT 2002.
- ⁹ United States District Court for the Southern District of Alabama Southern Division; "USA v. Mohammad Abdul Rahman Abukhdair;" Plea Agreement; 6 AUG 2013.
- ¹⁰ United States Attorney's Office, Northern District of Georgia; "Terrorism Defendants Sentenced: Ehsanul Islam Sadequee Receives 17 Years in Prison; Co-defendant Syed Haris Ahmed Receives 13 Years;" 14 DEC 2009.
- ¹¹ United States Attorney's Office, Middle District of Florida; "Jacksonville Man Pleads Guilty to Conspiring and Attempting to Support Terrorists;" 19 MAR 2014.
- ¹² NCTC; Unclassified talking points about US person Syria and Iraq foreign fighters;" SEP 2017.
- ¹³ NCTC; Unclassified talking points about US person Syria and Iraq foreign fighters;" SEP 2017.
- ¹⁴ NCTC; Unclassified talking points about US person Syria and Iraq foreign fighters;" SEP 2017.
- ¹⁵ Washington Post; "Flow of foreign fighters plummets as Islamic State loses its edge;" Griff Witte, Sudarsan Raghavan, and James McAuley; 9 SEP 2016; https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/flow-of-foreign-fighters-plummets-as-isis-loses-its-edge/2016/09/09/ed3e0dda-751b-11e6-9781-49e591781754_story.html?utm_term=.09a0373355ff
- ¹⁶ House Committee on Homeland Security; "Final Report of the Task Force on Combatting Terrorist and Foreign Fighter Travel;" SEP 2015; pg. 9.
- ¹⁷ Anti-Defamation League; "Al-Shabaab's American Recruits;" FEB 2015; pg. 1.
- ¹⁸ Anti-Defamation League; "Al-Shabaab's American Recruits;" FEB 2015; pg. 1.
- ¹⁹ Anti-Defamation League; "Al-Shabaab's American Recruits;" FEB 2015; pgs. 9-18.
- ²⁰ University of Southern California's National Center of Excellence for Risk and Economic Analysis of Terrorism Events (CREATE); "Foreign Fighters: Terrorist Recruitment and Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Programs in Minneapolis-St. Paul;" APR 2015; pg. 12.
- ²¹ The George Washington University, Homeland Security Policy Institute; "Foreign Fighters: Trends, Trajectories, & Conflict Zones;" Frank J. Cilluffo; Jeffrey B. Cozzens; and Magnus Ranstorp; 1 OCT 2010; pg. 17.
- ²² DHS Office of Intelligence and Analysis, FBI, and NCTC; Roll Call Release; "(U) Common Pre-Travel Activities of Aspiring US Foreign Fighters;" 8 MAR 2016.