'A Caliphate That Gathered'

Addressing the Challenge of Jihadist Foreign Fighter Hubs

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Image: Al-Sahaba Mosque, Darnah, Libya. Reuters.

"Raise your head high, for today—by Allah's grace—you have a state and caliphate, which will return your dignity, might, rights, and leadership...It is a caliphate that gathered the Caucasian, Indian, Chinese, Shami (Levantine), Iraqi, Yemeni, Egyptian, Maghrebi (North African), American, French, German, and Australian. Allah brought their hearts together, and thus, they became brothers by His grace, loving each other for the sake of Allah, standing in a single trench, defending and guarding each other, and sacrificing themselves for one another. Their blood mixed and became one, under a single flag and goal, in one pavilion, enjoying this blessing, the blessing of faithful brotherhood."

—Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, June 2014, following the Islamic State's capture of Mosul[1]

From 2013 through 2015, the Islamic State (IS) conducted one of the most successful foreign fighter recruitment campaigns in the recorded history of conflict.[2] During that period, the jihadist group recruited an estimated 40,000 foreign fighters from more than one hundred countries.[3] The size and scale of this mobilization might lead one to believe that IS foreign recruits have come from every corner of the globe. Yet in reality, the vast majority came from a small number of places. For example, two-thirds of Saudi fighters came from the country's central regions of Riyadh, Hail, and al-Qassim, and 85 percent of Libyan fighters came from the eastern regions of Darnah and Benghazi. In the broader Middle East, 75 percent of IS foreign fighters were recruited from areas that constituted 11 percent of the region's total population.[4] By focusing on these areas of concentrated recruitment, and why recruitment efforts succeeded there, the Biden administration can reduce the likelihood that the next wave of foreign fighters will be larger than the last.

IS foreign fighters may have been unprecedented in their numbers, but they were still part of a larger historical trend.[5] They constituted the latest wave of transnational jihadist recruits whose origin dates to the mobilization of "Afghan Arabs" in response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the 1980s. Thinking of foreign fighter mobilizations as "waves" yields two important policy insights. First, a new wave of foreign fighters is quite possible in the Middle East given their historical persistence and the current structural weaknesses that can engender protest and militancy (e.g., unemployment, economic stagnation, poor quality of basic services). Second, the current ebb of foreign fighter mobilization provides policymakers a window of opportunity to preempt new waves of fighters from joining future conflicts.

Recent academic research on foreign fighters has found that they extend conflicts, exacerbate tensions, and perpetrate disproportionate harm against civilians. The recruitment of foreign fighters also increases the risk for terrorist attacks against the United States and its allies and partners. Thus,

addressing the foreign fighter problem is critical for U.S. national security and for U.S. Middle East policy. If the Biden administration does not develop proactive strategies to deter future waves of foreign fighters, those fighters could not only carry out future attacks but also spoil U.S. efforts to find a more stable balance of power in the Middle East.[6] Addressing foreign fighters is also important for U.S. counterterrorism strategy. If plans to mitigate the flow of foreign fighters abroad are not implemented now, the potential rise of another group like IS could once again draw the United States into a costly foreign war.[7]

This paper is divided into three parts. The first part explains the historical ebb and flow of foreign fighters in response to conflicts, with a focus on the rise and persistence of transnational jihadism. The second part introduces a theory of how "hubs" of foreign fighter recruitment form to support these mobilizations. The third part explains why the United States should care about foreign fighters, prescribing three policies that the Biden administration should consider to reduce the number of foreign fighters involved in future conflicts.

Ebb and Flow of Foreign Fighters in Response to Civil Conflicts

In spring of 2013, a group of senior, battle-hardened Salafi jihadist officers met for five days in the village of Kfar Hamra on the outskirts of Aleppo, Syria's most populous city. Over a meal of grilled chicken, french fries, and tea, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, then commander of the Islamic State of Iraq, presided over a debate on whether the group should declare an Islamic caliphate in Iraq and Syria. Baghdadi argued that borders, citizenship, institutions, and a functioning bureaucracy would appeal to a larger group of Muslims than would the

efforts of any other jihadist group. Unlike the exclusive al-Qaeda (AQ), he claimed, a formalized state would attract recruits from among ordinary Muslims who might otherwise not know how to join.[8]

Although the Islamic State ultimately lost the entire territorial caliphate imagined and later realized by Baghdadi, his prediction about the allure of a state for new recruits proved prescient. IS recruited more foreign fighters than any other jihadist organization and oversaw one of the most prolific recruitment campaigns of any insurgent group in the recorded history of conflict.[9] Some fighters were recruited over many years,[10] while others "just showed up" without references, according to IS foreign fighter registration forms.[11] Given this context, the discussion that follows will first describe the emergence of IS in its historical context, then discuss why the Middle East remains at risk of seeing a new wave of foreign fighters in the years ahead.

The consensus among researchers is that IS recruitment constituted the main part of a fourth wave of jihadist mobilization.[12] Most researchers also agree that the first wave of transnational jihadist foreign fighters emerged to fight the Soviet Union in Afghanistan in the 1980s. Some scholars, depending on how they rate AQ's rise in the late 1990s or the rise of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in the late 2000s, disagree over whether the U.S. invasion of Iraq constituted the second or third wave of jihadist mobilization. Regardless of their position, however, researchers agree that Syria's civil war and its spillover into Iraq constitute the fourth wave, resulting in the rise of IS and several other jihadist groups (see figure 1).[13]
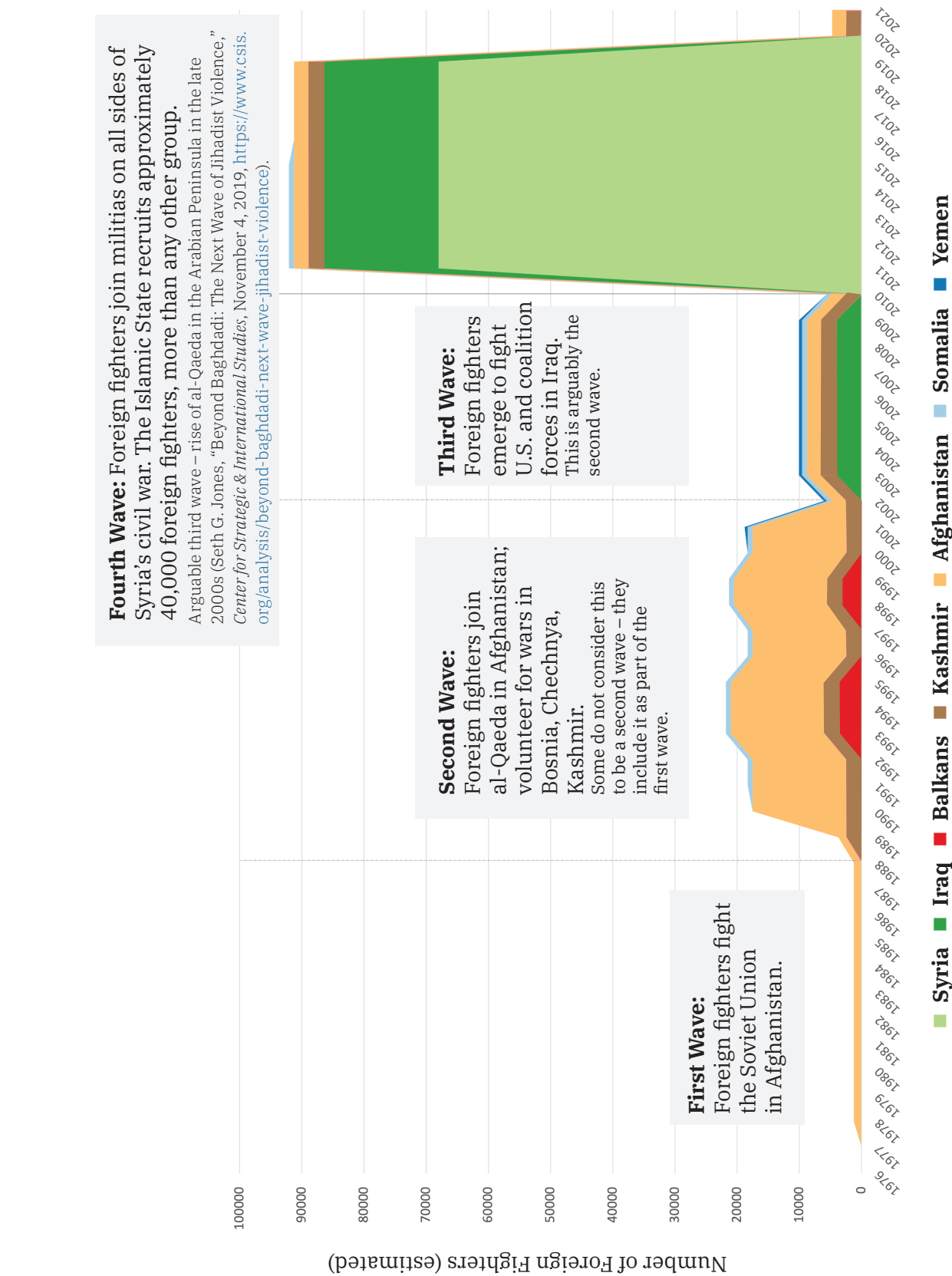
A 2017 study by the United States Institute of Peace and the Wilson Center analyzed these waves of transnational Salafi jihadist insurgency and found exponential growth in each one. The insurgents mobilized twice as fast for each new conflict, and the groups involved have become more extreme over time in their tactics and ideology.[14] Other research has found that while each movement's insurgents have been younger and more aggressive than their predecessors, they learn and adapt quickly, applying lessons that may extend their staying power beyond the point at which military force alone could dislodge their efforts.[15]

At present, the tide of foreign fighters from the Middle East is ebbing. But this period should not be mistaken for a disappearance of the jihadist movement that inspired so many to join insurgencies abroad. When IS was losing its final pieces of territory in southeast Syria in 2019, for example, spokesman Abu al-Hasan al-Muhajir argued that by enduring present hardships, IS would eventually "break" the Global Coalition to Defeat Daesh/ISIS's[16] commitment to fighting the group: "Victory comes with patience," he explained."[17] Months later, IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi released a video message describing the new phase of the war—the ebb, as it were—as "one of attrition," where supporters would suffer in captivity or as part of small guerrilla movements until an opportunity to reemerge presented itself.[18]

Although both Baghdadi and Muhajir were killed in U.S. operations after making those statements, fervent supporters argue the movement is only being tested.[19] That faith might seem counterintuitive, but it is borne out by history. In a 2004 issue of the al-Qaeda publication Voice of Jihad, released even before AQ in Iraq leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi led the capture of Fallujah during the U.S. occupation, similar sentiments were expressed about jihad. "Incremental progress is a known universal principle," according to the text. "Yesterday, we did not dream of a state, but today we established states and they fall. Tomorrow, Allah willing, a state will arise and will not fall."[20] In this framing, the failures of specific groups are seen not as evidence of failure by the entire jihadist movement, but rather as an indication that the movement has learned and will adapt accordingly. The jihadist movement would endure for the long haul, and whatever foreign enemy it fought—the Soviets, the Americans—would eventually disappear. Observers within jihadist circles have noted keenly, for example, that U.S. attention would be diverted from their causes after the January 6, 2021, events at the Capitol.[21]

Figure 1. Ebb and Flow of Foreign Fighters in Transnational Jihadist Conflicts

Fourth Wave: Foreign fighters join militias on all sides of Syria's civil war. The Islamic State recruits approximately 40,000 foreign fighters, more than any other group.

Arguable third wave – rise of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula in the late 2000s (Seth G. Jones, "Beyond Baghdadi: The Next Wave of Jihadist Violence," *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, November 4, 2019, https://www.csis.org/analysis/beyond-baghdadi-next-wave-jihadist-violence).

Third Wave: Foreign fighters emerge to fight U.S. and coalition forces in Iraq. This is arguably the second wave.

Second Wave: Foreign fighters join al-Qaeda in Afghanistan; volunteer for wars in Bosnia, Chechnya, Kashmir. Some do not consider this to be a second wave – they include it as part of the first wave.

First Wave: Foreign fighters fight the Soviet Union in Afghanistan.

Number of Foreign Fighters (estimated)

Syria ■ Iraq ■ Balkans ■ Kashmir ■ Afghanistan ■ Somalia ■ Yemen

Yet supporters of the jihadist movement who hope to attract future waves of foreign recruits need not place their faith solely in the historical persistence of their cause. Three structural conditions are also present in the Middle East that suggest the movement will likely find many new foreign recruits in the years ahead.

The first structural condition involves the combined deterioration of socioeconomic prospects and political freedoms in the Middle East. Indeed, all the structural factors that helped compel foreign fighters to join insurgencies in Syria and Iraq in the 2010s remain in place today, with some having worsened, particularly in light of the Covid-19 pandemic and associated austerity measures.[22] Related structural factors include burgeoning youth populations, the highest youth unemployment rates in the world, anemic economic growth prospects, struggling private sectors, and bloated bureaucracies. The pathways for economic mobility for youth are slim, and overall poverty has increased. The Middle East is the only region in the world where people have become poorer both in absolute terms and as a proportion of the population over the past decade.[23] Moreover, a recent tightening of authoritarian rule in the region,[24] including in the name of counterterrorism,[25] provides a political dimension that can result in increased protest and militancy.[26]

Second, conflicts in the Middle East are "internationalized civil wars"—that is, internal wars with a significant external or international component. By using these external interventions as a conduit to enter the battlefield, foreign combatants could be a permanent fixture in the region's civil conflicts.[27] One reason external interventions are popular is that they are a cheap way for states to undermine their adversaries' interests. Instead of using their own citizens or participating directly in costly interstate wars, regional powers can use other citizens and other battlefields to attack their adversaries.[28]

Not only are foreign fighters a manifestation of the region's political tensions, they are also a cause of the intractability of its conflicts. The intervention of foreign combatants in civil conflicts has been shown to: (1) prolong civil wars by making them harder and more complicated to resolve;[29] (2) exacerbate human suffering within those conflicts because foreign combatants are less likely to be restrained in the violence they carry out against civilian populations;[30] (3) undermine local efforts to resolve conflict by interrupting traditional dispute resolution mechanisms;[31] (4) legitimate transnational movements that call for the use of violence to advance a political agenda;[32] and (5) be uniquely persistent in the Middle East—meaning that those who become foreign fighters are more likely than not to continue to drift from conflict to conflict.[33]

Third, governments in the Middle East and North Africa are consistently unwilling to repatriate, prosecute, and reintegrate their foreign fighters.[34] The persistence of these foreign fighters, combined with their sheer number, has created a cadre of semiprofessional soldiers who migrate from conflict to conflict and inspire new generations of fighters to join them. Many countries are understandably worried about the risks entailed in repatriating foreign fighters.[35] Although some countries, such as Morocco, have repatriated many citizens who fought in Syria and Iraq, most remain reluctant to do so.[36] However, doing so is critical to preventing the "Camp Bucca effect,"[37] wherein imprisoning seasoned foreign fighters together helps deepen their networks in preparation for the next conflict.[38] This is the danger of temporary detention facilities in northeast Syria, which hold a total of approximately two thousand foreign fighters[39] and eight thousand Iraqi and Syrian fighters, as well as displacement camps, which currently house tens of thousands of IS-affiliated families.[40]

In sum, historical trends combined with present conditions suggest that absent proactive efforts, another jihadist wave is not only possible but likely. Of course, jihadism does not emerge and endure in a vacuum; it is part of a complex system. Depending on the context, similar recruitment pathways exist for domestic insurgents, foreign fighters, illegal migrants, and perpetrators or organized crime. To reduce the size and likelihood of another wave of foreign fighters, one must first understand where these fighters come from.

How Hubs Form and Why Foreign Fighters Are Recruited from Them

Abu Thabit al-Jazrawi, a Saudi foreign fighter in Syria, showed in his own words how important it was that he lived alongside others in Saudi Arabia who participated in transnational jihadism. His repeated personal encounters with people who joined transnational jihadist groups convinced him over time to become a foreign fighter himself. "I thought that Osama bin Laden turned our nation into a nightmare," wrote Jazrawi in a series of posts online.[41] In 2001, then age fifteen, Jazrawi was disgusted by the September 11 attacks on the United States. Osama bin Laden "was the cause of all the problems in the Muslim world," Jazrawi wrote, adding that AQ should be "utterly rejected."

Jazrawi's views on jihad started to change during the 2003 war in Iraq. A friend showed him material posted by mujahedin (holy warriors) in Iraq, and "[the posts] revealed the suspicions that filled my head about the [Saudi] government's religious scholars." But Jazrawi still did not want to fight: "In my heart, I did not want to go on jihad...The road is difficult, and I have neither references nor money," he explained, adding that he was "not following the right path" at that time.

It took the actions of many friends, several years, and the war in Syria to influence Jazrawi to become a fighter: "I was not fully familiar with the events in al-Sham [Syria]," he explained, "until I went to the mosque [in 2013] and my friend told me that several people I knew had joined the jihad there. I was shocked...I was sitting here while my friends were all going to jihad in Syria."

As the Syrian war continued, Jazrawi met a fighter who had returned to Saudi Arabia. "He asked me to meet with him privately as soon as possible

and I agreed," Jazrawi wrote. "After a while, I was convinced finally to participate in the jihad." Jazrawi found a sponsor who covered his travel expenses and provided him with the necessary references to travel to Syria. (It is unclear from Jazrawi's story whether he initially joined Jabhat al-Nusra or the Islamic State when he arrived.)[42] In any case, he arrived in January 2014, traveling from Saudi Arabia and reaching Syria in less than twenty-four hours. The journey likely entailed flights to a Turkish city such as Gaziantep and then a drive across the border.[43]

Jazrawi's story challenges many aspects of conventional wisdom on what leads a person to become a foreign fighter. He had a stable job—to which he referred in posts without specifying its nature—a stable life, and a robust social network; his decision to become a foreign fighter was considered, not impulsive. These facts undermine common characterizations of foreign fighters as "young... impoverished and hopeless," people who are "humiliated by injustice and corruption."[44] None of these characteristics describe Jazrawi's condition when he left Saudi Arabia for Syria.[45]

Many foreign fighters have profiles resembling Jazrawi's—a fact that calls for reexamination of the paths by which tens of thousands of foreign fighters have joined IS, Jabhat al-Nusra, and other transnational insurgent groups. Jazrawi's story is also interesting in that it shows how social influences affected his likelihood of eventual recruitment to fight in a foreign war. Whatever his peers and neighbors intended, Jazrawi's own words show how his proximity to them influenced his thinking over many years, eventually driving him to fight abroad. Those voices enabled Jazrawi to feel normal, safe, easy, and even prestigious in his decision.

By the time Jazrawi "migrated to the land of jihad," he was convinced of the righteousness of the cause. "I don't care when or how I'm going to die," he declared, "as long as my death is going to be for the sake of God."[46] Indeed, Jazrawi was killed in May 2014 in Deir al-Zour, a month after he posted his story.[47]

The Importance of Recruitment Hubs

Tens of thousands of foreign fighters joined IS or AQ from more than one hundred countries, but this statistic can be misleading. In truth, the vast majority came from a small number of city neighborhoods and rural towns in the Middle East.[48] Hubs of militancy have also formed in specific places for terrorist groups fighting in domestic conflicts, from Hamas suicide bombers[49] to the Irish Republican Army.[50] What is different about IS recruits is that hubs of recruitment formed for fighters joining a *foreign* war. IS recruits were not trying to effect local change by fighting abroad. Instead, many joined so as to abandon their home countries to pursue a better life elsewhere.

Hubs were important because they were the engines of IS recruitment and gateways for new fighters to join the jihad. According to 2,090 Islamic State registration forms for foreign fighters from the Middle East, 75 percent came from regions that constituted 11 percent of the region's population.[51] And using the Soufan Center's estimate that 42 percent of IS foreign fighters came from the Middle East and North Africa, it can be concluded that roughly one in three foreign fighters who joined IS came from one of several dozen recruitment hubs.[52]

IS foreign fighter recruitment hubs existed in almost every country in the Middle East and were often concentrated in specific geographic areas. Sixty-seven percent of Saudi fighters came from three provinces in the country's conservative heartland (Riyadh, Hail, and al-Qassim). In Libya, 85 percent of fighters came from only two cities (Benghazi and Darnah).[53] Foreign fighter hubs also emerged in northern Morocco and in the Sinai region of Egypt. Tunisia is the exception: so many hubs for IS foreign fighter recruitment existed in the country that there was no geographic pattern overall (see figure 2).[54]

As illustrated in figure 2, a focus on any of these regions reveals concentrations of foreign fighters having come from specific areas. And within those areas, there were even more specific concentrations

of recruits. For example, in the Douar Hicher neighborhood of Tunisia's capital, Tunis, certain blocks or quarters, such as Khalid Ibn al-Walid Street, were known for the heaviest recruitment.[55] Such concentrations are partly attributable to so-called network effects, wherein people are much more likely to participate in high-risk activities when others they know are similarly involved.[56] People, given their social nature, do not make choices according to everything that is possible; they make choices according to what they believe is available to them, and others around them model what is possible.

Yet network effects are not the only reason recruitment hubs form; place matters too. Research on both the power of neighborhood effects[57] and the importance of neighborhoods for youth identity-formation in the Middle East and North Africa[58] suggests that looking at rural towns or city neighborhoods is the most appropriate way to analyze how hubs form. That method of analysis allows for some generalizing while also being specific to the conditions in particular places.

For IS, hubs were both engines for recruitment and gateways for the next generation of foreign fighters from the Arabic-speaking world. Foreign fighters who joined from hubs were, on average, three years younger than those recruited from regions that were not hubs. They were also less likely to be married, less likely to have well-paying jobs, and almost half as likely to have fought in a previous jihad (e.g., in Iraq, Afghanistan, or Somalia).[59] In other words, foreign recruits from hubs were largely new fighters, likely drawn to the movement because, as with Jazrawi, so many others around them were also joining.

Hubs were vital to the foreign fighter recruitment efforts of IS. Most foreign fighters came from hubs, and it was in hubs where many new fighters started their jihad work. From a historical perspective, foreign fighters in the Middle East are distinguishable not just for their numbers but also for their persistence. In short, once someone becomes a jihadist in the Middle East, it is much harder for that

Figure 2. Map of IS Foreign Fighters from the Middle East and North Africa by Region of Origin
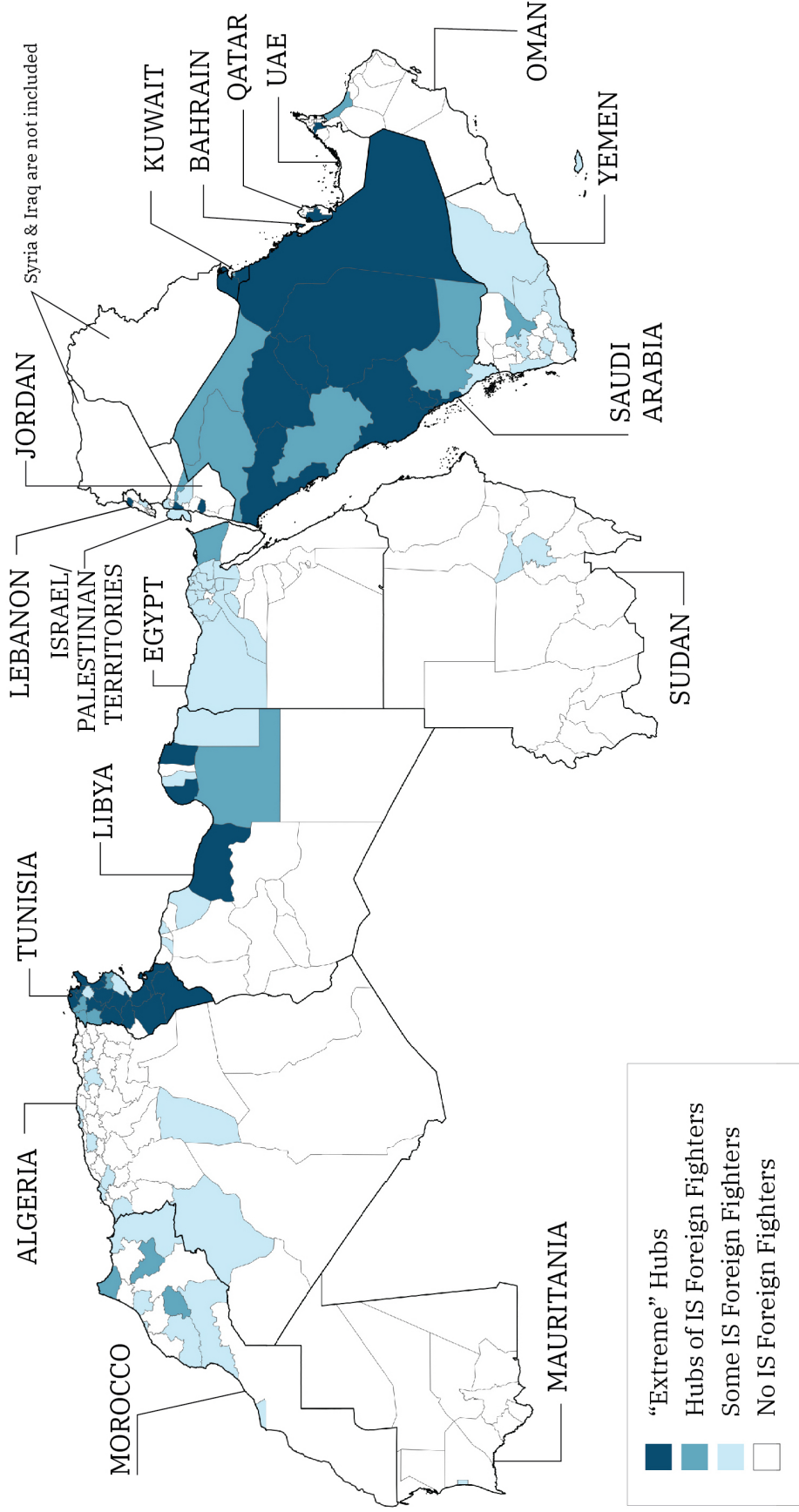
Note: Hubs of IS foreign fighters had twice the average rate of IS foreign fighters relative to the region-wide average (8.6 persons per 1 million); "extreme" hubs had three times as many.

person to leave the movement than it is for a jihadist in another region.[60] That is why, although some new hubs emerged with the rise of IS, other recruitment hubs for transnational jihad (e.g., Darnah, Libya, and Ben Gardane, Tunisia) have remained problematic for decades.[61]

Why Hubs Work

Most research on why people mobilize to fight in foreign wars tends to connect personal or structural conditions, such as unemployment, relative poverty, and authoritarianism, with the outcome—namely, someone joining a group such as the Islamic State.[62] But there are problems with this approach; chief among them is that psychological research has found no generalizable pathway for why individuals become combatants.[63] This paper argues that hubs function as a mediating variable that fits between the preexisting structural conditions and the outcome of a person joining a militant group (see figure 3). Certain structural factors make hubs more or less likely to form, and the interaction of the people who live in those hubs sets in motion their recruitment.

Hubs can be statistically measurable. Figure 4 shows the per capita rate of foreign fighter recruitment in hubs across the Middle East and North Africa. Note that a small number of places have had high rates of recruitment, whereas a large number have had few or no recruits.[64] Hubs are also directly observable. Residents interviewed in some places shown in figure 4 have described how their communities changed. In one case, the Salafi group Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia took over the community, transforming it into a place where nonstate groups controlled local functions such as economic activity and community policing.[65]

Certain structural and process-related factors indicate where IS recruitment hubs were most likely to form. Structurally, hubs were more likely in comparatively poor parts of wealthier regions where there were higher rates of unemployment, particularly among young people in their late twenties. These places were also more likely to be in or around cities and to have higher average rates of women's participation in the labor force.[66] Moreover, the areas lacked social hierarchies with traditional means of ordering the community in the absence of state involvement (e.g., tribal structures, family intermarriage, local notables, political or business organizations).

A further attribute of recruitment hubs was their appearance in communities that were socially, politically, and economically isolated. The political

Figure 3. Theory of Recruitment Hubs

What factors describe where hubs form? → HUB → Why do hubs facilitate recruitment? → Why do recruits become foreign fighters?
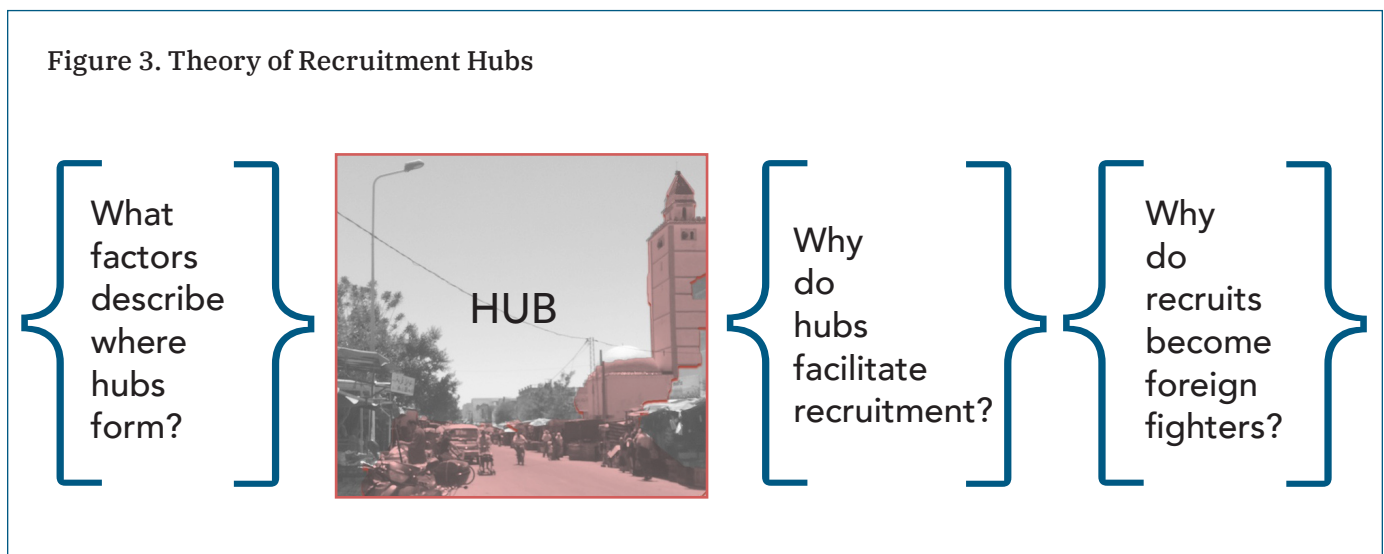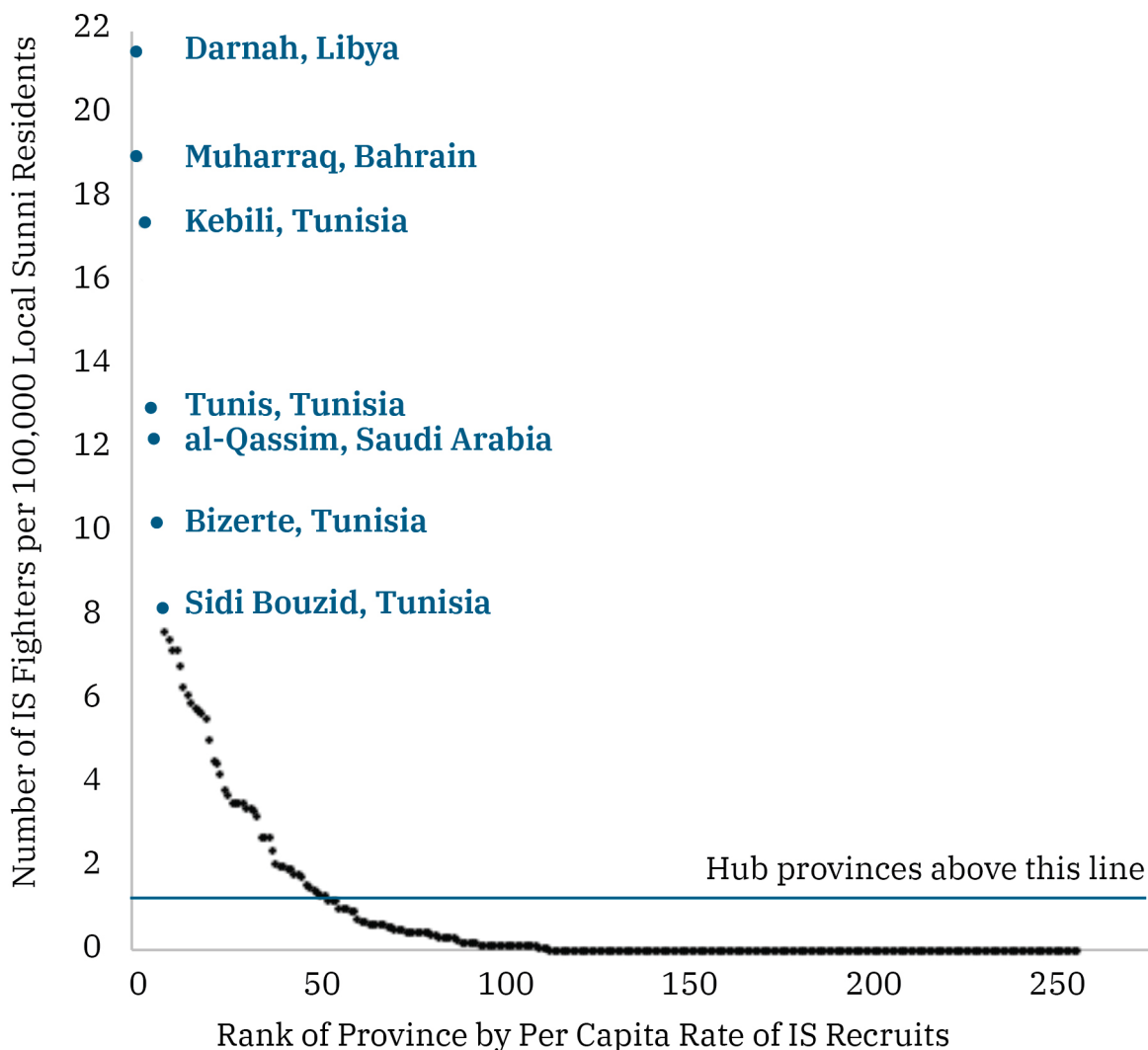
Figure 4. IS Foreign Fighter Recruitment Hubs in the Middle East and North Africa

isolation was reflected in a lack of state investment in education, infrastructure, culture, and recreation, as well as the means to lobby for greater state-owned resources. The social isolation involved a lack of legal status for many residents (e.g., birth certificates, property deeds), who thus faced constant discrimination.[67] And economic isolation was indicated by residents' struggle to find stable employment in the formal economy.

In response to their living conditions, residents from such communities naturally gravitate toward the informal economy.[68] When the idea of fighting in someone else's war spreads in such a community, interested residents naturally flow to informal means of doing so, whatever their motivation (e.g., economic opportunity or mobility afforded to soldiers, ideological belief in helping one side in a conflict, a desire to train and build connections to prepare to wage war at home).[69] The informal pathways for participation in a foreign conflict are attractive to the residents of such communities

because they believe more formal avenues (e.g., political influence, civic activism, financial assistance, enlistment) are not available to them. The cycle is self-reinforcing; the more attractive the informal economy is as a pathway for mobility in a given area, the more isolated that place becomes from formal sectors.

Finally, a political opportunity was a necessary precondition for a hub to form. In many countries, political transformations as a result of the Arab Spring and associated uprisings provided the opportunity for a recruitment hub to emerge. But this was not the only reason hubs emerged. The political support for rebel groups fighting in Syria provided another type of political opportunity. In the early years of Syria's civil war, it was easy—and in some cases encouraged—to mobilize support to send money, arms, or even fighters to join the rebel groups in Syria.[70] The Arab Spring provided the opportunity for foreign fighters to organize and mobilize in countries such as Tunisia, where the wave of regional unrest began in late 2010.[71] Countries such as Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, directed support to various anti-Assad rebel factions, providing the political justification for fighters to organize and mobilize.

A hub for foreign fighter recruitment forms when a group captures a community's core governing functions, such as protection and the local economy. Fieldwork in Tunisia found that Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia seized control of mosques in certain neighborhoods and formed community protection units in the first year of its emergence (2011–12). At that point, the community became a hub, although not yet for foreign fighting. Hubs became critical sites for IS recruitment for three principal reasons.

First, the reasons for joining expanded. Eventual IS recruitment hubs were places where a group exerted control over the levers of local governance by policing the streets and controlling the mosques.[72] In places that became hubs, a group often provided services that would otherwise be provided by state institutions, such as personal protection, religious instruction, and charity. Because groups effectively

became police forces, joining them could offer a recruit a level of power or social status in the larger community. Conversely, joining the group could offer protection against state and local law enforcement entities. "Every rascal had become a Salafi," one military officer observed in Tunisia before IS recruitment hubs were forming. "If I were a rascal, I would have done the same thing. Wearing a beard was a passport to immunity."[73]

Joining also offered a recruit the possibility of financial reward. The group could help a recruit start a business, because the group had cultivated a network of like-minded persons with whom a recruit could build relationships with frequent contact and a high degree of trust. The network could help a recruit raise a small amount of start-up capital or find other members with whom to share the burden of starting a business, such as a taxi service or a retail shop. The group could also help grow a new business by finding the best location to open a shop, often by displacing existing businesses whose owners did not support the group.[74]

There were many reasons to join such groups other than for power, prestige, protection, and financial reward. Relatedly, in the case of foreign fighter recruitment, local control achieved what economists call "scale effects"—wherein as a business grows, the average cost of producing each unit declines. In the case of foreign fighter recruitment, the more a hub grew, the easier it was to recruit each additional new member. Thus, members of an ideological movement could have joined for prosaic reasons without yet sharing the movement's ideology.

The second reason IS recruits were more likely to join through a recruitment hub was that the recruitment pitch itself was more nuanced, effective, and individualized. Friends and family of people who joined IS in Syria described how recruiters would "make a case study" of an individual before approaching that person.[75] Recruiters strove to learn anything they wanted to know about a potential recruit, which meant that their opening pitch to a potential member was highly personalized and therefore very effective.

Recruiters also knew the right time to approach a potential recruit. For example, one woman described living in a recruitment hub in Tunisia and recalled how her father, who suffered from a mental illness, was approached immediately after a traumatic episode. The recruiter "spoke so eloquently, it was almost impossible to refuse him," she explained.[76] Another person, who lived in an adjacent neighborhood, described how his cousin was approached after witnessing the death of a friend: "They said, 'We never know God's plan for us in this world. Would you like to talk about what happened and pray for your friend's soul?'"[77]

The third reason hubs were such effective sites for IS recruitment is that area residents had more opportunities to join. This dimension was pronounced in the case of Jazrawi, who was encouraged to consider becoming a foreign fighter several times over many years. In a hub, residents would see members of IS everywhere they went. Residents would see them in the mosque; they would see them promoting IS at all the major neighborhood intersections; and they would see IS fighters enforcing dress codes or certain patterns of behavior.[78] Like Jazrawi, hub residents would find that some of their friends or others they knew had decided to join the group. The mere fact that potential recruits had more opportunities to join IS meant that it was easier and more likely that they would do so. In hubs, peer pressure convinced those who might otherwise have "stayed on the fence" to join.

Hubs thus grew larger because potential recruits had more reasons to join, had more opportunities to join, and were persuaded more often to join. These hubs were also the most efficient way to recruit new members. Rather than operating secretively as in the past, recruitment efforts took place openly.[79]

Although this paper focuses on foreign fighters in conflicts in the broader Middle East, it is important to note that foreign fighting exists in a complex space alongside other forms of high-risk and often informal activities, including domestic insurgencies, organized criminal and gang activity, protests, and even illegal migration. For example, two researchers independently shared a common conclusion with the author: that foreign fighters from Tunisia viewed illegal migration and foreign fighting as substitutes for each other.[80] Recruitment hubs form in similar ways across these contexts. An organized crime group that works to take over a particular neighborhood requires political opportunity and a social opening.[81] The reason a recruitment hub forms—a foreign or domestic insurgency, gang-related drug smuggling, protests, or oppositional politics—depends on shifts in local contexts that are difficult to predict.

Where Are the Next Hubs for Foreign Fighters in the Middle East?

To paraphrase Dwight Eisenhower, peacetime predictions are of no particular value, but peacetime predicting is indispensable. Although the locations of future recruitment hubs are difficult to predict, thinking about where they will form is crucial. With that in mind, the discussion will now move to why the most likely place for recruitment hubs to emerge is in outlying urban neighborhoods.

A generation ago, new neighborhoods formed on the periphery of the region's cities as a result of rapid rural-urban migration. To this day, the children of those rural-urban migrants have not fully integrated into city life, yet they also do not share the rural traditions of their parents. This phenomenon of social change on the urban periphery, combined with inattention to the structural conditions that gave rise to IS recruitment hubs to begin with, is creating a situation of potentially severe social unrest. Provided the right political opportunity, such as fresh turmoil or a new regional conflict that galvanizes widespread interest, this combination could result in a new wave of foreign fighters.

In 2017, Yasmine (not her real name) met the author at a café on the busy Achier El Daya Street in Tripoli, Lebanon.[82] It was a trendy area lined by cafes and restaurants. On summer evenings, young men would drive by with their car windows or rooftops down, blasting Arabic pop music to show off their sound systems and to attract attention to themselves. Yasmine came to talk about a program she managed that worked with young people at risk of being recruited into gangs or militant groups that were sending young people to Syria. The conversation focused on the story of Ahmed (not his real name), whose case exemplified a common process of radicalization in Lebanon's restive northern region. Ahmed had grown up near Akkar, a rugged, conservative hinterland region around Tripoli. His mother was a teenager when she gave birth to him, but the family was not poor, and Ahmed was expected to attend university. As if the matter were not his choice, Ahmed left Akkar at age eighteen to attend the University of Tripoli.[83]

Ahmed was not interested in school and was ostracized by his peers for what they regarded as his uncivilized, rural appearance and habits. Eventually, he stopped attending classes. While his parents assumed he was in school, Ahmed instead worked odd jobs and spent time at cafés in Tripoli. Eventually, he was approached by an Islamic State recruiter looking for vulnerable youth just like himself. Ahmed eventually dropped out of school officially and might well have joined IS were it not for the intervention of Yasmine and her program.

The beginning of Ahmed's radicalization closely resembles the stories often heard about recent immigrants to Europe. As the French political scientist Olivier Roy has observed, the prototypical terrorist attack in Europe is perpetrated by a second-generation immigrant who does not fully share either the identity of his or her parents or the identity of the family's newly adopted country.[84] Although Ahmed did not move to a new country, his shift to Tripoli from Lebanon's countryside still felt significant. Indeed, across much of the Middle East, the cultural differences between rural and urban areas are as stark as those separating one country from another.

Rural-to-urban migration in the Middle East peaked in the mid-1990s.[85] Assuming that many of those people started families after their move, their children would have been coming of age when IS first formed in spring 2013. Although slightly different from Ahmed, who moved to Tripoli for university, young people from similar origins faced discrimination in their family's newly adopted neighborhoods, based on the author's on-the-ground observations in Morocco, Lebanon, and Tunisia. For example, one student from Jbal Lahmar, a Tunis neighborhood that was once an IS recruitment hub, recalled being stopped by a police officer who asked where he was going. "I told him I was going home to Jbal Lahmar after classes. He asked me what I was studying. When he heard the answer, the policeman burst out laughing: 'An architect, in Jbal Lahmar?'"[86]

If another jihadist mobilization effort emerges, its leaders will seek new recruits from isolated and generally poorer parts of relatively wealthy cities that are characterized by high rates of unemployment, gendered labor market competition, and a lack of social hierarchy. The reason these areas will remain recruitment hubs is twofold. Rural-urban migration has continued, although not at the same high levels as in the 1990s, and governments in the region have not addressed the underlying conditions that transformed particular areas into hubs in the first place. Without long-term investment in economic development and broad social integration of these communities by regional governments (with support from the international community), residents will continue to harbor the same grievances that previously attracted recruitment efforts by jihadist groups.

Although the factors described above can lead to hubs for foreign fighting, they also show how becoming a transnational insurgent exists in a complex space that can encompass other "contentious politics," a term that includes social movements, protests, civil wars, revolutions, and insurgencies. A hub for protest, for example, can

emerge where a jihadist hub once existed.[87] Darnah, Libya, is illustrative. An "Islamic state" has twice been declared in Darnah, first in 1991 and again when IS captured the city in 2014. But outside those years too, Darnah was a longtime hub for transnational jihadism. Residents became foreign fighters only when they could not fight the same war at home.[88] Meanwhile, the neighborhood of Dahiya, a suburb of Beirut, supplies fighters for Hezbollah.[89] Likewise, residents of Sadr City, a suburb of Baghdad, supported the Shia insurgency against the U.S. occupation of Iraq and later became a hub of support for the Sadrist movement, a political group.[90] Sidi Moumen, an impoverished neighborhood in Casablanca, supplied most of the suicide bombers for an attack in 2003,[91] and Jamaa Mezouak, a neighborhood in Tetouan, Morocco, was a hub for foreign fighters to Iraq and the childhood home of several perpetrators of the 2004 bombings in Madrid.[92]

Hubs like Darnah, Dahiya, Sadr City, Sidi Moumen, and Jamaa Mezouak are sites of domestic or transnational militancy when there is a political opportunity for them to emerge as such. Without this opportunity, people can engage in other types of political contention. In January 2021, for example, protests erupted in Tunisia over pandemic-related lockdowns. Some of the most active protest sites were in Douar Hicher and Ettadhamen, poor Tunis neighborhoods that previously had served as IS recruitment hubs in the mid-2010s.[93] Hubs all share common characteristics that led to their formation, but the purpose (e.g., domestic or foreign insurgency, protest, gang recruitment,[94] intense support for a political cause) of any given hub strongly depends on local conditions.

Policy Recommendations

In May 2020, Daniel Benaim and Jake Sullivan, who were then serving as Biden campaign advisors,

argued that the United States should aim to wind down the region's conflicts and find a more stable accommodation of powers in the Middle East.[95] Whatever moves the administration makes, part of its approach must include devoting greater resources and attention to the continued crisis of foreign fighters in the region. Demobilizing current foreign fighters and limiting the size of future waves will reduce the duration, complexity, and intensity of the region's conflicts. Investments now to lessen the impact of foreign fighters, while their activities are at an ebb, will prove more cost-effective than deploying U.S. troops to fight another war or waiting for a new round of attacks in the United States or targeting U.S. allies and partners. There are many potential policies that could address this challenge, each of which deserves its own study. This paper's focus on hubs suggests that great progress can be made through concentrating on the places relied on by IS and other militant groups to sustain their ranks and fill their coffers. U.S. counterterrorism policymakers should considering employing the following strategies in particular.

Use Development Tools to Identify and Proactively Disrupt Future Recruitment Hubs

Most future-oriented policies for addressing transnational waves of fighters focus on preventing them from reaching various wars or from joining various insurgent groups. Although this approach may deny foreign fighters some opportunities to mobilize, it is hardly sufficient for addressing the complex threats foreign fighters pose. Not all political opportunities that allow foreign fighters to mobilize can be predicted, prevented, or proscribed. The Biden administration could reduce the size of future foreign fighter waves by focusing on their typical places of origin. To head off future hubs and their outsize role in foreign fighter recruitment, the administration should design programs with three points of emphasis.

1. **Focus counter-messaging resources and counter-recruitment programs on hubs.**
   Given the outsize role of hubs in the recruitment of foreign fighters, counter-messaging and counter-recruitment campaigns need to locate hubs and tailor their messages and programs to counteract recruitment efforts in these areas. This includes countering the recruitment of active members as well as the wider support networks terrorist groups rely on to sustain their insurgencies. Further, because recruitment in hubs is highly tailored to the individual conditions of potential new joiners, counter-messaging and counter-recruitment resources should likewise be as personalized as possible. Although such an effort may seem daunting, tools exist to shape the individual's experience with potentially radicalizing content, whether online or in person. One example is the Redirect Method, which uses Google Adwords targeting and YouTube videos to direct online users away from recruitment campaigns and toward videos that debunk such recruitment themes.[96]

   U.S. efforts across the board should be similarly targeted to the individual's experience with recruitment efforts, recognizing that much of the world population feels helpless, angry, or disenfranchised. Those who act negatively on their frustrations usually experience both an activating trigger and an encounter with someone who channels those frustrations into a political message that leads to the belief that certain actions, such as violence, are meaningful sacrifices. This paper has shown that radicalization is highly individualized, even if concentrated in rural towns and city neighborhoods that become recruitment hubs. That is why counter-messaging efforts by the U.S. Department of State's Global Engagement Center in Washington DC, Hedayah or the Sawab Center in the UAE, and other entities must focus on active recruitment hubs and work to validate the frustrations of vulnerable individuals while redirecting the political culture toward a meaningful alternative to violence.

2. **Implement short- and long-term development strategies to mitigate the formation of new hubs.**
   In the short term, the most successful aspects of the toolkit for preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) should be implemented. At their core, successful programs are locally led, focus on local drivers of recruitment, and track their impact based on the individual-level changes of participants. The last point is key: a focus on measuring how individuals' propensities for violence shift over their participation in a P/CVE program could yield an evidence base to determine whether interventions are working.[97]

   Successful P/CVE programs that focus on individual-level behavioral changes can include support for community-based psychosocial support groups, anonymous referral systems, and awareness training for police and other law enforcement entities.

3. **Support long-term investment in the economic development and social integration of communities vulnerable to becoming hubs.**
   Investment in economic development and social integration is, at heart, a governance challenge. Regional governments, with support from the international community, should address the structural conditions most likely to give rise to militant groups (e.g., isolation, informality, and lack of social structure). Such efforts should include greater investment in basic infrastructure (e.g., educational and recreational resources, roadways, and sewage systems) with the aim of boosting opportunities in at-risk areas for mobility within the formal economy. Government jobs, not private-sector employment, remain an important pathway for upward mobility by the lower middle classes of the Middle East, a fact that should be considered in economic develop-ment policy before pursuit of headlong privatiza-tion across the region.[98]

Demobilize Hubs Sustaining the Most Recent Foreign Fighter Wave

U.S. leadership of multilateral efforts to repatriate and prosecute foreign fighters is critical to overcoming differences among America's counter-terrorism partners with regard to a constructive way forward. Repatriation of foreign fighters is essential yet so complex an undertaking that separate in-depth policy analysis is required.[99] From this paper's perspective, the tens of thousands of people currently held in temporary detention facilities and displacement camps in northeast Syria essentially live in recruitment hubs for trans-national jihadism. Moreover, with tens of thousands of children present, these camps could not only sustain the current transnational jihadist movement but also be a gateway for new joiners to the next foreign fighter wave.[100] In these places, even well-designed disengagement and reintegration programs will struggle to gain traction. The power dynamics there favor IS supporters to such an extent that it is safer to identify as an IS ideologue than to engage meaningfully in programs that encourage denouncing the group's beliefs.[101]

The U.S. policy priority for northeast Syria must be to break up the detention and displacement camps by sending foreign nationals back home and working to reintegrate them into mainstream society.[102] Being clear-eyed about the associated risks is a first step. Only a small number of returning foreign fighters have perpetrated highly lethal attacks, mostly within the first year after returning home.[103] However, histories of foreign fighters demonstrate that the greatest threat they pose is not necessarily that of conducting an attack but of using their skills to convince others to carry out attacks or organize groups to use violence.[104]

U.S. policy has thus far been modestly successful in demobilizing the last wave of foreign fighters, but these efforts flagged under the Trump administration and must be renewed now with greater urgency, diplomatic attention, and resources.[105] Through the framework of the State Department's Global Coalition to Defeat Daesh/ISIS, the United States has worked with countries to rewrite their laws to close loopholes so that citizens who join foreign insurgencies can be prosecuted for doing so.[106] The al-Hawl camp is being slowly dismantled, starting with Syrian nationals[107] and continuing with some Iraqi nationals who have been sent back to Iraq.[108]

Iraqi foreign fighters pose unique challenges. They make up the largest proportion of foreign nationals detained or displaced in Syria,[109] and their cases are more complex than those of other nationals. Unlike Tunisia or Saudi Arabia, for example, IS committed atrocities in Iraq, and the Iraqi government struggles with transitional justice on top of repatriating and potentially prosecuting Iraqi nationals who remain in neighboring Syria.[110] Approximately nine hundred Iraqi IS fighters have been repatriated from Syria as of February 2021,[111] putting more strain on what has been described as a broken justice system that favors prosecuting as many cases as possible with show trials and draconian punishments for the convicted.[112] The system's various incentives have resulted in the capture of mostly lower-level fighters, who are easy to find and lack the resources to defend themselves in court. Higher-level IS officers, meanwhile, have better access to resources and more often escape punishment. The perverse incentives that perpetuate this system in Iraq sow the seeds for future conflicts and urgently need to be ended. For Iraqi nationals, U.S. policy and resources should push for imple-mentation of truth and reconciliation commissions, as seen in other post conflict settings. In this way, the vast majority of resources would be used for prosecuting cases against higher-level officials in IS, with the remaining attention and resources used to help ensure that lower-level IS-affiliated fighters and families are quickly reintegrated into society.[113]

Farther afield, the United States has worked with some Middle East countries to repatriate foreign fighters, but thus far Jordan is the only country mentioned in public sources.[114] The United States has helped track threats, shared biometric data on foreign fighters, and financed and trained countries to shore up border security.[115] The Biden administration should continue these policies and

offer additional assistance as part of ramped-up diplomatic efforts to pressure countries, particularly those in Europe, to repatriate their citizens and prosecute them for the crimes they have committed. Repatriation and prosecution can be done through existing multilateral forums, including but not limited to the eighty-two-member Global Coalition to Defeat Daesh/ISIS, the Global Counterterrorism Forum, the UN Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate, Canada's interactive Advance Passenger Information and Passenger Name Record data, and other means of information sharing, such as battlefield evidence collected during the counter-IS battle.

Many governments openly recognize the threats but remain reluctant to repatriate any of their citizens. More research is needed on effective models for repatriating, prosecuting, and eventually reintegrating fighters and families. Still, North Macedonia may be one model the Biden administration can look to regarding the repatriation of family members of IS fighters who remain in northeast Syria.[116] The approach in North Macedonia is to not imprison returnees but rather release them back into the communities from which they were recruited. In turn, North Macedonia developed a "whole of society" framework to address the complex risks that returnees pose, including state and local collaboration on information sharing and the inclusion and empowerment of civil society as frontline advisors. Returning fighters is the first step, and the greatest priority, and must also include appropriate resources and support for the prosecution, sentencing (where possible), monitoring (if not), and eventual reintegration of foreign fighters and their families.[117]

Rebalance Counterterrorism Resources to Address Foreign Fighters as Part of a Complex System of Threats

In 2018, U.S. policy acknowledged that "preparedness and prevention must be integral parts of [U.S.] counterterrorism strategy." Yet this strategy focused on border security, infrastructure security, enhanced "preparedness of the American people," and strong partnerships with foreign country partners.[118] The Biden administration could make further inroads against insurgents that recruit foreign fighters by rebalancing its counterterrorism strategy away from a securitized approach that relies on hardened buildings and high walls and toward one that leverages development and diplomatic tools to prevent individuals from becoming foreign fighters and facilitates their exit from groups if they join them. The best way to understand how people are radicalized and recruited, and how they may be convinced later to leave, is by focusing on the rural towns and city neighborhoods from which they are recruited. Understanding and remedying conditions in these places requires a balanced approach aimed at building institutions that empower residents to protect their communities.

The main thrust of U.S. efforts to mitigate a potential new wave of foreign fighters has been to prevent their mobilization.[119] This approach may deny foreign fighters some opportunities to mobilize, but it is not enough. It is not possible to predict and prevent each new opportunity, which means at least part of the mitigation effort must address the underlying structural conditions that give rise to mobilization.

To understand those conditions at the local level, the Biden administration should give members of vulnerable communities a chance to participate in efforts to safeguard themselves against terrorist group recruitment. That includes empowering multilateral forums, such as the Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund, which collects global resources for use by grassroots initiatives; the Strong Cities Network, given the importance of cities in hub formation; and the Global Counterterrorism Forum, which coordinates best practices on the rule of law and border management to counter violent extremism.[120] Finally, although still in its early stages, the Global Fragility Act of 2019 aims to stabilize conflict-affected areas and would be ideally suited to consider the complex system of threats posed by recruitment hubs.[121] These varied efforts focus on different dimensions of the challenges that

give rise to extremist recruitment hubs and fit the Biden administration's larger vision for cost-effective, sustainable ways to thwart terrorist groups from replenishing their ranks and coffers.

Foreign fighters are part of a complex system of potential threats to communities, fragile states, and the international community. Hubs can emerge for foreign fighter recruitment efforts in much the same way hubs can emerge for gang recruitment, organized crime recruitment, or domestic insurgent group recruitment. The hubs from which foreign fighters have been recruited also may form toward other, less clearly negative outcomes, such as protest organizing or even political party mobilization. That is why an integrated approach to addressing the complex system of problems is so important. By giving diplomatic and development actors more sway, counterterrorism efforts are more likely to see the foreign fighter challenge in the complex context from which it emerges, rather than solely as a threat to be eliminated. ❖

Acknowledgments

Annex A. Socioeconomic Backgrounds of IS Foreign Fighters

	Hubs (n=1,546)		Non-hubs (n=544)		
	Mean	**SD**	**Mean**	**SD**	**χ^2**
Year fighter was born	1988	(5.5)	1985	(7.2)	47.4***
Marital status 1 = single 2 = married 3 = number of children	1.36	(0.7)	1.71	(0.9)	67.5***
Formal education 1 = none 2 = primary school 3 = secondary school 4 = some university 5 = university graduate	3.26	(1.1)	3.19	(1.2)	1.6
Religious knowledge 1 = simple 2 = intermediate 3 = advanced	1.37	(0.6)	1.44	(0.6)	3.4
Profession 1 = no work 2 = low income/temporary 3 = blue collar 4 = professional 5 = advanced professional	2.54	(1.1)	2.75	(1.0)	15.2***
Countries visited	2.26	(1.2)	2.22	(1.3)	1.6
Previous jihad	0.07	(0.3)	0.12	(0.3)	10.1**

Note: Foreign fighters who joined IS from hubs were younger (fighters from hubs were born on average in 1988; those not from hubs were born on average in 1985), less likely to be married (marital status score = 1.36 vs. 1.71), less likely to be employed (profession status score = 2.54 versus 2.75), and less likely to have fought in a previous jihad (7% of fighters from hubs vs. 12% of fighters not from hubs). Asterisks indicate that these differences are statistically significant. *$p < .05$ (two-tailed); **$p < .01$; *** $p < .001$ Summary of differences between IS foreign fighters in hubs and non-hubs performed by Mann-Whitney U test. SD = standard deviation.

Source: IS foreign fighter registration forms.

Annex B. Factors Affecting Likelihood of Hub Formation

Independent variable	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	Odds ratio	SE	Odds ratio	SE	Odds ratio	SE	Odds ratio	SE
Youth unemployment (ages 20–24)	.97	.03	.96				.98	.03
Youth unemployment (ages 25–29)	1.13*	.05	1.05	.04			1.13*	.06
University educated unemployment rate	1.01	.03	1.08*	.03			.99	.04
Homeownership rate	1.03**	.01			1.04***	.01	1.03**	.01
Log monthly household expenditures	7.62***	3.43			3.48***	1.23	6.09***	2.92
Female economic activity rates			1.07***	.02	1.07*	.03	1.05	0.03
Model χ^2	93.3***		73.4***		78.1***		96.2***	
Pseudo R²	.40		.31		.33		.41	

*Note: Number of observations = 250; intercepts not shown; constants not shown but include bordering Syria, land or sea border, log distance to Syria, log provincial population. * p < .05 (two-tailed); ** p < .01; *** p < .001. SE = standard error.*

Note: This table shows four model tests for estimating the extent to which the independent variables listed above increase or decrease the likelihood of a hub forming. All numbers above 1 increase the likelihood of a hub forming; numbers below 1 imply a decrease in this likelihood. Numbers marked with an asterisk are statistically significant to at least a 95 percent confidence interval. The results show that wealth factors were positively correlated with the likelihood of a hub forming and were the most robust compared to other variables shown in the models. High unemployment among young people in their late twenties and increases in women's participation rate in the workforce were both positively correlated with hub formation, although these factors were less robust.

Source: IS foreign fighter registration forms.

Annex C. Translation of IS Foreign Fighter Registration Form

1. Full name

2. Kunya (nickname/nom de guerre)

3. Mother's name

4. Blood type

5. Date of birth and citizenship*

6. Marital status: [check box] single, married, number of children*

7. Address and place of residence*

8. Education level*

9. Level of sharia expertise:

   [check box] advanced, intermediate, basic*

10. Occupation prior to your arrival*

11. Countries visited and time spent in each*

12. Point of entry and facilitator

13. Do you have a recommendation? If so, from whom?

14. Date of entry

15. Have you engaged in jihad before? If so, where?*

16. [Do you want to be a] fighter, suicide bomber, or suicide fighter?

17. Specialty: [check boxes for] fighter, sharia [official], security, administrative

18. Current work location

19. Personal belongings that you deposited

20. Level of understanding of orders and obedience

21. Address where point of contact can be reached

22. Date and location of death

23. Notes

* Considered for analysis in this paper.

NOTES

1. *Dabiq*, no. 1 (July 2014), 7, available at https://jihadology.net/wp-content/uploads/_pda/2014/07/islamic-state-22dc481biq-magazine-122.pdf.

2. David Malet, "Foreign Fighter Mobilization and Persistence in a Global Context," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 27, no. 3 (2015): 454–73.

3. "IS Foreign Fighters: 5,600 Have Returned Home—Report," BBC, October 24, 2017, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-41734069.

4. The "broader Middle East" will herein be referred to as the "Middle East." For the purposes of this paper, which focuses on foreign fighters from the Arabic-speaking world who joined IS in Iraq and Syria, the following seventeen countries or regions are included: Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, the Palestinian territories, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. These are countries/territories where Arabic is an official language and is spoken by a majority or plurality of the population.

5. This paper will focus on findings that relate to transnational jihadist foreign fighters because this is the main foreign fighter type at present in the Middle East and North Africa. Malet defines foreign fighters as "noncitizens of conflict states who join insurgencies during civil conflict." This definition includes not only terrorist foreign fighters but also any individual who joins any insurgent group in a foreign country's civil conflict. David Malet, *Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identity in Civic Conflicts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 9.

6. Daniel Benaim and Jake Sullivan, "America's Opportunity in the Middle East: Diplomacy Could Succeed Where Military Force Has Failed," *Foreign Affairs*, May 22, 2020, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2020-05-22/americas-opportunity-middle-east.

7. The counter-IS fight cost "more than thirteen million dollars a day" during the operations to capture Raqqa and Mosul from the group, lasting from late 2016 until late 2017. See Robin Wright, "Mosul Falls: What Is Next for ISIS?" *The New Yorker*, July 9, 2017, https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/mosul-falls-what-is-next-for-isis.

8. Harald Doornbos and Jenan Moussa, "Present at the Creation: The Never-Told-Before Story of the Meeting That Led to the Creation of ISIS, as Explained by an Islamic State Insider," *Foreign Policy*, August 16, 2016, http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/08/16/present-at-the-creation/.

9. Malet, "Foreign Fighter Mobilization."

10. Abu Thabit al-Jazrawi, "How I joined the jihad," Twitter [preserved in original Arabic], April 14, 2014, https://web.archive.org/web/20140415182222/www.justpaste.it/f2tm.

11. Author's analysis of IS foreign fighter registration forms. Described in more detail by Nate Rosenblatt, "All Jihad Is Local: What ISIS' Files Tell Us About Its Fighters," New America, July 20, 2016, https://www.newamerica.org/international-security/policy-papers/all-jihad-is-local/.

12. Although this paper uses the words *recruit* and *recruitment* to describe the phenomenon by which foreign fighters joined IS, as Hegghammer notes, recruitment is a two-way street in that potential joiners can seek a group just as much as a group can seek new joiners via a "multiplicity [of] possible trajectories from normalcy to militant activism." Thomas Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia: Violence and Pan-Islamism Since 1979* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

13. There is some debate over documenting the so-called waves or phases of jihadist militancy. Most researchers agree the first wage corresponded to the formation of AQ and its involvement in the jihad against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan and that the fourth wave was the emergence of jihadist groups during the Syrian civil war. There is less agreement on the second wave, which could have been a pivot in the mid-1990s to focusing on the "far enemy" (the United States) rather than the "near enemy" (e.g., Algeria, Egypt). Others argue that the second wave emerged after the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Those who believe the second wave emerged in the 1990s argue that the third wave was the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Those who believe the U.S. invasion of Iraq constituted the second wave see the emergence of AQAP as the third. See, e.g., Seth G. Jones, "Beyond

Baghdadi: The Next Wave of Jihadist Violence," *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, November 4, 2019, https://www.csis.org/analysis/beyond-baghdadi-next-wave-jihadist-violence; "Exploiting Disorder: Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State," International Crisis Group, March 14, 2016, https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/exploiting-disorder-al-qaeda-and-islamic-state; Glenn E. Robinson, *Global Jihad: A Brief History* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020); and Rik Coolsaet, "Facing the Fourth Foreign Fighters Wave: What Drives Europeans to Syria, and to Islamic State? Insights from the Belgian Case," Egmont Institute, March 2016, https://www.egmontinstitute.be/content/uploads/2016/02/egmont.papers.81_online-versie.pdf?type=pdf.

14. Robin Wright, et al., "The Jihadi Threat: ISIS, al-Qaeda, and Beyond," United States Institute of Peace and Wilson Center, December 2016/January 2017, https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/The-Jihadi-Threat-ISIS-Al-Qaeda-and-Beyond.pdf.

15. International Crisis Group, "Exploiting Disorder."

16. As the coalition is now known. ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham) and Daesh are alternative names for the Islamic State.

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45. One common theme flowing through this paper is that the motivations for joining violent extremist groups are so diverse that it is difficult to set a policy that can reliably address any one dimension. Rather, understanding *where* foreign fighters come from can perhaps serve as a better proxy for *why* they join. Where fighters come from combines the structural dimensions that contribute to their mobilization with the social network factors that facilitate them.

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52. Richard Barrett, "Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Return," Soufan Center, October 2017, https://thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Beyond-the-Caliphate-Foreign-Fighters-and-the-Threat-of-Returnees-TSC-Report-October-2017-v3.pdf.

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59. For results from which this analysis is drawn, see annex A.

60. Malet, "Foreign Fighter Mobilization."

61. David Sterman and Nate Rosenblatt, "All Jihad Is Local, Volume II: ISIS in North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula," New America, International Security Program, April 2018, https://www.newamerica.org/international-security/policy-papers/all-jihad-local-volume-ii/.

62. A good summary of extant research on the subject can be found in Erica Chenoweth and Pauline Moore, *The Politics of Terror* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

63. John Horgan, "Speaking of Psychology: Getting into a Terrorist's Mind," American Psychological Association, http://www.apa.org/research/action/speaking-of-psychology/terrorist-mind.aspx.

64. A hub (see figure 4) is a geographic area (e.g., governorate, province) in the Middle East and North Africa where the per capita foreign fighter recruitment rate is at least twice the average rate in the region overall. IS recruited approximately 8.6 foreign fighters per 1 million people in the region in 2013–14.

65. Aaron Y. Zelin, *Your Sons Are at Your Service: Tunisia's Missionaries of Jihad* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020); Rosenblatt, "The Architects of Salvation."

66. See annex B for detailed results.

67. A psychologist interviewed by this author in July 2019 described people from one neighborhood in Tunis that became a major hub of foreign fighter recruitment: "They feel like even though they are under the Tunisian sky, they are still not welcome in certain neighborhoods." A similar dynamic has been observed in Tripoli, Lebanon; see Raphaël Lefèvre, "The Sociopolitical Undercurrent of Lebanon's Salafi Militancy," Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center, March 27, 2018, https://carnegie-mec.org/2018/03/27/sociopolitical-undercurrent-of-lebanon-s-salafi-militancy-pub-75744.

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a general pathway for understanding how individuals are radicalized. It is best to be wary of fitting broad reasons on a general population. See John Horgan, "Getting into a Terrorist's Mind," in *Speaking of Psychology*, produced by the American Psychological Association, podcast, http://www.apa.org/research/action/speaking-of-psychology/terrorist-mind.aspx.

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73. "Tunisia: Violence and the Salafi Challenge," International Crisis Group, February 2013, https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/tunisia/tunisia-violence-and-salafi-challenge.

74. Rosenblatt, "Architects of Salvation."

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76. Author's interview with the daughter of a potential IS recruit, Tunis, February 20, 2019.

77. Author's interview with the brother of an IS foreign fighter, Tunis, June 12, 2019.

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79. Nate Rosenblatt, "Localism as Secrecy: Efficiency-Secrecy Tradeoffs in the Recruitment of ISIS Foreign Fighters" (Department of Sociology, University of Oxford, November 2020), https://arxiv.org/pdf/2011.12290.pdf.

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81. Federico Varese, *Mafias on the Move: How Organized Crime Conquers New Territories* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).

82. Author's interview with Yasmine in Tripoli, July 2017.

83. Ibid.

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