



# ISIS: The Threat to the United States

**ThreatKnowledgeGroup** Special Report

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November 2015

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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With the November 13<sup>th</sup> attack in Paris that killed 130 people and injured 368, many are asking what the risk is of a similar attack on U.S. soil. While France has a proportionately larger Muslim population than the United States (7.5% of the total population in France compared with .6% – 2.2% in the U.S.), ISIS has already recruited supporters in the United States with the intent of executing domestic attacks here in America. Key evidence includes the following:

- **82 individuals in the United States affiliating with ISIS have been interdicted by law enforcement** since March 2014 (including 7 unnamed minors and 4 killed in the course of attacks). (For a full list of those individuals see [www.ThreatKnowledge.org](http://www.ThreatKnowledge.org))
- **More than 250 individuals from the United States have joined or attempted to join ISIS** in Syria and Iraq according to the [Final Report of the Task Force on Combating Terrorist and Foreign Fighter Travel](#) published by the U.S. House of Representatives Homeland Security Committee in September 2015.
- **The FBI currently has nearly 1,000 ongoing ISIS probes in the United States**, according to a recent report by [Judicial Watch](#).
- ISIS is recruiting within the U.S. at about **three-times the rate of Al Qaeda**.
- Ali Shukri Amin, a 17 year-old Islamic State (IS) supporter from Manassas, Virginia, recently sentenced to 11 years in prison for conspiring to provide support to ISIS, had nearly **4,000 Twitter followers**, under the alias, 'Amreeki Witness.'
- Ahmad Musa Jibril, an Arab-American Islamist preacher living in Dearborn, Michigan, had **38,000 Twitter followers** before his site went silent. A [report](#) by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR) found that 60% of surveyed foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria followed Jibril on Twitter.

What the numbers demonstrate is that ISIS has a significant base of support in the United States, including both those who have already traveled to Iraq and Syria to fight as *jihadis*, as well as terror suspects who have been interdicted for attempting to travel there, providing support to ISIS in other tangible ways, or attempting attacks.

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Most importantly, **nearly one third of the domestic ISIS cases in the past 18 months involved people who planned to carry out attacks against Americans on U.S. soil.** In other words, one third of those interdicted calculated that the best way to serve the new Islamic State and its Caliph, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, is to wage jihad here on the soil of the infidel.

It is also essential to note the number of followers of ISIS propagandists Ali Shukri Amin and Ahmad Musa Jibril, which shows that domestic support for ISIS may reach well into the thousands. With Syrian refugees starting to arrive in the United States, these numbers may further increase.

## ISIS VS. AL QAEDA: ASSESSING THE THREAT

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Al Qaeda was able to carry out the most successful terrorist attack in modern history 14 years ago on Sept. 11<sup>th</sup> 2001. ISIS, however, presents a much greater threat for the following reasons:

- **ISIS is a fully-fledged insurgency, not merely a terrorist group as Al Qaeda was.** Wherever it had been operating over the last 14 years, Al Qaeda was never a true insurgency. For example, in both Afghanistan and Somalia it functioned as a terrorist organization which attached itself to a pre-existing domestic insurgency, the Taliban and Al Shabaab respectively. In these theaters Al Qaeda never recruited its own mass base of fighters. In contrast, in less than two years ISIS has recruited an insurgent force of indigenous and foreign fighters that now numbers more than 60,000. As a result, it has been able to successfully capture large expanses of territory in multiple countries, giving it far greater reach and recruiting capability than Al Qaeda ever had.
- **ISIS is the richest non-state threat group in modern history.** The *Financial Times* has [estimated](#) that in the last 12 months, ISIS generated \$500 million from illicit oil sales, local taxation, and hostage-taking. When one considers that the official *9/11 Commission Report* estimated the cost to Al Qaeda of the 9/11 operation at \$500,000, it is clear that ISIS is in another league entirely and has ample financial capacity to carry out large-scale attacks.
- **ISIS has successfully declared the Caliphate after 90 years absence, and it is growing.** ISIS now claims 35 affiliate groups who have sworn allegiance or pledged support in countries ranging from Libya, Tunisia, Nigeria, and Yemen to the Philippines, Pakistan and Indonesia.
- **ISIS is successfully recruiting from the U.S. at a far greater rate than Al Qaeda.** Al Qaeda arrests averaged 1.5 per month compared with an average of 4.1 ISIS cases between mid-March 2014 and mid-November 2015, a nearly 300% increase in the rate of ISIS recruiting over Al Qaeda in the United States.

## UNDERSTANDING THE THREAT: THE EVOLUTION OF ISIS

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The origins of ISIS can be traced back to Al Qaeda, whose story begins in 1979 with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Its founder was a Sunni Islamic scholar and theologian named Abdullah Azzam. Born into a Palestinian family that fled the West Bank after the Israeli victory in the Six Day War, Azzam became a disciple of the Muslim Brotherhood, studying the works of Hassan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb during his formative years. He studied in Syria and Egypt, and taught in Saudi Arabia. In each of these places, he was close to the leading Islamist movements of the day. As a result, he was able to bring their disparate intellectual threads together into a cohesive doctrine, which he published in 1984 under the title [Defense of Muslim Lands](#). That fatwa became the foundational work for the global jihad, because it contained the key beliefs at the heart of every modern jihadist enterprise:

- Jihad is a personal obligation.
- Muslims have been humiliated at the hands of impure Arab regimes and Western colonial powers.
- Islam will suffer ultimate defeat if Muslims do not take on jihad as a personal obligation.
- Reestablishing the Caliphate is the ultimate goal of the Islamic faith.

These were the ideological grounds for modern jihad; Later, Osama bin Laden, Azzam's deputy, was able to turn them into the basis for a successful terrorist enterprise. His power to do so was in no small part because of his ability personally to fund the resultant organization, Al Qaeda. His fortune was estimated at \$300 million, and at one point he claimed to be supporting jihadist groups in 13 different countries.

In his 1996 [fatwa](#), "Declaration of War Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places," Osama bin Laden declared jihad against the United States. He blamed the "Jewish-Crusader Alliance" for what he saw as the corruption of the Saudi regime, and he highlighted what he saw as the suffering of Muslims, especially Palestinians and Iraqis. He believed Muslims had the obligation to carry out defensive jihad where Muslim lands were occupied by non-Muslims—notably against the American military presence on Saudi soil.

Then Bin Laden published a [letter](#) in January 2001 that indicated his ideology had evolved one step further. In the 1990s jihad had become more and more offensive, but now he sought to make Islam victorious over all, with all the enemies of Islam defeated and all Muslim countries of the world united into one:

Today, every member of the Muslim world agrees that all the Muslim countries of the world having geographical boundaries on the basis of nationality, geography, religious discord, color and race, should be merged into one Muslim state, where men do not rule men. There should be one caliph for the whole state whose capital should be Mecca. There should be one currency and defense for this state and the Holy Koran should be its constitution. The name that has been proposed for this vast state is

Global Muslim State. I want to congratulate you that by the grace of God, from today, we have begun the task of achieving a highly important and strong target of domination of Islam over all other religions.

But while bin Laden aspired to establish the Global Muslim State, or the Caliphate, he did not necessarily think it would happen in his lifetime. Instead, he pledged allegiance to Mullah Omar, the leader of the Afghan Taliban. As bin Laden described it, Mullah Omar was the only man in the world leading an Islamic state. Mullah Omar was just an emir not a Caliph, and the land he ruled was not a Caliphate, but here one can clearly see planted the idea that would eventually bear fruit with ISIS' declaration of the Caliphate in Iraq and Syria in June of last year.

## FROM AL QAEDA TO ISIS

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Three factors were pivotal to the success of Al Qaeda:

1. The ideological foundation justifying jihad found in the writings of Abdullah Azzam.
2. The millions of dollars that flowed in from bin Laden and others to support jihad.
3. The personal experience many young Muslims had gained in fighting jihad in places such as Afghanistan, Chechnya, Bosnia, Kashmir, and the Palestinian territories.

One such acolyte was a Jordanian named Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who had met Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan in late 1999. Zarqawi was a criminal and a thug. He is reported to have had 37 run-ins with police prior to his career as a terrorist, and Zarqawi and bin Laden would eventually clash themselves. Zarqawi would call for the execution of all Shi'ites in Iraq, in keeping with Salafist Islamic teachings, whereas Bin Laden was more tolerant of the Shi'a.

Zarqawi and bin Laden also differed on the nature of the enemy. Bin Laden was focused on the "far enemy:" Israel and the United States. Zarqawi's first objective was to overthrow the Jordanian regime, but then he broadened his focus to include al-Sham. Geographically, al-Sham, or the Levant, refers to the area that includes Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and the territory of Palestine. Theologically it has great significance in Islamic eschatology: al-Sham is deemed to be the site of the last jihad between true Muslims and the forces of the infidel led by an anti-Christ-like figure. Judgement day will be preceded by a series of battles culminating in the city of Dabiq in northern Syria. As a result, ISIS is sending a very clear message to potential recruits: if you had a desire to be a jihadi to secure your own salvation this is your very last opportunity as they have captured the territory of al-Sham, and the final jihad has begun.

While still in Afghanistan, Zarqawi formed the organization Jund al-Sham, Soldiers of al-Sham, and he named himself the Emir. Then in December 2001, Zarqawi left Afghanistan and moved his operations to Iran and Iraq. In 2004 Zarqawi established Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), swearing allegiance to Bin Laden. AQI conducted countless terrorist attacks and bombings and helped fuel the insurgency against the U.S. forces deployed there.

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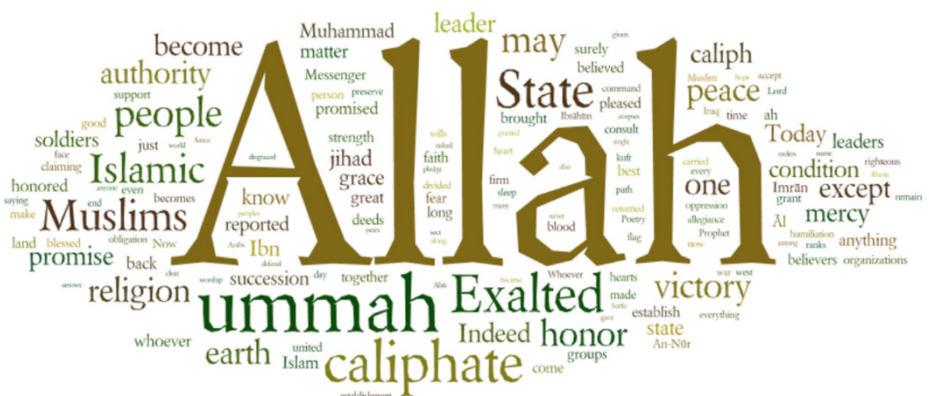
On June 29, 2014, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced to the world the re-establishment of the worldwide caliphate from the pulpit of Mosul's largest mosque, and he said henceforth ISIS would be known as the Islamic State. Al-Baghdadi himself took the name of Caliph of all Muslims and the Prince of the Believers.

Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi  
took the name of Caliph  
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## WHAT ISIS BELIEVES IN

In sharp contrast, when Abu Bakr al Baghdadi announced the creation of the Caliphate, he did so from the Grand Mosque of Mosul, not from a cave and not in the dress of a military commander. He wore a black clerical robe and turban. He took out a miswak, a twig, before he spoke, and cleaned his teeth, a practice that was recommended by Mohammed. And Abu Bakr al Baghdadi is of course not his real name; it is his nom-de-guerre. The original Abu Bakr was the first Caliph following the death of Mohammed. He was alleged to have been the closest of all men to Mohammed and the first to convert to Islam. He is therefore considered by Sunni sources to be “The First Among Men to Enter Islam.” Thus Abu Bakr al Baghdadi is unlike the leaders of Al Qaeda, demonstrating his position as a religious leader, not just a military commander.

A word cloud based on the speech of Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, when he announced the reestablishment of the Caliphate on July 5, 2014, demonstrates clearly that the priorities for ISIS are Allah, the caliphate, and the ummah—the global community of Muslim believers. That means abolishing democracy, which they see as the rule of man over man. It means establishing a strict form of Sharia law, law that is based on the Koran, the Hadith and the Sunna.



ISIS has since then published [a list](#) of the punishments they would mete out to offenders in the new Caliphate.

- **Blasphemy against Allah:** Death.
- **Blasphemy against the Prophet Mohamed:** Death—even if the accuser repents.
- **Blasphemy against Islam:** Death.
- **Adultery:** Stoning until death if the adulterer was married and 100 lashes and exile if he or she were unmarried.
- **Sodomy (homosexuality):** Death for the person committing the act, as well as for the one receiving it.
- **Theft:** Cutting off the hand.
- **Drinking alcohol:** 80 lashes.
- **Stealing (as part of banditry):** Cutting off the right hand and the left leg.

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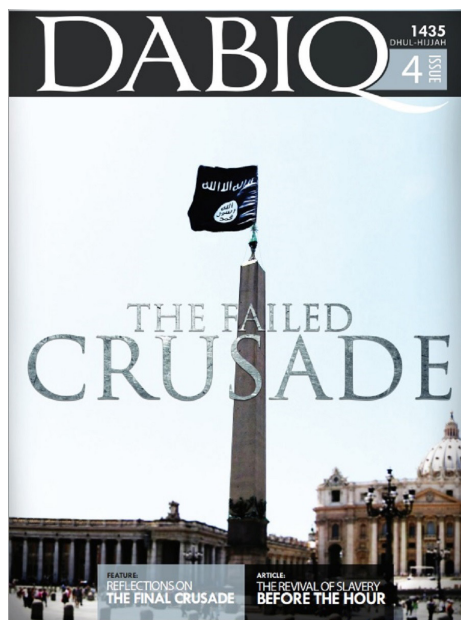
ISIS cares deeply about End Times. Their magazine, *Dabiq*, is named after a town in Syria where the Final Jihad will be fought.

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Numerous videos and photographs of hudud punishments (punishments based on the Koran and Sunnah) being carried out have been published, such as Christians being beheaded and homosexuals thrown from high buildings.

One question that has not been adequately addressed is why the Jordanian Royal Air Force Pilot, Lt. Kasasbeh, was not beheaded like all the other ISIS prisoners, but rather burned alive. In subsequent propaganda statements by ISIS for Western audiences, the justification given was that the pilot had to be burned as the women and children he burned had died. But that was not the reason used internally.

Lt. Kasasbeh was a Muslim who, from the perspective of ISIS, had committed the blasphemous crime of fighting against his fellow Muslims. Hence the punishment: if an apostate is captured in battle, he should be treated as if he is already in hell, thus immolation.



ISIS cares deeply about End Times, the final jihad. Their magazine, one of their principal propaganda tools, is entitled *Dabiq*. *Dabiq* is a small town in Syria, but more importantly, according to Islamic eschatological theology, it is where End Times will begin. It is believed that an epic battle will take place in *Dabiq* between invading Christians and defending Muslims. Muslims will win this battle before the world will come to an end, and Allah will judge who goes to hell and who goes to heaven.

Within Islam, the validity of this view of End Times is debated, nonetheless ISIS is leveraging this theme very effectively. They are able to persuade many supporters to come fight on the grounds that this is "The Final Jihad."



## WHO IS ISIS RECRUITING?

Al Qaeda was never very successful in recruiting Americans or other Westerners. Afghanistan and Pakistan were difficult places to get to. Al Qaeda focused mostly on those who had grown up in conservative Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia and Yemen and who would be motivated to protect Muslim lands. In addition, Al Qaeda was very controlling of who they would allow into their organization. Their propaganda videos were few and far between, and they wanted to meet people face to face.

ISIS is casting a much wider net, and they have a slick, multi-million dollar media campaign to help them achieve their goals. To begin with, they have an easier job because Syria and Iraq are much more accessible, with most recruits coming in through Turkey.

According to a *New York Times* [article](#) published on September 26, 2015, intelligence analysts estimate that around 30,000 foreign fighters from 100 different countries (including about 250 from the United States) have gone to fight in Syria and Iraq. ISIS's image of the black flag derives from the hadith: "The people of my family will face trials and torture and rejection until a nation comes from the east that carries with them black flags." ISIS is persuading many people, on the grounds of this verse, that they are the nation that comes from the east.

It is important to note that a key component of ISIS's recruiting is their focus on young people. Youth are more easily indoctrinated, and there is the practical issue that, as fighters are lost on the battlefield, replacements are needed. But above and beyond these more mundane concerns, ISIS consistently emphasizes the importance of youth. In one issue of the ISIS magazine *Dabiq*, ISIS glorifies the youth as the "Lions of Tomorrow." In this article ISIS says they have set up special schools to teach the youth about Islam and military skills.

In the recent PBS documentary *ISIS in Afghanistan*, the narrating journalist has the following exchange with an ISIS fighter:

ISIS FIGHTER IN FIELD: [through interpreter] Sharia law tells us that children should be given all essential skills. So we teach them and give them military training to prepare them in mind and body so they are set on the right path. And each generation will learn and teach in turn.

NAJIBULLAH QURAISHI: [subtitles] Do you think it's right for children to learn about weapons and fighting?

ISIS FIGHTER IN FIELD: [through interpreter] Yes, of course, it's right, as we see from the Prophet's young companions. Those companions were vying with each other to take up arms. So this enthusiasm, spirit and desire is in our children, and in our women, too. Time will show what we can do for God's religion. We are always ready to sacrifice for it.

The documentary captures images of young boys and girls being taught to use weapons, including assault rifles and hand grenades. They are instructed that guns are used to defend the faith and to kill the infidel. The Afghan children are also shown videos of



Issue 8 of *Dabiq* features an article entitled "The Lions of Tomorrow" about the special role of youth in ISIS

children in Iraq and Syria receiving military training. The narrator talks with two young boys, ages 13 and 17, who say openly they are in training to become suicide bombers for ISIS.

This emphasis on youth is borne out by the breakdown of ISIS arrests in the U.S., where 63% of those arrested are between the ages of 15 and 25. This should be of particular concern to lawmakers, parents, teachers and community leaders, given the vulnerability of youth and ISIS's cultic appeal.

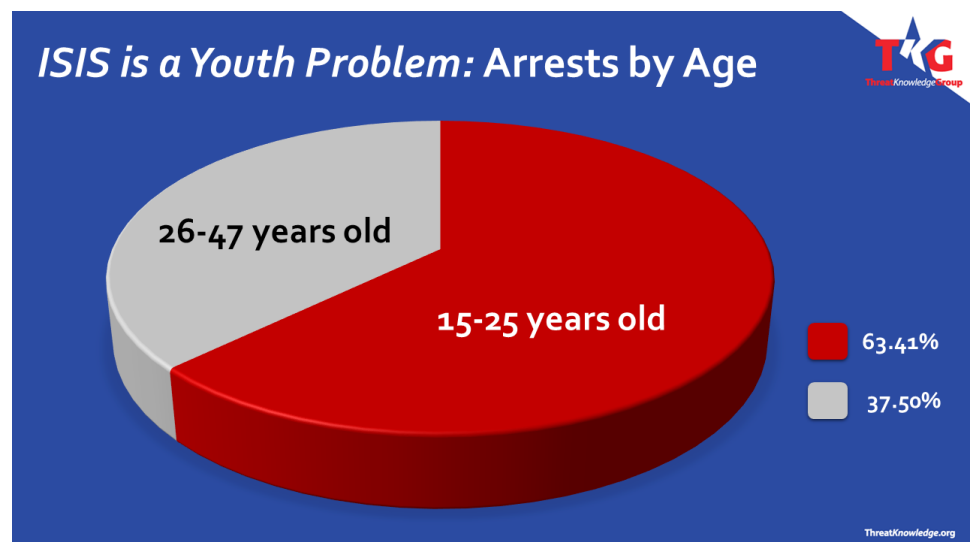
## WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THE INCIDENTS TO DATE OF RECRUITS FROM THE UNITED STATES?

### ***ISIS is much more successful in recruiting Americans than Al Qaeda was***

Between March 2014 and November 2015, 82 individuals in the United States affiliating with ISIS have been interdicted by law enforcement, whether traveling to fight, recruiting, fundraising, planning to travel, promoting ISIS, or initiating or carrying out attacks (including 7 unnamed minors and 4 killed in the course of an attack. (For a full list of the 82 cases see [www.ThreatKnowledge.org](http://www.ThreatKnowledge.org).) This is an average of 4.1 ISIS arrests per month on American soil. In comparison, in the ten years following 9/11, an estimated 176 Americans were indicted, arrested or identified as terrorists or terrorist supporters affiliated with Al Qaeda, according to a [RAND study](#). That is an average of 1.5 Al Qaeda recruits per month. Plainly put, we are interdicting 300% more ISIS recruits than Al Qaeda terrorists.

### ***ISIS targets young people***

Of the **82** people who have been apprehended by law enforcement, **52** (or 63%) are between the ages of 15 and 25 years old; the remaining **30** are between the ages of 26 and 47 years old. And 7 have been under the age of eighteen. As mentioned above, ISIS is deliberately targeting youth from the earliest ages.



### ***Peer-to-peer recruiting is prevalent among ISIS supporters***

Among the **82** cases, **53** of the ISIS supporters did not act alone. They were clustered into **15** groups of people who, in some way, shape, or form, worked together to support ISIS. The biggest single cluster is the **11** men and women from Minneapolis, most of whom attended Al Farooq Youth and Family Center, and who were in contact with Abdi Nur, a fellow Minnesotan who has joined ISIS in Syria.



### ***Ideology is a key to recruitment***

Multiple people either noted that they were influenced by or were found in possession of Al Qaeda materials or *Inspire* Magazine. Others also referenced Osama bin Laden as someone they followed, someone they were influenced by, and someone they greatly respected. Two other ideologues noted were Mohammed Ansar and Sheikh Abu Bara'a al-Sayf. In the criminal complaints, **5** individuals either referenced or quoted Anwar al-Awlaki's teachings to explain or justify their support for ISIS and jihad.

### ***Social Media is a Key to Interdiction***

While use of social media has been at the heart of ISIS's recruiting success, it can also be a key vulnerability. Most people who support ISIS are proud to do so and are eager to broadcast their beliefs. It also seems that for many, a first step in joining ISIS is to join the online conversation. It should not be surprising then, that to date the single most effective tool for detecting ISIS supporters has been through their social media activity. At least 39 people, or over 47.5%, expressed their beliefs or intentions related to ISIS on social media, which brought them to the attention of law enforcement. But this window into jihadist activity may be closing. There has been a lot of discussion of the fact that the planning for the Paris attacks went completely undetected by French intelligence.

Combatants learn to adapt, and ISIS is no different. In the May 2015 raid by U.S. forces that killed senior ISIS financier Abu Sayyaf, Sayyaf's wife was captured along with extensive data from cellphones and computers. What they revealed, according to the [New York Times](#), is that ISIS directed some of its communications through wives as a way to avoid detection by U.S. intelligence. The [New York Post](#) has also reported New York Police Commissioner Bill Bratton's statements that the Paris terrorists used encryp-

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tion devices, such as the Sony Playstation 4, to elude eavesdropping from authorities. According to a November 17, 2015, [article](#) in *The Washington Times*, a counterterrorism official spoke about the slowdown in ISIS arrests following the high number of July arrests: “While it has reduced the load a bit this fall, there are some in the intelligence community who fear it may be a sign that sleeper cells are already here or that the arrests and publicity this summer tipped off ISIL to change its tactics and communication patterns.” It should therefore be expected that ISIS supporters will turn to more discrete forms of communication. But social media will likely continue to be an important source of intelligence for the foreseeable future.

### ***Friends and family are important in helping to stop ISIS supporters***

After interdiction through exposure on social media, being turned in by someone close to the ISIS supporter was the second most common means of detection. In total, 18 of the 82 jihadists were turned in by someone they know. An additional 3 were turned in by a stranger. (It is also worth noting that there were at least 8 people whose friends or family knew about their beliefs but did not report them to the authorities).

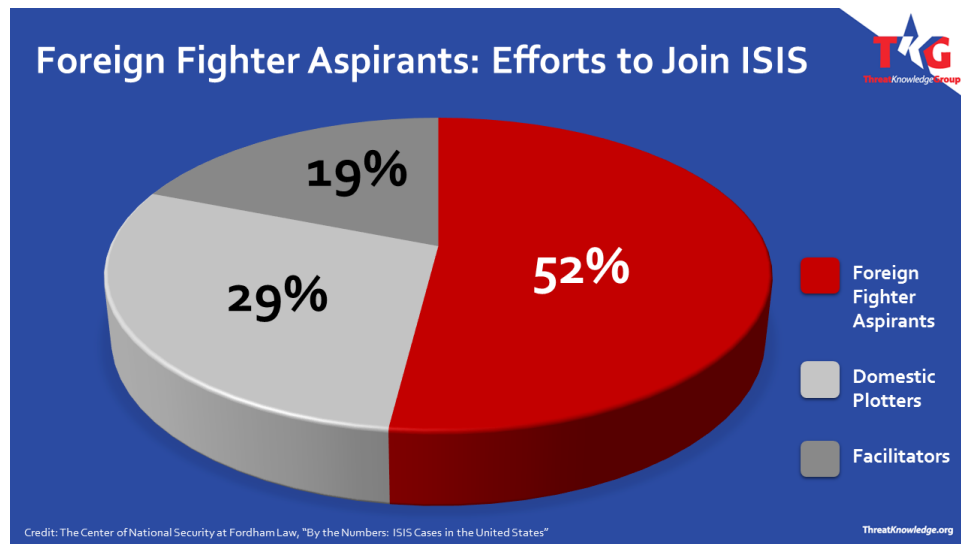
Sixteen were detected in connection with another active case, and 5 unknowingly contacted or were in contact with an FBI informant or undercover agent. Seven were discovered after they left the United States (all 7 were either stopped before they got to Syria or returned to the US on their own). Only 8 of the 82 people were previously convicted of other crimes, ranging from drug charges to sexual assault charges.

This, too, has important implications for law enforcement. It suggests that building relationships of trust and accessibility with the local community may be the best means for detecting radicalization before it can be exercised as a full-blown attack.



## 30% of ISIS supporters in the United States planned domestic attacks

In assessing the potential for an attack on U.S. soil, it is vital to highlight the fact that 30% of arrests so far have been of ISIS supporters who believed they could best serve the ISIS cause by carrying out attacks within the United States, against U.S. citizens, according to a [report](#) by Fordham University. Of the 59 people they identified in their study, 31 were foreign fighter aspirants, 11 were facilitators and **17 were domestic plotters**. Again, if the total number of supporters is into the thousands, that presents the United States with a very serious domestic threat that could easily lead to multiple Paris attack-type scenarios.



## ISIS RECRUITING: THE ROLE OF THE IDEOLOGUES

No Islamist organization or movement can launch its efforts without first establishing its ideological legitimacy within the corpus of Islam. Hence the importance of Abdullah Azzam's fatwa [Defense of Muslim Lands](#), which established jihad as a personal obligation, and Osama bin Laden's fatwas which justified jihad on the basis of the 13<sup>th</sup> century scholar Ibn Taymiyya.

Where ISIS has found unparalleled success is in re-establishing the Caliphate and in evoking End Times. The recent PBS Frontline [documentary](#) *ISIS in Afghanistan* conveys the centrality of ideology to the success and growth of ISIS. A former Taliban leader in Afghanistan who has recently switched allegiance to ISIS explains his move this way:

Yes, we were fighting holy war as Taliban. Our holy war was just because there was no caliphate then. But God says when there is a caliphate, you must join the caliphate. There is a caliphate now, so we've left the Taliban. We're fighting holy war under caliph's leadership.

It is the key failing of U.S. efforts to fight terrorism that we have not understood the importance of ideology: that every act by jihadists must be justified by radical clerics, jurists or scholars. Indeed one can argue that the ideologues are more important than individual

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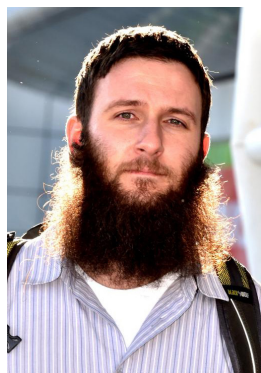
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operational leaders. Field commanders, as we have seen again and again, are replaceable, but ideas live on. They are far more difficult to defeat. Anwar Al-Awlaki, the Yemeni-American imam who was killed by an American drone in 2011, one of the most important early ideologues linked to a number of terrorist attacks, continues today to inspire young Americans and others to weaponize their faith.

Today, it is others who have taken Awlaki's mantle. A [study](#) published by the International Center for the Study of Radicalisation found that there are "new spiritual authorities who foreign fighters in Syria look to for inspiration and guidance...[T]heir statements and interactions can be seen as providing encouragement, justification, and religious legitimacy for fighting in the Syrian conflict, and—whether consciously or not—are playing an important role in radicalizing some individuals." The study identifies three of the most important spiritual authorities:



**Musa Cerantonio** lives in Australia. Italian-Irish and raised Catholic, he converted to Islam. His writings have been particularly important in fleshing out the End Times theology that ISIS and its followers use to help justify their fight in Syria and Iraq.



**Anjem Choudary**, based in the United Kingdom, with 32,000 twitter followers, has trained foreign fighters in the past and is currently perhaps the West's most famous radical Muslim, thanks to his many TV appearances. He was arrested August 5, 2015, for supporting ISIS on social media and subsequently released on bail. He will stand trial in 2016.



**Ahmad Musa Jibril**, Dearborn, Michigan. His Facebook page had 242,000 likes. He spent 6½ years in prison for money laundering, tax evasion and insurance fraud. More than 60% of the foreign fighters in Syria whose social media was surveyed followed Jibril on Twitter.

So, first and foremost, ISIS is able to recruit by the tens of thousands, expand transnationally, and inspire terrorist attacks in foreign countries because of the ideologues who help to justify its existence and its tactics. These ideologues work constantly to reconcile the ISIS narrative with Islamic teaching and belief.

As a result, the intelligence community and federal law enforcement could have a greater impact on the threat groups we face today if individual operational leaders were not the principal focus of our interdiction operations. The identification and prosecution of key ideological players, given their key position as promoters of the “jihadi brand” and the spread of their influence far beyond specific tasks, would have a far greater effect on the long-term security of the nation than just focusing on those who plan and execute attacks.

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## ISIS RECRUITING: THE ROLE OF PROPAGANDA AND ON-LINE MEDIA

In addition to the importance of spiritual authorities in winning over supporters and sympathizers for ISIS, on-line propaganda and social media are also key. From its inception, ISIS has invested heavily in professional recruiting videos and propaganda, and they have access to the talent to do so. Indeed, it has become their hallmark. One of the earliest indicators that Boko Haram, the jihadist group in Nigeria, was moving into the ISIS fold is that their propaganda videos suddenly went from grainy hand-held videos to Hollywood-quality productions. Within a few months of that transition, they swore allegiance to ISIS.

As a result of this investment in propaganda, people across the globe are able to see ISIS's victories in ways Al Qaeda was never able to communicate. The image of ISIS rolling into Mosul in captured American Humvees sends a compelling message of a powerful and victorious army to would-be recruits.

In addition to the more infamous videos of beheadings, crucifixions and immolations, ISIS also projects their ability to provide services. According to *Newsweek*, ISIS [has claimed](#) to have an annual budget of \$2 billion, with which they can pay wages to fighters and compensation to the families of fallen fighters. They also emphasize the social and

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If one person in a community affiliates themselves with ISIS, one can expect to see more, especially among those who are close to the recruit.

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public services they can offer, all to build up the idea that they are creating a utopian paradise, a central theme woven into their propaganda. Anjem Choudary, the radical Islamist preacher from London who supports ISIS, said in [an interview](#) with Graeme Wood of *Atlantic Monthly*, “when places like Saudi Arabia just implement the penal code, and don’t provide the social and economic justice of the Sharia—the whole package—they simply engender hatred toward the Sharia.’ That whole package, he said, would include free housing, food, and clothing for all...” Choudary says ISIS has finally implemented Sharia correctly because it is not only implementing the penal code but also providing public goods. ISIS’s investment in propaganda is paying big dividends in terms of recruits and supporters.

Important to ISIS’s success in recruiting is that it does not rely on propaganda alone. Once people are interested, members of ISIS switch to one-on-one contact. This is something Al Qaeda never did. They were much more suspicious of outsiders, and even if people actually made it to Afghanistan, they were put through a vigorous vetting process. ISIS has not demonstrated a similar suspicion of aspiring jihadis. Indeed they have been very welcoming, engaging in personalized, peer-to-peer recruiting.

Peer-to-peer recruiting also includes direct outreach from people who have already been won over, which results in clusters, groups of friends or siblings who go into jihad together, as demonstrated by U.S. arrests. As noted above, among the 82 cases, 53 did not act alone and were clustered into 15 groups. Looked at another way, this might mean that 15 ISIS supporters who were willing to take action were able to use their influence to grow that number to 53. This has serious implications for the scope of the potential threat in the United States. For law enforcement, it suggests that if one person in a community affiliates themselves with ISIS, one can expect to see more, especially among those who are close to the recruit.

## SIGNS OF RADICALIZATION

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There is no clear “psychology” of a terrorist. Some experts have tried to develop theories of terrorism, but none is holding water so far.

There are, however, some indicators of radicalization in the specific case of supporters of ISIS, because of its religious and ideological nature.

Some of these indicators were described in the recent [federal criminal complaint](#) against Nader Saadeh, 20, and his brother Alaa, 23, plus three other men in Rutherford, New Jersey, for conspiring to recruit a small army for ISIS.

The complaint cited changes in Saadeh’s appearance and behavior that coincided with his pledging allegiance to the Islamic State:

- Posted anti-American messages online and repeatedly downloaded IS videos and praised the terror group’s atrocities, including beheadings, burnings and the murder of French cartoonists.
- Posted on Facebook images of ISIL’s flag and the flag of the Islamic caliphate.
- Frequently researched Islamic writings and often studied the Quran.

- Grew out his beard and dyed it red, mimicking Mohammed.
- Began to fast, and stopped drinking, smoking and eating foods that were not permissible under Islamic law.
- Began praying five times a day.
- Wore traditional Muslim attire in place of the Western clothing he had previously worn.
- Became offended and agitated by any conversation or mention of any religion other than Islam.

Similar indicators have been noted in other cases. The transformation of Donald Ray Morgan, who pledged his allegiance to ISIS on June 29, 2014 and was subsequently arrested, was described by NBC News this way:

Morgan stopped bodybuilding and began to spend less time at the gym, according to some who used to work out with him. He only worked out at odd hours, and kept mostly to himself. And he changed his appearance: Morgan grew a beard, shaved his head and donned a skull cap. And he founded an Islamic Center in a small building not far from downtown Salisbury. The center's Facebook page shows Morgan posing with apparent members of the community.

Abdi Nur, age 20, left the Twin Cities on May 29, 2014, to fight with ISIS. He is one of an estimated 20 young men from that area who have traveled to Syria to join ISIS. His radicalization was similarly reflected in his behavior and appearance, according to [MPRNews](#):

In the two months before he left for Syria, Nur became more outwardly religious, began talking about jihad and prodded his family to pray more and wear traditional clothing, according to a criminal complaint. A family member told the FBI that the changes emerged at the same time Nur began attending the Al-Farooq Youth and Family Center, a large mosque in Bloomington.

Radicalization can thus be accompanied by changes in behavior and appearance. However, these indicators also present a serious challenge to law enforcement, because some, such as increased prayer and fasting and changes in dress, are also simply signs of increased religiosity and do not necessarily indicate radicalization.

Other challenges include the fact that families are often complicit, as we have seen in a number of cases, and therefore support their children and help them to evade law enforcement. As Michael Steinbach, head of the FBI's counterterrorist division, [noted](#),

"In the majority of cases, we know that someone recognizes that change in behavior, that radicalization. That family member or friend chooses not to intervene. And by not getting involved, the story ends in a very familiar fashion, and that's death."

Conversely some families are simply oblivious, as many are about the goings on of their teenagers. Many parents know the challenge of living with teens who are secretive and manage to carry on all kinds of illicit or unhealthy behavior without being detected. This is one of the great curses of the internet. Aamer Anwar, a lawyer who is defending a girl recruited by ISIS, has [written](#), "The failure to deal with the grooming of underage girls by

Radicalization can be accompanied by signs of changes in behavior and appearance



Munther Omar Saleh,  
20, Queens New York,  
Arrested June 17, 2015

ISIS is a child protection issue.” He likens it to a pedophile making contact with a child. The pedophile builds up trust over several months and convinces the child not to discuss anything with his or her parents. When the time is right he convinces the child to leave her family and join him. Anwar claims the process is identical in radicalization by ISIS:

Most parents wouldn't know if their teenagers were drinking or having sex, let alone being groomed by ISIS; many young Muslims—already adept at living a double life—will hide their digital footprint in exactly the same way.

The fact that 18 of the 82 ISIS supporters in the United States who were interdicted by law enforcement were turned in by someone they knew, either a family member, friend, or teacher, suggests that this pattern does not always hold, but it does highlight a very definite challenge for law enforcement as well as family and friends.

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We have to look for more terrorist attacks—attacks carried out purely for their shock value—attacks on public places, shopping malls, national monuments, bridges, tunnels.

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## THE IMPORTANCE OF OPEN SOURCE INTELLIGENCE

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One of the most underutilized sources of information about future terrorist plots is open-source intelligence. ISIS, like Al Qaeda before it, makes no secret of its aspirations and intentions through social media as well as through their magazines, *Inspire* and *Dabiq*. While the worst attacks were not broadcast beforehand (New York on 9/11, London on 7/7, Paris on 11/13), in other instances AQ and ISIS openly provide specific guidance and instruction. One of their stated aims is “to strike fear into the hearts of the infidels.” This means we have to look for more terrorist attacks—attacks carried out purely for their shock value—attacks on public places, shopping malls, national monuments, bridges, tunnels. Major landmarks are inherently vulnerable. We also know that ISIS has called for attacks on members of the military and their families, as well as attacks on local police and FBI agents. So while we may not be able to predict where or when an attack will take place, open source intelligence can certainly help indicate where efforts should be focused and what method of attack to expect.

## WHAT CAN THE UNITED STATES EXPECT IN THE FUTURE?

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The United States can expect difficult times ahead, with more domestic attacks or attempted attacks likely. Based on the evidence available, the number of ISIS supporters in the United States measures in the thousands, rather than hundreds. Whether ISIS will launch an attack on the scale of the Paris attack is unknown, but it is clear that the United States is a primary target for ISIS and that ISIS has the necessary supporters in place and the financial means to carry out such an attack. The challenges of screening incoming refugees may further exacerbate the problem.

### How should the United States respond to this heightened threat environment?

1. **Stop downplaying the seriousness of the threat** so that individuals and law enforcement can be properly prepared.



2. **Recognize that ISIS is targeting youth, and do more to protect youth from radicalization.** Educate those who work with youth about the indicators of radicalization. Hold parents criminally liable for not preventing their children from supporting ISIS where it can be established that they were aware of it.
3. **Target the ideologues.** Recognize the link between rhetoric that calls for death of the infidel and acts of terrorism and interrupt the flow of such communication.
4. **Better utilize open-source intelligence.** Both domestic supporters as well as ISIS-central and Iraq and Syria are boldly announcing their plans and intentions. Law enforcement should take that intelligence seriously and act on it.
5. **Screen refugees.** While accepting those who flee from persecution and violence is a valued component of the American tradition, we must acknowledge that ISIS and other terrorist groups may use the refugee track as a way to gain access to the United States with the purpose of carrying out an attack.

The United States, indeed the world is facing a threat unlike any it has seen. The old rules of engagement no longer pertain, and terror is the order of the day. Citizens are as vulnerable (if not moreso) than soldiers. If we want to prevent the loss of more lives we must acknowledge the seriousness of this threat. That does not mean making Muslims register or banning all refugees, but neither does it mean continuing with the status quo. There is much that can be done by law enforcement, by intelligence and by citizens to keep America safe and yet also free. We have outlined a few of those steps here as a place to start. ■

For any further questions on our findings, or for additional information on the work of the Threat Knowledge Group, please contact Dr. Sebastian Gorka at [seb.gorka@gmail.com](mailto:seb.gorka@gmail.com), 703-300-5014, or Katharine Gorka at [kcg@threatknowledge.org](mailto:kcg@threatknowledge.org).



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