

From: [I&A PB](#)
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Subject: (U//FOUO) IA: Pre-Travel Activities Exhibited by US Persons Aspiring to Fight in Syria Provide Detection Opportunities, dated 6 January 2016
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Colleagues,

(U//FOUO) The attached Intelligence Assessment: Pre-Travel Activities Exhibited by US Persons Aspiring to Fight in Syria Provide Detection Opportunities, dated 6 January 2016 has been released. CTAB members, Field Operations, IGA, OPA, and OLA are receiving this message and attachment to ensure uninterrupted access to I&A's finished analytic products.

(U) This product will also be available via NCTC Current and the I&A websites on HSDN and HTSN (JWICS); HSIN; and CapNet.

(U//FOUO) **Intended Audience:** Federal, state, local, tribal, and territorial government agencies and authorities; and the private sector

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Very Respectfully,
I&A Intelligence Publications Division
Department of Homeland Security

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Homeland
Security

INTELLIGENCE ASSESSMENT



(U//FOUO) Pre-Travel Activities Exhibited by US Persons Aspiring to Fight in Syria Provide Detection Opportunities

6 January 2016

Office of Intelligence and Analysis

IA-0045-16

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(U) All US person information has been minimized. Should you require the minimized US person information, please contact the I&A Production Branch at (b) (6).

From the Secretary

6 January 2016

The accompanying assessment was prepared by the DHS Office of Intelligence and Analysis, in coordination with the Defense Intelligence Agency, Federal Bureau of Investigation, and National Counterterrorism Center. I urge you to review it closely, as it provides very useful information to address the current threat environment.

Let's all work hard for a safe 2016, and remain vigilant.

JCJ



Jeh C. Johnson

Secretary

Department of Homeland Security



**Homeland
Security**
Office of Intelligence and Analysis

INTELLIGENCE ASSESSMENT

6 January 2016

(U//FOUO) Pre-Travel Activities Exhibited by US Persons Aspiring to Fight in Syria Provide Detection Opportunities

(U) Prepared by the DHS Office of Intelligence and Analysis (I&A). Coordinated with DIA, FBI, and NCTC.

(U) Scope

(U//FOUO) This Assessment examines the pre-travel activities and trends associated with 42 arrested US persons who sought to or succeeded in traveling to Syria or Iraq to fight with or support fighting by foreign terrorist organizations (FTOs) or armed opposition groups since 2013. All of the examined individuals were arrested between January 2013 and November 2015 and are either awaiting trial, have already pled guilty, or been found guilty in a court of law. Thirty-six of the individuals were arrested attempting to travel to Syria or Iraq, and six were arrested following their return from Syria. Our findings are based primarily on (b) (3), (b) (7)(E). This Assessment is intended to inform federal, state, local, tribal, and territorial counterterrorism, law enforcement, and countering violent extremism (CVE) officials on observable activities violent extremists often engage in prior to traveling to conflict zones. It builds on a body of previously released I&A assessments related to US aspiring or successful foreign fighters' motivations, social media use, fundraising efforts, travel routes, and operational security practices. The cutoff date for information in this Assessment is 30 November 2015.

(U) Key Findings

(U//FOUO) Our review (b) (3), (b) (7)(E) of 42 aspiring or successful travelers to Syria or Iraq—with a median age of 22—indicated that (b) (3), (b) (7)(E).

We judge the individuals' public support primarily for the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) was likely driven by their vulnerability to ISIL's messaging that offers them a cause to join, the willingness of many young people to publicly share their views on social media, and, in some cases, a probable lack of concern that law enforcement could learn of the individuals' support for violent extremist causes.

(U//FOUO) Despite the frequent consumption and influence of terrorist messaging on social media, 27 of these individuals (b) (3), (b) (7)(E).

. Seventeen of the individuals also (b) (3), (b) (7)(E).

(U//FOUO) Approximately half of the examined individuals (b) (3), (b) (7)(E).

. (b) (3), (b) (7)(E).

. Additionally, those we examined used a variety of techniques to (b) (3), (b) (7)(E).

(U//FOUO) Approximately half of the subjects engaged (b) (3), (b) (7)(E).

(b) (3), (b) (7)(E) The employment of these (b) (3), (b) (7)(E) measures, combined with half of the examined subjects (b) (3), (b) (7)(E)

(U//FOUO) Just over half of the individuals lived with family members during their radicalization and mobilization to violence, (b) (3), (b) (7)(E)

(U//FOUO) Parents, other family members, friends, religious leaders, and law enforcement attempted to intervene or dissuade travel to Syria in at least 15 cases, (b) (3), (b) (7)(E)

(U//FOUO) Frequent Public Posting of Terrorist Messaging and Contact with US- or Overseas-Based Violent Extremists (b) (3), (b) (7)(E)

(U//FOUO) Our review of a (b) (3), (b) (7)(E) indicates that 19 of the 42 aspiring or successful Syria foreign fighters posted or praised on social media the messaging or actions of FTOs. These individuals' public signaling of their adoption of a violent extremist mindset most often (b) (3), (b) (7)(E). (b) (3), (b) (7)(E) they were most likely to generally praise ISIL; positively comment on ISIL videos, ISIL-related imagery such as the group's flag, issues of its English-language magazine *Dabiq*, or statements by its leadership; or pledge allegiance to the group.

(b) (3), (b) (7)(E) s'—the median age of the 42 individuals was 22—(b) (3), (b) (7)(E)

- » (U) A New York-based individual pledged allegiance to ISIL (b) (3), (b) (7)(E), asked that specific ISIL leaders be protected from harm, and posted several other pro-ISIL (b) (3), (b) (7)(E) (b) (3), (b) (7)(E). He was arrested in July 2015 for a previous trip to Turkey, on which he allegedly sought—unsuccessfully, as it turned out—to reach Syria to join ISIL.
- » (U) An Illinois-based individual posted a link on (b) (3), (b) (7)(E) to a video about ISIL Emir Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in January 2015. (b) (3), (b) (7)(E). He was arrested in March 2015 and is currently awaiting trial for seeking to fight for ISIL overseas and allegedly discussed attacking police stations, courts, and a National Guard facility in the Homeland with his now-arrested cousin.
- » (U) A Pennsylvania-based woman currently awaiting trial for her March 2015 attempt to join ISIL in Syria made pro-ISIL posts (b) (3), (b) (7)(E) starting around August 2013, including posting a video of an ISIL Western fighter giving advice, a photograph of an ISIL child soldier, and a photograph of an ISIL fighter soliciting donations, (b) (3), (b) (7)(E)

(U//FOUO) Despite the growing trend of individuals using social media to view violent extremist messages, 27 of the 42 individuals (b) (3), (b) (7)(E) (b) (3), (b) (7)(E)

* (U//FOUO) DHS defines radicalization as the process through which an individual changes from a non-violent belief system to a belief system that includes the willingness to actively advocate, facilitate, or use unlawful violence as a method to effect societal or political change.

(b) (3), (b) (7)(E)

» (U) Three of the examined individuals—two brothers and a former high school classmate from New Jersey—were arrested in the summer of 2015 for planning to travel to Syria to join ISIL, (b) (3), (b) (7)(E). The brothers lived together and probably reinforced each other's devotion to ISIL, and one of the siblings convinced his former classmate to join their plan to travel to Syria by "preying on his insecurities and pain," according to (b) (3), (b) (7)(E).

» (U) In April, six Minnesota-based individuals were arrested for their attempts to travel to Syria to join ISIL, (b) (3), (b) (7)(E). The group of friends watched videos together encouraging fighting on behalf of Islam, met secretly to plan their travel, and shared contact information with each other of ISIL members in Syria, (b) (3), (b) (7)(E).

» (U//FOUO) Twenty of the 42 individuals (b) (3), (b) (7)(E). This demonstrates the frequency with which aspiring fighters seek (b) (3), (b) (7)(E).

(U//FOUO) Twenty-two of the examined individuals (b) (3), (b) (7)(E), and 17 of the 22 had never (b) (3), (b) (7)(E).

» (U) An Illinois-based individual, who pled guilty in October 2015 to attempting to provide material support to ISIL, was in contact on multiple mobile messaging applications with a Western ISIL member named Abu Qa'qa he first communicated with (b) (3), (b) (7)(E). When the Illinois-based individual arrived in Turkey, an associate of Abu Qa'qa intended to take the US person to ISIL in Syria or Iraq, (b) (3), (b) (7)(E).

» (U) A North Carolina-based individual, who was arrested in March 2014 for his plan to travel to Syria to fight with al-Nusrah Front (NF), indicated he was talking online to an injured fighter in Syria and an Australia-based associate who encouraged him to maintain strong operational security, (b) (3), (b) (7)(E).

» (U) A Colorado-based woman began online relationships with multiple ISIL fighters and planned to travel to Syria to marry a 32-year-old Tunisian ISIL fighter with whom she talked via Skype, (b) (3), (b) (7)(E). The woman was arrested at a Colorado airport in April 2014, where she planned to depart to meet her Tunisian suitor.

(U//FOUO) Given that 34 of the 42 individuals were arrested after ISIL's June 2014 announcement that it had reestablished the Caliphate, (b) (3), (b) (7)(E).

* (U//FOUO) For more information, see the DHS-JTAC Intelligence Assessment "(U//FOUO) Syria-Based US and UK Persons' Public Social Media Activity Effective but Provides Terrorism Prevention Opportunities," released on 20 May 2015.

† (U//FOUO) DHS defines an HVE is a person of any citizenship who has lived and/or operated primarily in the United States or its territories who advocates, is engaged in, or is preparing to engage in ideologically-motivated terrorist activities (including providing support to terrorism) in furtherance of political or social objectives promoted by a foreign terrorist organization, but is acting independently of direction by a foreign terrorist organization. HVEs are distinct from traditional domestic terrorists who engage in unlawful acts of violence to intimidate civilian populations or attempt to influence domestic policy without direction from or influence from a foreign actor.

- » (U) A Mississippi-based couple arrested in August 2015 sought to join ISIL in Syria to provide medical aid to injured ISIL fighters and assist the group's media efforts to rectify alleged falsehoods about ISIL, (b) (3), (b) (7)(E). The female also indicated that she wished to raise the couple's future children in ISIL-controlled territory.
- » (U) A Texas-based individual desired to live in Syria with his wife and two children, and he also aspired to fight with ISIL, (b) (3), (b) (7)(E). He was sentenced to seven years in prison in June 2015 on charges of attempting to provide material support to terrorists.
- » (U) A Wisconsin-based individual indicated he did not like living in the United States and hoped to not return once he left for Syria, (b) (3), (b) (7)(E). He was arrested in April 2015 after traveling to Turkey in 2014 but failed to reach Syria and link up with ISIL or NF.

(U//FOUO) (b) (3), (b) (7)(E) Commonly Precede Attempted Travel to Conflict Zones

(U//FOUO) Approximately half of the examined individuals (b) (3), (b) (7)(E) in the months prior to their attempted travel, underscoring that some (b) (3), (b) (7)(E) Attempts by potential HVEs to (b) (3), (b) (7)(E)

- » (U) Seventeen individuals in the study (b) (3), (b) (7)(E) in the months preceding their travel, with three claiming (b) (3), (b) (7)(E), and four requesting (b) (3), (b) (7)(E). For example, a Minnesota-based individual who was arrested in November 2014 for attempting to travel to join ISIL first came to the attention of law enforcement in April 2014 when he (b) (3), (b) (7)(E).
- » (U) The FBI in April 2015 arrested two men in California after they traveled from Minnesota with the stated goal of traveling to Mexico (b) (3), (b) (7)(E). The previous month, the two individuals—along with four Minnesota-based associates who were subsequently also arrested in April—were in contact with a Syria-based associate who claimed he could help secure a (b) (3), (b) (7)(E).

(U//FOUO) (b) (3), (b) (7)(E)

- » (U) One of the six Minnesota-based individuals arrested in April 2015 tried to sell his car in the weeks before travel to raise additional funds, (b) (3), (b) (7)(E). Another individual in the group withdrew \$5,000 in cash from his financial aid debit card in the weeks prior to his failed May 2014 attempted departure for Syria, (b) (3), (b) (7)(E).
- » (U) A Texas-based individual sentenced in June 2015 for attempting to travel with his family to join ISIL stated in the months prior to his departure that he was waiting to get his tax refund before embarking, trying to earn money by

volunteering for a medical study, and considering raising money by selling his firearms, (b) (3), (b) (7)(E)

- » (U) A Colorado-based woman arrested in April 2014 for traveling to join ISIL claimed in an interview with law enforcement officials prior to her attempted departure that someone, probably an overseas violent extremist, had purchased the airline ticket for her, (b) (3), (b) (7)(E). Additionally, an Ohio-based individual who was arrested on terrorism-related charges in February 2015 after returning from Syria allegedly received from his Syria-based brother the contact information for a travel facilitator who assisted the Ohio-based individual in entering Syria from Turkey, (b) (3), (b) (7)(E).

(U//FOUO) Six arrestees are believed to have engaged (b) (3), (b) (7)(E) —in the months preceding attempted travel, (b) (3), (b) (7)(E). We assess this number possibly undercounts the number of arrestees who took steps to prepare for (b) (3), (b) (7)(E).

- » (U) Two North Carolina-based violent extremists engaged in physical training routines and participated in firearms and military tactics instruction before they were arrested in March 2014 for attempting to travel to Syria, (b) (3), (b) (7)(E).
- » (U) The Colorado-based woman arrested in April 2014 claimed in an interview with law enforcement officials that she joined the US Army Explorers program so she could be trained in military tactics and firearms, which she intended to use overseas while engaging in violence on behalf of ISIL, (b) (3), (b) (7)(E).

(U//FOUO) Many Attempted to Hide Their Intentions with (b) (3), (b) (7)(E)

(U//FOUO) Approximately half of the arrested subjects engaged in a range of (b) (3), (b) (7)(E) many of these may be detectable by family members, associates, or law enforcement officials. (b) (3), (b) (7)(E)

- » (U) Six weeks prior to attempting to travel to join ISIL in April 2015, a Pennsylvania-based woman allegedly shut down her Twitter account—where she frequently re-posted ISIL messaging and expressed a desire for “martyrdom” in Syria—and told an online associate she did so (b) (3), (b) (7)(E). Similarly, less than two months before being arrested in June 2015 for taking steps to travel to join ISIL, a New Jersey-based individual allegedly closed his Facebook account, (b) (3), (b) (7)(E).
- » (U) A separate New Jersey-based individual, who intended to join ISIL and was arrested in August 2015, changed cellphones, ceased using the home computer of the individual he was living with, claimed he was traveling abroad to study, switched to communicating on the phone in Arabic instead of English, and shaved his beard in the weeks prior to attempting to travel, (b) (3), (b) (7)(E).

(U//FOUO) (b) (3), (b) (7)(E)

* (U) For additional information, see the DHS and FBI Roll Call Release, “(U) Mobilization of Violent Extremists in the United States,” released on 17 January 2012.

(b) (3), (b) (7)(E)

» (U) (b) (3), (b) (7)(E)

» (U) (b) (3), (b) (7)(E)

» (U) Finally, five subjects attempted or succeeded in evading US law enforcement detection by (b) (3), (b) (7)(E)

(U//FOUO) Few Examples of Homeland Plotting by Examined Arrestees, but Interest Increasing Among Overall HVE Population

(U//FOUO) Only about 20 percent of the arrestees—eight of the 42 in this study—expressed an interest in undertaking Homeland plotting or allegedly took concrete steps to plan or assist a proposed attack in the United States, (b) (3), (b) (7)(E)s. Only three other arrested individuals publicly expressed online support for the 2015 terrorist attacks in Chattanooga, Tennessee and Garland, Texas. (b) (3), (b) (7)(E)

(U//FOUO) However, the surge in arrests in 2015 for Homeland plotting—as of September 2015, 17 arrests had been reported for the year compared to just two in 2014—(b) (3), (b) (7)(E)

further assess (b) (3), (b) (7)(E) .†† We

- » (U) Before being arrested for attempting to travel to join ISIL in March 2015, an Illinois-based individual—who served in the National Guard—discussed with his cousin attacking the military installation where he trained, offered to supply his cousin with military uniforms, and provided his cousin with the installation's training schedule, (b) (3), (b) (7)(E).
- » (U) A New York-based individual arrested in February 2015 for attempting to travel allegedly expressed interest in receiving guidance for engaging in an act of violence on US soil, such as killing the President of the United States or planting a bomb on Coney Island in New York. His arrested co-conspirator claimed that if he was unable to get travel documents to go to Syria, he would instead buy a machine gun and shoot law enforcement officers, (b) (3), (b) (7)(E).
- » (U) Prior to seeking to travel to Syria to join NF in April 2013, an Illinois-based individual provided suggestions on attack techniques and potential targets to an associate arrested in September 2012 for plotting to detonate a bomb outside an Illinois bar, (b) (3), (b) (7)(E). The former individual backed out of the plot in August 2012 because he suspected law enforcement was aware of it.

* (U//FOUO) For more on travel tradecraft, see DHS Intelligence Assessment, "(U//FOUO) 'Hidden City' Airline Ticketing a Viable and Utilized Method to Disguise Travel From United States to Syria," released on 8 December 2014.

† (U//FOUO) For additional information, see the DHS Reference Aid, "(U//FOUO) Analysis of ISIL-Related Arrests in the Homeland from January 2014-September 2015," released on 5 November 2015.

†† (U//FOUO) DHS defines a lone offender as an individual motivated by one or more ideologies extremist ideologies who, operating alone, supports or engages in acts of unlawful violence in furtherance of that ideology or ideologies that may involve influence from a larger terrorist organization or a foreign actor.

(U//FOUO) Family Members Often First to Detect Pre-Travel Activities, (b) (3), (b) (7)(E)

(U//FOUO) Just over half of the individuals examined lived with family members at the time of their radicalization and mobilization to violence, likely indicating that parents and other close relatives are frequently best positioned to discover early indications that young people are preparing to engage in violent extremist activities overseas. (b) (3), (b) (7)(E)

- » (U) In April 2015, law enforcement was alerted to a New Jersey-based violent extremist who was increasingly displaying signs of radicalization to violence, including expressing support for ISIL orally and on Facebook, justifying the 2015 *Charlie Hebdo* attacks in France, changing his mobile phone, and expressing a newfound desire to study in Jordan, (b) (3), (b) (7)(E)
- » (U) Notebooks found in the residence and car that an Illinois-based individual—who was arrested in October 2014—shared with his parents outlined his plan for getting to Syria and revealed other pro-ISIL statements and symbols, (b) (3), (b) (7)(E)

(U//FOUO) In at least 15 of the cases reviewed, parents, other family members, friends, religious leaders, and law enforcement officials (b) (3), (b) (7)(E)

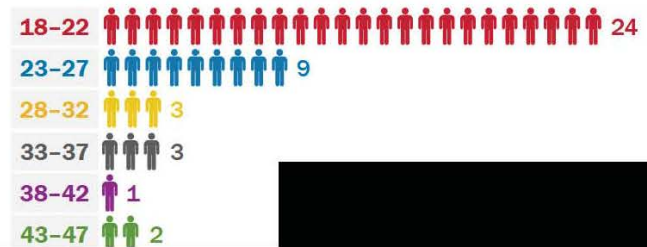
- » (U) The parents of a now-arrested New York-based individual took away his passport between August and October 2014 to prevent him from traveling on a flight he booked from New York to Turkey, with the intention of continuing to Syria to join ISIL. (b) (3), (b) (7)(E) The individual had retrieved his passport or acquired a new one by July 2015, however, and was arrested while attempting travel. Similarly, the sister of a Michigan-based individual who aspired to join Lebanese Hizballah in Syria confiscated her brother's Lebanese passport in September 2013 to prevent him from traveling. (b) (3), (b) (7)(E) The individual then filed an application to become a US citizen in order to get a US passport; he was subsequently arrested in March 2014 at Detroit Metropolitan Airport.
- » (U) A Minnesota-based individual abandoned his plan to drive from Minnesota to California with the goal of continuing on to Syria after family members questioned the intended purpose of his travel as he was preparing his car for the road trip. (b) (3), (b) (7)(E) The individual was subsequently arrested in April 2015, however, with five other associates for attempting to travel to join ISIL. One of those associates—who previously attempted to travel to join ISIL in November 2014—abandoned his latest plan to leave for Syria after his father confronted him about his goal of joining ISIL. (b) (3), (b) (7)(E)
- » (U) After traveling to Turkey on his way to allegedly join ISIL in February 2014, a Texas-based individual decided to immediately return home after learning that his mother had purportedly been hospitalized, information that was falsely provided in order to convince him to come back. (b) (3), (b) (7)(E) Similarly, a North Carolina-based individual who booked travel to Turkey with intended onward travel to Syria in September 2013 abandoned his plans after stating that he “could not muster the strength to leave his parents” at that time, (b) (3), (b) (7)(E). The subject was arrested two months later for attempting to travel to join NF.

(U) Appendix A**(U) OVERVIEW OF PRE-TRAVEL ACTIVITIES EXHIBITED BY US PERSONS ASPIRING TO FIGHT IN SYRIA**

(U//FOUO) I&A examined the pre-travel activities and trends—(b) (3), (b) (7)(E)—associated with 42 (b) (3), (b) (7)(E) persons who sought to or succeeded in traveling to Syria or Iraq to fight or support fighting between January 2013 and November 2015. Nineteen of

(U) AGES AT TIME OF ARREST

Median Age 22



(b) (3), (b) (7)(E)

(U//FOUO) Appendix B: Common Pre-Travel Activities of Aspiring Foreign Fighters

(U//FOUO) Some observed activities that may be suspicious include constitutionally protected activity. These activities should not be reported absent articulable facts and circumstances that support the source agency's suspicion that the observed behavior is not innocent, but rather reasonably indicative of criminal activity associated with terrorism, such as indications of possible preparations for or attempts to travel overseas to engage in or support violence. The following activities were commonly present among the 42 cases of aspiring or successful foreign fighters we examined in this study, or in DHS' review of other recent HVEs who have sought to travel overseas for violent extremist purposes:

(b) (3), (b) (7)(E)



(U) Source Summary Statement

(U//FOUO) This Assessment is based primarily on I&A's review of (b) (3), (b) (7)(E), which we supplemented with (b) (3), (b) (7)(E). We have (b) (3), (b) (7)(E).
s. Some of these individuals also likely used encrypted communication platforms during their radicalization and mobilization to violence, (b) (3), (b) (7)(E).

(U) Report Suspicious Activity

(U) To report suspicious activity, law enforcement, Fire-EMS, private security personnel, and emergency managers should follow established protocols; all other personnel should call 911 or contact local law enforcement. Suspicious activity reports (SARs) will be forwarded to the appropriate fusion center and FBI Joint Terrorism Task Force for further action. For more information on the Nationwide SAR Initiative, visit <http://nsi.ncirc.gov/resources.aspx>.

(U) Tracked by: HSEC-8.1, HEC-8.2, HSEC-8.3, HSEC-8.5