Leaving Home for Jihad: Predicting ISIS Foreign Fighters in the West

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Leaving Home for Jihad:
Predicting ISIS Foreign Fighters in the West

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Abstract:
Individuals all around the world are leaving their homes to join the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) as foreign fighters. With a focus on those from North America, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand, this study provides a novel mixed methods approach to analyze the social, political, economic, and online factors driving a country’s output of foreign fighters. Through multiple time series regression models, I find that low migrant acceptance, economic equality, high unemployment, and a higher percent of the population using the internet are all causally related to a larger number of foreign fighters by population. Although the exact roots of radicalization are difficult to pinpoint even with anecdotal evidence, my findings demonstrate that a coalescence of social, economic, and online factors influence the path to ISIS whereas political conditions are limited in their causality.
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Introduction

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, hereafter referred to as ISIS, prominently appeared on the world stage in 2014 after seizing control of both Raqqa and Mosul (Steed 2016; Ryan 2015).\(^1\) ISIS took the region by storm, maintaining its momentum by capturing other strategic Sunni towns and declaring the revival of an Islamic caliphate in late June (Ryan 2015). Since ISIS’ peak in 2014, the group has lost many of its strongholds and now possesses only a small desert territory in Hajin, Syria where it began (Kranz and Gould 2017; Callimachi 2018). Despite its defeats, ISIS continues fighting for territorial gains in the name of the lost caliphate (Gates and Podder 2015). ISIS’ foremost advantage in this struggle is its capitalization of the internet and social media to spread propaganda and recruit foreign fighters. Due to the increased interconnectedness facilitated by the internet and the group’s propaganda, ISIS is able to reach and radicalize potential recruits from all over the world.

Before the emergence of ISIS in 2013, most terrorist groups depended on traditional mass media for communications. Al Qaeda, for instance, released videos and audio recordings to Al Jazeera for dissemination (Klausen 2015). ISIS, however, has been considered one of the first jihadist terrorist groups to make use of the internet and social media for message propagation and recruitment purposes (Klausen 2015). ISIS’ online activities highlight the weaponization of social media and challenge prior academic works that focus solely on the positive aspects of social media following the Arab Spring (Howard

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\(^1\) In this paper, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) refers to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, the Islamic State (IS; الإسلامية الدولة), and its Arabic acronym Daesh (داعش). For consistency and brevity, ISIS will be utilized throughout the paper.
and Hussain 2013). In this regard, ISIS’ social media strategies have sparked lively academic debate since 2014 (Ceron et al. 2018).

A large body of academic work shares a similar focus on the different structural determinants of ISIS foreign fighters and terrorists at large. These studies consider social, political, and economic factors at the national level to unveil the environments most conducive to radicalization. Among these factors, scholars examine ethnic and religious homogeneity, political freedoms and institutions, as well as variables tied to prosperous or weak economies, such as economic inequality, gross domestic product, and unemployment rates. Disparate quantitative results, however, produce discord within the academic community, confirming no definitive conclusions beyond the agreement that terrorism is multicausal (Fox and Hoelscher 2010; Abadie 2006; Benmelech et al. 2012; Klor and Benmelech 2016; Krueger et al. 2003; Krueger and Maleckova 2003; Krueger and Laitin 2008; Piazza 2006; Drakos and Gofas 2006; Heroux 2012; Krieger and Meierrieks 2011). Therefore, the evaluation of terrorism on an individual level is necessary to contextualize national level findings, despite an incongruity in units of analysis. This study thereby fills a methodological gap in the literature by implementing a mixed methods approach to both quantitatively and qualitatively evaluate how social, political, economic, and online indicators contribute to a nation’s number of foreign fighters.

In addition to a novel analysis of the internet and a mixed methods approach to investigate other structural determinants, another valuable dimension of this study is its concentration on foreign fighters. While native fighters may join for locally salient reasons and grievances, the phenomenon of foreign fighters is more difficult to understand (Gates and
Podder 2015). For the purpose of this study, I focus only on foreign fighters from Western countries, including North America, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand, which possess well-developed and developing infrastructure and technology and encompass many mature and emerging democracies. A higher level of development and greater political freedoms thereby increase the sacrifices made by Western foreign fighters as they leave behind lives of relative comfort for war, making these individuals an interesting case to study.

Additionally, Western cases were selected to control for differences in culture. I suggest that whether a society is dominated by collectivist or individualistic culture can influence a foreign fighter’s decision to leave home. In collectivist cultures, such as in many Asian and South American nations, individuals are socialized to prioritize the welfare of the group over themselves. Collectivism may thusly increase an individual’s costs when choosing to leave behind family and join ISIS in Iraq or Syria. Conversely, in individualistic cultures, such as in many North American and European nations, individuals emphasize themselves over the group. These cultures may consequently ease the decision to leave family for jihad. Therefore, the study’s case selection is limited to countries identifying more closely with social norms and customs originating from Europe, which are subsequently more likely to emphasize individualism, to account for culture’s impact on foreign fighters. I acknowledge that Western countries still vary from one another in culture, but the degree of separation between them is not as significant as when compared to other Asian, South American, African, or Middle Eastern countries. Accordingly, I pose the following research question:

*Why do citizens from developed and developing Western nations leave behind their countries and join ISIS?*
This paper begins by detailing the origins of foreign fighters as well as the propaganda and other social media strategies ISIS implements to recruit them. Then, I outline the existing debates surrounding the causal explanations for foreign fighters and terrorism as well as the characteristics closely associated with radicalization. Herein, I also identify the reasons why a mixed methods approach is necessary to simultaneously confirm and contextualize causality. Next, I discuss my four guiding hypotheses and the theoretical basis for these arguments. I then test my hypotheses, first implementing multiple time series regression models and qualitatively examining five foreign fighter case studies. I conclude this study by discussing the implications of my findings as well as some future avenues for further research.

Background

Where Do Foreign Fighters Come From?

Foreign fighters come from all around the world. Although a large majority of ISIS fighters originate from Northern Africa and the Middle East, Western countries are also giving birth to new generations of fighters. Detailed data for foreign fighters remains limited due to the wariness of countries to reveal certain figures and limited measures of estimation (Barrett 2017), but the information in this study draws from the Soufan Group’s reports on foreign fighters from December 2015 and October 2017. These reports amalgamate foreign fighter data from reliable sources but admit to limitations and inevitable inaccuracies (Barrett 2017).

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2 The Soufan Group is a non-profit, non-partisan organization that produces independent research and hosts conversations to provide governments and multinational organizations with global security
The Soufan Group’s 2015 report found that Tunisia represented the most common nationality among ISIS foreign fighters, totaling 6,000 recruits. Tunisia was followed by Saudi Arabia at 2,500 recruits; Russia with 2,400; Turkey with 2,100; and Jordan with 2,000. By 2017, however, foreign fighter numbers changed. Tunisia’s numbers dropped to 2,926 and Turkey’s dropped to about 1,500. The Soufan Group attributes this downward revision to an increased ability for countries to make more accurate foreign fighter estimates (Barrett 2017). Despite Tunisia and Turkey’s revisions, the general trend for foreign fighters between 2015 and 2017 was an increase (Barrett 2017). In 2017, Russia climbed to the top position with 3,417 foreign fighters. Saudi Arabia also increased to 3,244 but maintained its position as the second largest nationality representing ISIS foreign fighters. Jordan rose to third place with 3,000 recruits, Tunisia fell to fourth, and France joined the top five at 1,910 with a 210 person increase from 2015.

As for the lowest producers of foreign fighters, Brazil, Cambodia, Madagascar, Moldova, New Zealand, Romania, Singapore, and South Africa all produced ten or fewer ISIS recruits in 2015. In 2017, Bulgaria, which was not included in the 2015 dataset, was the only country to produce ten or fewer foreign fighters. However, the 2015 dataset did not include any of the aforementioned, low-count countries from 2015.

In short, foreign fighters are a global phenomenon, but this study restricts its focus to Western countries for which data is available. These countries are generally more developed or developing and provide a higher average living standard; therefore, foreign fighters leaving intelligence. The Soufan Center’s foreign fighter data has been widely used and cited, such as by Klor and Benmelech’s (2016) study for the National Bureau of Economic Research.
these countries to join ISIS in Iraq or Syria are likely to make larger sacrifices than those from less advanced countries. Additionally, these countries possess a similar individualistic culture linked to European social norms that may affect foreign fighter output when compared to citizens from other cultures.

Figure 1: Highest Numbers of ISIS Foreign Fighters in the World

*Figure 1 is based on data from the Soufan Group (2015) and Barrett (2017).
Figure 2: Foreign Fighters from Developed and Developing Western Countries in 2015

*Figure 2 is based on data from the Soufan Group (2015).

Figure 3: Foreign Fighters from Developed and Developing Western Countries in 2017

*Figure 3 is based on data from Barrett (2017).
How Does ISIS Recruit Foreign Fighters?

ISIS relies on propaganda via social media to indoctrinate new generations of fighters. Through its Al Hayat Media Center, ISIS produces and translates propaganda into foreign languages, actively reaching out to Westerners. To understand how ISIS successfully recruits foreigners to join their ranks, it is important to first understand how propaganda influences the human psyche. While a variance of propaganda tactics exists, propaganda all function similarly by manipulating audiences into perceiving certain things, thereby functioning as an effective form of message dissemination and recruitment. On a psychological level, propaganda coerces the mind through cognitive shortcuts, or heuristics, to guide individuals to conclusions that match the aims of the propaganda (Baines and O'Shaughnessy 2013). Propaganda also directly targets emotions to produce desired responses with the most popular forms appealing to fear and guilt (Baines and O'Shaughnessy 2013).

O'Shaughnessy (2004) argues that one of the central elements contributing to the persuasiveness of propaganda is the creation of myths. He argues that propagandists both revive old myths and create new ones for purposes of persuasion. For instance, ISIS implements a variety of myths to propagate appealing messages to potential recruits. ISIS portrays their deceased fighters as heroes and martyrs to promote the myth of glorified deaths; expresses

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3 In 1937, the Institute for Propaganda Analysis (IPA) brought together scholars from various disciplines to educate the American public about propaganda and protect democracy. The IPA identified seven main propaganda techniques, including name-calling, glittering generalities, transfer, testimonial, plain folks, card stacking, and bandwagon strategies (Mazal et al. 1939). Contrarily, other scholars have since identified hundreds of propaganda and mass persuasion techniques (Cole 1998; Cull et al. 2003), while Baines and O'Shaughnessy (2013) settle on twelve. These twelve include: propaganda of enlightenment, propaganda of despair, propaganda of hope, particularist propaganda, revolutionary propaganda, integration propaganda, agitation propaganda, atrocity propaganda, sociological propaganda, political propaganda, vertical propaganda, and horizontal propaganda.
jihadist dogma to emphasize the myth of the “lost caliphate;” and recruits fighters by suggesting that joining ISIS is an adventure (Awan 2017; Botz-Bornstein 2017). For potential recruits, these myths provoke alluring images of an ISIS lifestyle and encourage membership, indicating that the formation of myths is a powerful propaganda strategy.

ISIS constructs these myths through its active engagement in cyberspace. Within online communities, empirical research indicates that ISIS is most active on Arabic Twitter (Alfifi et al. 2018; Bodine-Baron et al. 2016; Ceron et al. 2018). One method through which ISIS used Twitter to disseminate content was through its Twitter application, *The Dawn of Glad Tidings*. This application posted tweets to all the accounts connected with it, enabling ISIS to send out more tweets per day and reach a wider audience before it was terminated in June 2014 (Awan 2017; Berger 2014). A method ISIS continues to use on Twitter is “hashtag hijacking” wherein members post to unrelated trending hashtags to broaden their audience, such as by posting pro-ISIS messages and threats to #WorldCup in 2014 (Alfifi et al. 2018; Singer and Brooking 2015). Despite such techniques, in comparison to normal Twitter users ISIS accounts do not typically exemplify “spam behavior,” such as excessive posting or URL use (Alfifi et al. 2018).

While many studies focus solely on ISIS' Twitter presence, the organization also makes use of many other forms of social media, including Facebook, YouTube, Skype, and WhatsApp (Awan 2017; Botz-Bornstein 2017; Singer and Brooking 2015). Ultimately, the purpose of these social media strategies is to create an enticing narrative for ISIS. For example, ISIS uses videos, such as “There’s No Life Without Jihad” which features British fighters, to glamorize extremism and make fighting for ISIS appear ‘cool’ (Awan 2017; Botz-Bornstein 2017; Farwell 2014). ISIS also makes appeals as a united community or brotherhood, for which members can sacrifice
everything including their own biological families (Wilson 2017). Other ISIS posts tell stories of modernity, humanity, and power through images of members eating Snickers and caring for kittens or images of violence and military capacity (Farwell 2014; Botz-Bornstein 2017). In order to appear even more modern and powerful, ISIS videos and images also use the most recent graphics and photography, even re-appropriating images from Western sources and mimicking action movies like The Matrix (Botz-Bornstein 2017). Additional narratives emphasized by ISIS include its mission to restore a caliphate and, in turn, a moral order, framing itself as a protector of faith, pursuer of social justice, and an avenger of Muslim suffering (Klausen 2015; Farwell 2014).

Another propaganda method ISIS utilizes is the production of seemingly candid content to make its narratives appear authentic. Klausen (2015), however, argues that these spontaneous posts and images are actually highly regulated. Klausen (2015) finds that many ISIS fighter accounts are controlled by feeder accounts and are monitored by back-office managers who carefully select and promulgate messages from frontline fighters. ISIS also uses its Al Hayat Media Center in conjunction with female and foreign members to construct its foreign language communications and select candid-looking images to target sympathizers in Western countries (Awan 2017; Klausen 2015; Gates and Podder 2015).

Foreign fighters do not only help write and translate propaganda to attract more recruits. Instead, ISIS also uses Central Asian foreign fighters for front line combat, while inexperienced foreign fighters normally from the West are primarily used as suicide bombers (Gates and Podder 2015). Gates and Podder (2015) hold that ISIS’ current reliance on foreign fighters may eventually contribute to a clash of interests between foreign fighters and natives.
Literature Review

To fully understand the creation of ISIS foreign fighters, it is important to step back and understand the academic discussions surrounding the determinants and motivations of terrorism. Overwhelmingly, scholars agree that the roots of terrorism cannot be traced to only one indicator, and that the genesis of terrorism is multicausal (Fox and Hoelscher 2010; Abadie 2006; Benmelech et al. 2012; Klor and Benmelech 2016; Krueger et al. 2003; Krueger and Maleckova 2003; Krueger and Laitin 2008; Piazza 2006; Drakos and Gofas 2006; Heroux 2012; Krieger and Meierrieks 2011). Most all academic studies addressing terrorism acknowledge and investigate social, political, and economic variables to better predict how it originates. However, within these studies, conflicting empirical results produce disputes about the proper causations. Additionally, understanding the phenomenon of foreign fighters goes beyond local and national indicators and depends on individual personality. Research regarding the characteristics related to radicalization thereby helps expose individual level explanations for foreign fighters (Awan 2017; Ceron et al. 2018; Hogg et al. 2010; Lara-Cabrera et al. 2017; Klor and Benmelech 2016).

Social Motivations for Terrorism

A common approach to understanding terrorism is the evaluation of a country’s social or demographic characteristics. Some scholars find that countries with greater linguistic or ethnic heterogeneity are more likely to experience terrorist attacks (Tavares 2004; Piazza 2006). Piazza (2006) not only identifies linguistic and ethnic diversity as significant predictors of terrorism, but he also identifies religious diversity as an indicator. Tavares (2004), however,
identifies linguistic and ethnic diversity as predictors of terrorism, but does not find any significance connecting religious diversity to terrorism.

While ethnically and linguistically heterogenous countries may be more likely to experience terrorism, other scholars find that homogeneous groups are more likely to produce terrorists (Klor and Benmelech 2016). Klor and Benmelech (2016) argue that countries with high ethnic homogeneity make it more difficult for Muslim immigrants to assimilate, contributing to sentiments of isolation that make radicalization more likely.

*Political Motivations for Terrorism*

Some scholars also focus on a country’s political institutions. In addition to social factors, Piazza (2006) also evaluates political explanations, finding that state repression and the structure of party politics are significant indicators of terrorism. He argues that weak multi-party systems, exasperated in countries with severe demographic divisions, are more prone to terrorism because of an inability to integrate and moderate political participation. Similarly, Krieger and Meierrieks (2011) find that terrorism is more likely in non-democratic and politically unstable countries. They suggest autocratic regimes may repress individuals to prevent terrorist attacks, but the lack of political openness increases the likelihood of the emergence of terrorism. Fox and Hoelscher (2010) support these results as well since they also discover that political instability contributes to terrorism along with weak political regimes.

Counter to these studies and arguments are the empirical results of Klor and Benmelech (2016) who find that countries with well-developed political institutions are more likely to produce foreign fighters. These authors argue that ISIS recruitment targets individuals from
prosperous, politically stable nations, which is why a higher level of foreign fighters is attributed to countries with strong political institutions, but also why such countries may not be associated with a greater likelihood of generating terrorism. Klor and Benmelech (2016) pose that ISIS targets these developed nations because of the willingness of individuals from these places to volunteer into ISIS as well as ISIS’ demand for more recruits.

Economic Motivations for Terrorism

While numerous studies evaluate the economic conditions most likely to foster terrorists and terrorist attacks, a distinctive divide persists between the effects of poor economic conditions and economic prosperity. One explanation for terrorism suggests terrorists are more likely to originate from areas with poor economic activity (Benmelech et al. 2012; Burgoon 2006). Benmelech et al. (2012), for example, find a strong correlation between high local unemployment rates and poor economic conditions and the recruitment of more mature, experienced, and educated suicide terrorists. Similarly, Burgoon (2006) argues that an absence of social welfare policies may contribute to both international and domestic terrorism because social welfare policies diminish preferences for terrorism by decreasing economic inequality, poverty, and insecurity.

In contrast, some scholars discover a positive correlation between high economic development and a country’s output of foreign fighters and experience of social violence (Klor and Benmelech 2016; Fox and Hoelscher 2010). Four years after their study connecting poor economic conditions to suicide terrorism, Klor and Benmelech (2016) find that high economic development and low economic inequality possess a positive relationship with a country’s
number of foreign fighters. Although the different empirical results may be attributed to the 2016 study’s focus on foreign fighters and the 2012 study’s focus on suicide terrorists, the authors defend their novel findings by suggesting that terrorists are emerging from different types of countries due to a change in the willingness of individuals to join ISIS and a higher demand for recruits. Fox and Hoelscher (2010) also find that high rates of economic growth are related to higher rates of social violence, contrary to their initial hypotheses of absolute and relative deprivation producing social violence.

Despite the findings of these empirical studies, a larger body of work indicates that there is no significant relationship between economic conditions and terrorists (Krueger and Maleckova 2003; Krueger and Laitin 2008; Piazza 2006; Drakos and Gofas 2006; Krieger and Meierrieks 2011; Abadie 2006). These scholars subsequently suggest that alternative national and individual level factors are more significant than economics in predicting terrorism.

**Characteristics of Radicalization**

A growing number of studies have also aimed to identify the characteristics that make individuals more susceptible to ISIS propaganda and recruitment. Among the elements commonly attributed to an individual’s radicalization are loneliness and self-uncertainty (Awan 2017; Ceron et al. 2018; Hogg et al. 2010; Lara-Cabrera et al. 2017; Klor and Benmelech 2016). Studies that identify these two factors suggest that loneliness makes individuals feel disempowered while uncertainty makes them seek a strong identity; therefore, they join powerful groups with unambiguous identities like ISIS (Ceron et al. 2018; Hogg et al. 2010). Other characteristics that may indicate radicalization include thrill seekers who are drawn to
ISIS’ message of adventure; moral crusaders who are drawn to ISIS’ message of religious duty; perceptions of discrimination for being Muslim; expressions of negative ideas about Western society; and, expressions of positive ideas about jihadism (Awan 2017; Lara-Cabrera et al. 2017). Some studies suggest that social media habits may also reveal individual susceptibility to radicalization through participation in cyber mobs and referring to ISIS as “The Islamic State” rather than “Daesh” (Awan 2017; Bodine-Baron et al. 2016).

Ultimately, this study differentiates itself from the previous literature by evaluating a complexity of factors through controlling for extant structural explanations and isolating the unique effect of online recruitment. Secondly, the study is also unique in its focus on ISIS foreign fighters, rather than terrorism in general, as well as its geographic concentration on developed and developing Western nations. Last, this study is original in its mixed methods approach, testing causation variables through multiple time series regressions and contextualizing its quantitative findings with case studies of five foreign fighters. This is key since personal characteristics cannot be easily quantified, yet they effectively interact with other key variables affecting an individual’s propensity to engage in terrorist activity.

**Theoretical Framework & Guiding Hypotheses**

Through the investigation of four primary hypotheses, this study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the existing national level explanations for ISIS foreign fighters with the original addition of an online variable. Theory is implemented to tie these national indicators to the individual decision-making processes of foreign fighters, requiring a logical
jump from different units of analysis. Each hypothesis therein seeks to investigate the causal relationships of social, political, economic and online variables respectively.

First, I argue that citizens of developed and developing Western nations living in a country with anti-Muslim sentiments will be more likely to leave their country and join ISIS as foreign fighters. In line with contemporary studies, I acknowledge that individuals interested in or practicing Islam will experience or perceive social isolation when their community opposes their religious identity (Hogg et al. 2010; Hogg 2007; Al Raffie 2013). Social isolation refers to the absence of social contact, contributing to loneliness and self-doubt. For foreign fighters, social isolation may result from anti-Muslim community members intentionally ostracizing those related to Islam, or from Muslims purposefully avoiding social contact to avoid negative interactions with prejudiced community members.

Studies investigating extremism and social isolation find that loneliness and identity uncertainty, the two biproducts of minimal social contact, contribute to radicalization (Hogg et al. 2010; Al Raffie 2013). I approach this argument through uncertainty-identity theory (Hogg 2007), which stipulates that self-uncertainty motivates people to identify with strong, unambiguous groups. The logic for this theory follows that social isolation leads individuals to question their personal choices and the elements of their identity that result in their painful social experiences. This self-doubt convinces the individual to either conform to community standards or seek out a more resolute identity to regain self-confidence and certainty. Michael Hogg et al. (2010) find that when social isolation targets self-relevant values and practices, such as religion, individuals are especially likely to strengthen their identification with radical groups and engage in extremist behavior. Therefore, by extending Hogg’s findings from Australian
students to ISIS foreign fighters, I suggest that social isolation based on a country’s anti-Muslim sentiments will convince uncommitted Muslims to lose their faith or practice quietly, whereas more committed Muslims will identify themselves with stronger Muslim communities, such as ISIS.

Rather than moving somewhere with more tolerant views or identifying with a strong and nonviolent Muslim group, I pose that socially isolated individuals will likely join ISIS due to the personal advantages ISIS offers Muslims through the establishment of an Islamic caliphate and the mobilization of their victimhood and societal resentment. Having grown up with discrimination or experienced it daily for a majority of their lives, individuals will understandably remain unconvinced that other countries or communities will be more accepting of their religion. ISIS, however, pursues the establishment of an Islamic caliphate wherein an area is governed under Islamic law, which favors Muslims’ beliefs and life styles, while also promoting messages of the group’s modernization (Farwell 2014; Botz-Bornstein 2017). Depicted as a de facto Muslim utopia, individuals who have faced discrimination will likely welcome the idea of moving to a community that embraces their ideology both socially and politically without making any developmental sacrifices.

Moreover, individuals who have experienced social isolation as a result of religious discrimination are familiar with victimization. Thus, ISIS’ portrayal of itself as a victim of the Western world allows real victims to sympathize with the group’s plight. Meanwhile, false narratives of ISIS’ attempts at peaceful reconciliation justifies the groups use of violence, while its depiction of the West as an enemy provides individuals with a scapegoat for their feelings of societal resentment that develop over years of discrimination. ISIS therein provides self-
uncertain individuals with an area guaranteed to be favorable to Muslims while justifying its violence and capitalizing on victimization and the illustration of a common enemy.

Second, I argue that if citizens of developed and developing Western nations live in a country with fewer civil liberties they will be more likely to leave their country and join ISIS as foreign fighters. Seminal works by Ted Gurr (1970), Mark Lichbach (1987), and Charles Tilly (1978) all recognize repression from the state as a crucial factor in the causation of domestic political disputes. Lichbach (1987) argues that when governments increasingly repress nonviolent action, opposition groups will increasingly implement violence. In the context of ISIS foreign fighters, I posit that individuals who feel repressed by the government and are unable to freely and peacefully express their beliefs, practice organizational rights, or are otherwise limited in their personal autonomy, will be more likely to implement violent action against the state. These individuals likely lack the necessary resources, skills, and support to launch a domestic rebellion, but ISIS provides an easy outlet for violence by representing an already organized group with an international following that overcomes a frustrated individual’s collective action problem. Furthermore, rather than engaging in domestic or lone wolf terrorism in the name of ISIS against a repressive government, physically joining ISIS provides individuals with the leadership, organization, and experiential knowledge they would not have access to otherwise. ISIS’ leadership and experience provides sympathizers with assurance that their life-threatening actions will be the most effective in accomplishing their aims. Physically

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5 Freedom of expression and belief, associational and organizational rights, and personal autonomy and individual rights are all elements included in Freedom House’s civil liberty scores, which serves as a political variable in this study’s regression models. See the Appendix for more information.
joining ISIS also comes with the benefit that individuals can operate against repressive governments without living under their control, reducing the risks of being captured before realizing an attack.

My third argument addresses the economic factors that may contribute to an individual joining ISIS. Based on Ted Gurr’s (1970) *theory of relative deprivation* and *opportunity cost*, I hypothesize that if citizens of developed and developing Western nations live in a country with high economic inequality, low gross domestic product, and high national unemployment rates, they will be more likely to leave their country and join ISIS as foreign fighters. Gurr (1970) proposes the concept of “relative deprivation,” suggesting that discrepancies between what individuals feel they deserve and what they actually receive within the economic system produce discontent and violence. The logic of this theory follows that individuals who are dissatisfied with their economic positions due to a sense of entitlement to greater compensation will feel unjustly treated and respond with political violence. Therefore, I argue that countries with poor economic conditions are more likely to support instances of relative deprivation by providing a lower quality of life for an equal or greater amount of work than wealthier or more equal countries. Again, these frustrated and violent individuals likely lack the ability to organize a successful rebellion and the numbers to pose a considerable threat. Joining ISIS, however, helps them overcome both their inexperience and collective action problem.

Additionally, if individuals do not have the economic resources to survive or sustain the lifestyles to which they are accustomed, their opportunity costs for leaving their countries and joining ISIS are lowered. With poor economic conditions encouraging individuals to leave behind their homes without significant economic sacrifice and with relative deprivation
promoting violent attitudes, ISIS is able to manipulate these motivations by encouraging individuals to join with promises of jobs, free social services, and wealth in the afterlife for martyrs (Graham 2017). Although poor economic conditions reduce opportunity costs, physically uprooting and moving elsewhere is still costly. Therefore, ISIS’ guarantee of economic benefits removes an individual’s risk of engaging in a costly move to a different nation but still experiencing the same economic disadvantages as at home.

Finally, I take an original approach to understanding ISIS foreign fighters by investigating how internet accessibility and online activity affect the volume of foreign fighters. I argue that citizens of developed and developing Western nations living in countries with greater internet accessibility are more likely to leave their countries and join ISIS as foreign fighters. This hypothesis theorizes that the internet causes self-radicalization through an unchecked online learning process, drawing from social learning theory (Bandura and Walter 1963) and social control theory (Nye 1975). As with other self-radicalization studies, this hypothesis thereby holds that network theory, or the structure of relationships between individuals, no longer remains the only framework for understanding individuals who join terrorist organizations (Kirby 2007).

Social learning theory (Bandura and Walter 1963) stipulates that behavior is learned in a social context through either instruction or observation and can still occur in the absence of physical engagement or direct reinforcement. Therefore, this theory demonstrates that individuals can learn deviant behaviors from others whether in person or online, which may result in extremist learning and imitation (Freiburger and Crane 2008). Additionally, social control theory, commonly used to analyze crime, holds that socialization increases
accountability and self-control while antisocial behavior reduces social ties and promotes more socially delinquent behavior (Kirby 2007). Therefore, greater accessibility to the internet and more time spent on the internet may distance individuals from their offline communities and increase their susceptibility to malign behaviors.

Several North American and European government reports have identified the internet as a precursor to self-radicalization (Homeland Security Institute 2009; United States Department of State 2009; Change Institute 2008). The Homeland Security Institute identifies self-radicalization as a growing trend “whereby young persons are using the Internet to acquaint themselves with terrorist group’s ideologies” (2009, p.3). Mina Al-Lami similarly suggests that “the internet...has made it possible for individuals to become familiar with and influenced by radical ideologies without even socializing with radical groups” (2009, p.7). In this line, I argue that the internet causes self-radicalization through an unchecked learning process that begins with the ease of access to information online, engagement with religious material and communities, exposure to radical content and propaganda, and online preparation for battle, followed ultimately by engaging with ISIS and leaving home to join.
Figure 4: Theoretical Flow of Self-Radicalization Through an Unchecked Online Learning Process

Level 1: Religious Introduction
   Naturally, individuals become curious about Islam.

Level 2: Radicalization
   Increased engagement increases exposure to a diversity of values, including extremist values. Decreases engagement with offline community.
   Inspired by commitment of faith, thrilling videos, sensational stories, or other propaganda.
   Reinforcement of radical teachings. Increasingly identifies with the group and ideology. Lack of outside engagement fails to correct individual's course.

Level 3: Reinforcement & Decision
   Group depicts their cause as righteous and justifies their use of violence, reinforcing the glory of radical activities.
   They decide the positive consequences outweigh the negative and choose to take action to achieve glory and righteousness.
   They begin imitating radical behaviors with online training and information, giving them a sense of preparation.

Sense of preparation contributes to engaging with ISIS members and leaving home to join the organization.

Engagement with religious material and community contributes to acceptance of religious teachings. (Does not necessitate direct interaction or participation and can be limited to observation).
Figure 4 outlines the theoretical steps for self-radicalization through the internet. The theory presents that if individuals have access to the internet, they will utilize this medium for their own learning processes because it is a more convenient source for information than physically attending religious ceremonies or meeting with informed members of the religious community (Briggs and Strugnell, 2011; Shetret, 2011; Yeap and Park 2010). I suggest that through the natural pursuit of knowledge, individuals may therefore utilize the internet to inform themselves about Islam. After learning more about the religion by engaging with religious material and communities, these individuals may be persuaded by religious values or lessons and continue seeking out more information. At this stage, however, engagement does not necessitate direct interaction with religious lecturers, supporters or other community members and can be restricted to observations of ongoing conversations without participation.

The second level of online self-radicalization moves beyond a religious introduction as an individual’s acceptance of the faith and continued engagement with religious material increases exposure to radical content and decreases an individual’s interaction with their offline community. In accordance with social control theory, decreased social interaction subsequently increases the individual’s inclination to participate in deviant behavior. Moreover, radical content exposure incorporates exposure to ISIS propaganda, which is intentionally designed to appeal to a Western audience. Thus, through thrilling videos, sensationalized stories, or other methods, ISIS attracts individuals, reinforces radical teachings, and increases an individual’s identification with the group. With the internet largely replacing any offline religious interaction, the individuals interested by the propaganda are not corrected in their understanding of the religion and continue to self-radicalize.
Lastly, ISIS propaganda aims to attract individuals by depicting their cause as righteous and justifying their violence. Tsfati and Weimann (2002) find that terrorist groups go to great lengths to justify violence, often framing it as the last option after allegedly attempting all other avenues of peaceful resolution. Based on ISIS’ narrative, individuals decide that the positive consequences of helping this righteous cause, such as martyrdom and rewards in the afterlife, outweigh the negative consequences, such as death (Freiburger and Crane 2008). Individuals then begin imitating radical behaviors with online training and information, giving them a sense of preparation. When deciding to physically move to an ISIS held territory in either Iraq or Syria rather than acting domestically, individuals who have self-radicalized and prepared online likely feel as though they still require physical military training and other supplemental expertise that is unavailable online. Additionally, these individuals may require certain resources they do not personally have access to, such as weapons or materials for constructing explosive devices. Thus, once individuals feel they have prepared and informed themselves based on the sources available through the internet, they will feel comfortable engaging with ISIS members and leaving home to join the terrorist organization.

In sum, this study aims to investigate four separate hypotheses addressing the multifaceted factors contributing to a higher number of ISIS foreign fighters. These hypotheses are outlined as follows:

**Social**

**H1:** Citizens of developed and developing Western nations, living in a country with anti-Muslim sentiments, will be more likely to leave their country and join ISIS than individuals living in Western countries with less anti-Muslim sentiments.
Political

**H2:** Citizens of developed and developing Western nations, living in a country with fewer civil liberties, will be more likely to leave their country and join ISIS than individuals living in Western countries with greater civil liberties.

Economic

**H3a-c:** Citizens of developed and developing Western nations, living in a country with (a.) high economic inequality, (b.) low gross domestic product, and (c.) high national unemployment rates, will be more likely to leave their country and join ISIS than individuals living in Western countries with greater economic prosperity.

Online

**H4:** Citizens of developed and developing Western nations, living in a country with greater internet accessibility, will be more likely to leave their country and join ISIS than individuals living in Western countries with less internet accessibility.

Methodology & Summary Statistics

**Table 1: Summary Statistics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foreign Fighters / Population</td>
<td>0.00232%</td>
<td>0.00226%</td>
<td>0.0000005%</td>
<td>0.00933%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 2015</td>
<td>0.5555556</td>
<td>0.5025189</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim Population (% 2010)</td>
<td>19.57556%</td>
<td>30.37623%</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
<td>98.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Migrant Acceptance Index 2017</td>
<td>5.679111</td>
<td>1.987884</td>
<td>1.47</td>
<td>7.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic Fractionalization</td>
<td>0.281495</td>
<td>0.1998989</td>
<td>0.0586</td>
<td>0.630038</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Headscarf Ban</td>
<td>0.5111111</td>
<td>0.505525</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil Liberties</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>1.765837</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gini Index</td>
<td>0.3178667</td>
<td>0.0544917</td>
<td>0.167</td>
<td>0.429</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gross Domestic Product</td>
<td>$1.22e+12</td>
<td>$2.74e+12</td>
<td>$6.51e+09</td>
<td>$1.81e+13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Unemployment (%)</td>
<td>8.93489%</td>
<td>6.10353%</td>
<td>3.69%</td>
<td>27.69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individuals Using the Internet (%)</td>
<td>78.42278%</td>
<td>13.62099%</td>
<td>47.56976%</td>
<td>97.09936%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
To investigate the factors that contribute to the production of ISIS foreign fighters, I will adopt a mixed methods approach including multiple time series and cross-national analyses and a comparative case study of five ISIS foreign fighters. Although scholars debate the most effective research methodologies, I implement a mixed methods approach because both quantitative and qualitative research have unique merits that are complementary to one another (George and Bennett 2005). My OLS regressions establish causality between various national level variables and ISIS foreign fighters, while my comparative case study deconstructs the causal relationships and traces their specific, underlying logic. Therefore, my mixed methods approach counterbalances the weaknesses of each research method, creating room for statistical analysis and anecdotal evidence (George and Bennett 2005).

National level determinants, however, are conceptionally limited in their ability to describe the individual level decision-making dynamics that drive a foreign fighter to join ISIS. Therefore, this study’s individual level discussion of the cross-national analyses and the application of the quantitative results to the qualitative case studies requires the reader to make a logical jump from the national level determinants to the individual. Although limited, national level trends derive from the choices made by the individuals within these nations and therefore present the best proxy in lieu of fieldwork. These discussions are only intended to consider the possible ways in which the observed national level determinants relate to individual decision making and to allow individual cases to help contextualize larger scale findings. More research at the individual level is necessary to substantiate the explanations presented in this paper.
Throughout the study, I also focus only on Western countries. The rationale for this case selection follows that North America, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand possess well-developed and developing infrastructure and technology and include many mature and emerging democracies. The modern comforts of these countries provide a contrast to the hardships foreign fighters face, providing an interesting case for why citizens sacrifice these luxuries for battle.

Additionally, all of the nations in this study identify with aspects of European culture, which I define as enduring social norms and customs originating from Europe or closely associated with Europe through immigration or colonization. By focusing solely on nations related to European culture, I focus on countries that emphasize individualism rather than incorporating both individualistic and collectivist nations. The different group values based on individualism and collectivism may either reduce or increase an individual’s costs when joining ISIS. Therefore, maintaining a more consistent culture across cases accounts for discrepancies resulting from this variable. Also, despite variations in social norms between the study’s cases, the degree of separation between their cultures is still less than between them and Asian, South American, African, or Middle Eastern countries.

Furthermore, Western case selection was severely limited by missing data. The Soufan Group’s 2015 foreign fighter data encompassed a total of 66 countries, while the second report from 2017 only included data for 49 countries and four regions with certain overlap between
After filtering out regional data and countries from Asia, South America, Africa, and the Middle East, only 30 countries remained. Therefore, this study’s case selection does not include certain countries that should logically appear in the dataset due to missing information and includes countries that are "fence-sitters" of European culture to increase observations. For example, multiple countries in the dataset represent democratic and demographic shortcomings, including certain countries from the Balkans, those lying between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea, and Russia, but their development and European influences qualify them for the Western scope of this study.7,8

Quantitative Approach

The statistical analysis begins with multiple time series regressions that reveal the causal relationships between a country’s output of ISIS foreign fighters and its social, political, economic, and internet characteristics. The number of a country’s ISIS foreign fighters, taken as a percentage of its population, will serve as the study’s dependent variable.9 The data for

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6 The four regions included in Barret (2017) were the European Union, the Western Balkans, Central Asia, and South East Asia. Regional data was not incorporated because this study’s focus is on national and individual level determinants only.
7 Turkey, Georgia, and Azerbaijan are included in the dataset because of their ties to European culture. Turkey is a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and has applied for membership in the European Union (EU). Georgia has expressed interest in joining NATO and signed an Associations Agreement with the EU in 2014. Furthermore, both Georgia and Azerbaijan are members of the European Neighborhood Policy, Eastern Partnership, and the Council of Europe. Armenia is missing from both foreign fighter datasets.
8 Russia remains in the analysis because of its highly developed infrastructure, technological advancements, and European culture in certain regions. Since the foreign fighter data for this study, collected from the Soufan Group (2015) and Barrett (2017), does not distinguish between the different and culturally distinct regions in Russia, Russia is not removed from the study. Due to the vastness of Russia, future data collection and studies on foreign fighters would be well-served to specifically address different regions of Russia.
9 6-23% of ISIS foreign fighters from the European Union are converts (Boutin 2016). Therefore, foreign fighters were taken as a percentage of the entire population rather than a country’s Muslim population,
Foreign fighters per country comes from two reports published by the Soufan Group. The first report, *Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq*, updates figures from a previous report published by Richard Barrett in June 2014, which is no longer available (Soufan Group 2015). The first report was issued in December 2015 and provides both official and unofficial data. For this study, the official figure is used whenever available.\(^\text{10}\) The second report published in October 2017, titled *Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees*, is also written by Richard Barrett and only includes official data (Barrett 2017). For both datasets, whenever a range was indicated as the ISIS foreign fighter value, the mean was calculated.\(^\text{11}\) Foreign fighter data for each country was then divided by the total population. Data for each country’s total population derives from the World Bank’s World Development Indicators dataset.\(^\text{12}\)

I also define a dummy variable that takes the value of 1 if the data comes from 2015 and a value of zero otherwise. As a control, the foreign fighter percentage is also regressed on the percentage of the population that is Muslim. Data on Muslim populations for each country are as of 2010 and held constant for both 2015 and 2017 due to limited demographic data collection.\(^\text{13}\) Muslim population data is obtained from the Pew Research Center.\(^\text{14}\)

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\(^\text{10}\) Only data for Georgia 2015 and Serbia 2015 use unofficial estimates.

\(^\text{11}\) The mean was calculated for New Zealand 2015, Serbia 2015, and Turkey 2015.


\(^\text{13}\) Muslim population data is held constant from 2010 for both 2015 and 2017 because more contemporary numbers are unavailable. A later report from the Pew Research Center estimates that the Muslim growth rate between 2010-2015 was 1.8% with rates expected to decline over time.

\(^\text{14}\) The Pew Research Center is a nonpartisan think tank based in Washington D.C. that provides research on demographics, public opinion, and social issues.
To evaluate the study’s social argument captured in the first hypothesis, I include Gallup’s 2017 Migrant Acceptance Index. Gallup’s Migrant Acceptance Index follows a zero to 9 scale, with 9 representing the most accepting attitudes toward immigrants. The index value is scored for 138 countries and based on three survey questions asked in 2016.\(^\text{15}\) In the absence of a Muslim or religious tolerance index across Western countries, the Gallup Migrant Acceptance Index serves as a proxy measure for attitudes toward Muslims. Many Muslims have immigrated to Western countries and would thusly be included in migrant attitudes. Other Muslims have lineage from other countries and may still mistakenly be considered migrants. Additionally, in many Western countries where Christianity is the predominant religion, Muslims may be mistakenly perceived as foreign due to Islam’s predominance in the Arab world. As a new measure, the Gallup Migrant Acceptance Index has only been collected once for all nations; therefore, the index is kept constant across my dataset for 2015 and 2017.\(^\text{16}\)

Additionally, to control for a country’s diversity, a factor that has been identified in relation to terrorism and foreign fighters by existing literature (Tavares 2004; Piazza 2006; Klor and Benmelech 2016), I also include a measure of ethnic fractionalization. Ethnic, religious, and linguistic fractionalization are three indices constructed by Alesina et al. (2003). The indices are based on a zero to 1 scale, wherein a value of zero represents perfect homogeneity and 1 represents perfect heterogeneity. Concerns of multicollinearity are avoided by only utilizing one

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\(^\text{15}\) The survey took place in the U.S. in 2017. For more information on the questions asked, see the Appendix.

\(^\text{16}\) With most data collected in 2016, I have confidence that the index change would not be significant if data were available for 2015 and 2017 individually.
of the three indices.\textsuperscript{17} I use the annually updated version of the ethnic fractionalization index from the Quality of Government Institute at the University of Gothenburg.\textsuperscript{18}

The second set of variables are included to test the second hypothesis’ argument regarding civil liberties. Data for civil liberties by country are obtained from Freedom House’s \textit{Freedom in the World 2015} and \textit{Freedom in the World 2017} reports.\textsuperscript{19} Freedom House scores countries on civil liberties through a 7 to 1 rating, wherein 7 represents the least freedom and 1 represents the greatest degree of freedom. Civil liberties ratings are based on questions from four subcategories: freedom of expression and belief; associational and organizational rights; rule of law; and personal autonomy and individual rights.\textsuperscript{20} To further test the governmental role in the production of ISIS foreign fighters, I also define a dummy variable that values countries with any form of headscarf ban at 1, and zero otherwise. Headscarf bans refer to national, local, or partial bans instituted by the government.\textsuperscript{21} Headscarves include hijabs, burqas, niqabs, or full-face veils. A value of 1 is only assigned to a country if the headscarf ban was active during the given year in the time series.\textsuperscript{22}

The model also examines the study’s economic hypothesis by regressing foreign fighter percentage on economic inequality, gross domestic product, and total unemployment.

\textsuperscript{17} Results remain the same whether one or two measures of fractionalization are included.
\textsuperscript{18} Little to no variation exists in these indices for countries between 2015 and 2017.
\textsuperscript{19} Freedom House is a U.S. government funded independent research organization that studies and advocates for democracy, human rights, and political freedom.
\textsuperscript{20} For a fuller description of Freedom House’s methodology and scoring system, see the Appendix.
\textsuperscript{21} Partial bans are government bans in certain locations, such as government buildings and schools.
\textsuperscript{22} Turkey banned headscarves, but the ban was lifted in 2013 (Sanghani 2017). Spain also implemented a headscarf ban in 2010, but the law was overturned by the Supreme Court in 2013 (Govan 2013). Norway proposed the banning of full face-veils in education in 2017, but the law was not implemented until 2018 (Adomaitis 2018).
Economic inequality is measured through the Gini Index, a standard measure for economic inequality ranging from zero (0%) to 1 (100%) with higher values representing greater inequality.\textsuperscript{23} Gross domestic product in current USD represents the health of a country’s economy and is utilized as a measure of a country’s economic wealth and development.\textsuperscript{24} The third economic variable, total unemployment, captures the percentage of a country’s labor force that is unemployed based on the International Labour Organization’s estimates.\textsuperscript{25} Data for all three variables is available through the World Bank’s World Development Indicators dataset.

The final component of the model addresses the role the internet plays in foreign fighter output. I focus on the individuals using the internet as a percentage of the population to serve as a proxy measure for internet accessibility. Again, this data derives from the World Bank’s World Development Indicators dataset.\textsuperscript{26} No global data is available for the percentage of individuals utilizing social media, or individual social networking sites, so the internet hypothesis will be subject to further evaluation through the qualitative portion of the study.

\textit{Qualitative Approach}

The study’s qualitative approach implements a comparative case study of five Western foreign fighters. The comparative case study uses Mill’s direct method of agreement (1843) to understand foreign fighters at an individual level; therefore, cases are selected based on a common factor and any other common factors that are present across multiple different cases.

\textsuperscript{23} Retrieved from: \url{https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/si.pov.gini}.
\textsuperscript{24} Retrieved from: \url{https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD}.
\textsuperscript{25} Retrieved from: \url{https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/sl.uem.totl.zs}.
\textsuperscript{26} Retrieved from: \url{https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.ZS}.
are considered in relation to the study’s quantitative findings. The similar factor connecting all the subjects are their Western origins and their decision to travel to either Iraq or Syria to join ISIS. Subjects were also intentionally selected to capture variance in Western nationalities and genders. Other differences include the subjects’ ages, personalities, and social lives.

Moreover, the foreign fighters’ biographies are constructed by merging different accounts of their lives. These accounts include interviews with first-degree family members, friends, or the foreign fighters themselves as well as news stories and reliable reports. For each case, information from different sources will be cross-referenced to better ensure an accurate representation of their lives. Hence, only cases with interviews and more than one source available were selected to contextualize the study’s statistical analysis. Cases were drawn from the Counter Extremism Project’s Terrorists and Extremists Database, Syria Deeply, local news agencies, and international news outlets.

Foreign fighter case selection is thusly restricted to existing content, which is also limited. The limited data on the personal lives and recruitment of foreign fighters stems from the refusal of most foreign fighters to reveal personal information that could be used to identify

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27 Methodology and select cases adapted from Schlierer (2016).
28 Both Shamima Begum and Hoda Muthana were selected from the Counter Extremism Project’s Terrorists and Extremists Database. The Counter Extremism Project (CEP) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan international policy organization based in New York and London to combat extremism. The CEP is led by former world leaders and diplomats.
29 Damian Clairmont was selected based on the various interviews his mother, Christianne Boudreau, gave to multiple news agencies. Syria Deeply provided a detailed account of Clairmont’s life as told through the project’s own interview with Boudreau. Syria Deeply is an independent digital media project that aims to provide readers with context for the Syrian conflict. Syria Deeply is associated with News Deeply, a New York-based new media startup with the goal of advancing foreign policy literacy through public service journalism. Their partners include the World Economic Forum, Columbia University’s Graduate School of Journalism and the Baker Institute at Rice University.
them by their governments (Mironova and Whitt 2014). Additionally, the overwhelming media focus on sensationalized ISIS stories further restricts potential case selection. Therefore, an entirely random and representative sample of foreign fighters is currently unachievable. With these limitations in mind, the subjects are only selected to illustrate the logic of the quantitative findings and are not intended to represent a random and demographically representative sample of ISIS foreign fighters or to draw causal inferences.

For the study’s anecdotal evidence, a man from France and a teenaged boy from Turkey were selected. These two countries represent two of the three largest European nationalities in ISIS. Additionally, a teenaged girl from the United Kingdom, the fifth largest Western ISIS nationality among foreign fighters, is also included. The other nationalities represented in this comparative case study include the United States and Canada. Although women only make up an estimated 17% of ISIS foreign fighters from the European Union (Boutin et al. 2016), two women are included in this study for comparative purposes to identify any factors that may be closely linked to gender, such as marriage. Likewise, the average age for male ISIS foreign fighters is 26-27 years old, whereas the average age for female ISIS foreign fighters is estimated at two to three years older (Milton and Dodwell 2018). Therein, this study captures a disproportionate number of minors and young adults by only presenting cases of individuals aged 22 or younger. The study incorporates two minors, one male and one female, for comparison regarding any factors primarily affecting minors. The youngest subject in this study is 14 years old, while the oldest subjects are around 22 years old. Additionally, two of the subjects in the case study are converts to Islam. With respect to foreign fighters from the
European Union alone, only 23% are converts at most (Boutin et al. 2016). Therefore, this study also captures a disproportionate number of converts.

In all five Western foreign fighter cases, the internet was referenced as either a factor of radicalization, a source of information, or a point of contact with ISIS recruiters. To better ensure that these findings are not a result of shock-value media intended to dramatize the role of the internet in extremism, data on the mention of the internet or social media was gathered for all relevant subjects from the Counter Extremism Project’s Terrorists and Extremists Database. After filtering the database for ISIS foreign fighters, 84 cases were available. I then removed all cases wherein the foreign fighters were not from Western nations or they never seriously attempted to travel to Iraq or Syria, leaving a total of 67 cases. Therefore, the remaining cases included only Western foreign fighters who either successfully joined ISIS or were arrested in the airport. Although the case study subjects were selected based on their successful journey to Iraq or Syria, foreign fighters arrested in the airport were included to increase the sample size of this basic observation. After evaluating all 67 cases, I find that 61% of Western foreign fighters in the Counter Extremism Project’s Database made mention of the internet or social media. Therefore, the prominence of the internet in this study’s case selection is inflated, but effectively nuances and contextualizes how novel statistical evidence concerning the internet operates for a set of individuals.

In sum, the qualitative portion of the study incorporates a comparative case study of five foreign fighters from a diverse range of nationalities. The foreign fighters in this study have been selected to contextualize the underlying logic from the study’s quantitative findings and are not intended to represent a random and demographically representative sample.
Table 2: Regression Model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>(1) Foreign Fighters / Population</th>
<th>(2) Foreign Fighters / Population</th>
<th>(3) Foreign Fighters / Population</th>
<th>(4) Foreign Fighters / Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Year 2015</td>
<td>-8.19e-06</td>
<td>-5.32e-06</td>
<td>-7.47e-06</td>
<td>-6.96e-06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(5.33e-06)</td>
<td>(6.22e-06)</td>
<td>(5.21e-06)</td>
<td>(5.34e-06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim Population (%) 2010</td>
<td>0.0000242</td>
<td>0.00004*</td>
<td>0.0000357*</td>
<td>0.0000355*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.0000144)</td>
<td>(0.000016)</td>
<td>(0.0000136)</td>
<td>(0.0000139)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Migrant Acceptance Index 2017</td>
<td>-8.06e-06**</td>
<td>-9.41e-06**</td>
<td>-9.16e-06**</td>
<td>-9.88e-06**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2.81e-06)</td>
<td>(3.25e-06)</td>
<td>(2.74e-06)</td>
<td>(2.81e-06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic Fractionalization</td>
<td>-6.46e-06</td>
<td>4.95e-06</td>
<td>7.02e-07</td>
<td>5.53e-07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.0000152)</td>
<td>(0.0000172)</td>
<td>(0.0000145)</td>
<td>(0.0000149)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Headscarf Ban</td>
<td>-4.94e-06</td>
<td>-6.29e-06</td>
<td>-5.20e-06</td>
<td>-5.23e-06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(5.49e-06)</td>
<td>(6.43e-06)</td>
<td>(5.37e-06)</td>
<td>(5.50e-06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil Liberties</td>
<td>-2.97e-06</td>
<td>-6.10e-06</td>
<td>-3.90e-06</td>
<td>-4.79e-06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(3.22e-06)</td>
<td>(3.59e-06)</td>
<td>(3.08e-06)</td>
<td>(3.12e-06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gini Index</td>
<td>-0.0001614*</td>
<td>-0.0001009</td>
<td>-0.0001308*</td>
<td>-0.0001316*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.0000611)</td>
<td>(0.0000691)</td>
<td>(0.0000586)</td>
<td>(0.0000601)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gross Domestic Product</td>
<td>1.19e-18</td>
<td>5.37e-19</td>
<td>1.12e-18</td>
<td>1.27e-18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.06e-18)</td>
<td>(1.21e-18)</td>
<td>(1.03e-18)</td>
<td>(1.07e-18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Unemployment (%)</td>
<td>0.0002175***</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.0000502)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individuals Using the Internet (%)</td>
<td>0.0000674*</td>
<td>0.0000685*</td>
<td>0.000095**</td>
<td>0.0001111**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.0000316)</td>
<td>(0.0000375)</td>
<td>(0.0000323)</td>
<td>(0.0000347)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Youth Unemployment (%)</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>0.0000413*</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.0000181)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male Youth Unemployment (%)</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>0.0000978***</td>
<td>-----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.0000212)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female Youth Unemployment (%)</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>0.0000948***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.000022)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>0.0000572</td>
<td>0.0000553</td>
<td>0.0000292</td>
<td>0.0000231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.0000401)</td>
<td>(0.0000474)</td>
<td>(0.0000404)</td>
<td>(0.000042)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-squared</td>
<td>0.618</td>
<td>0.487</td>
<td>0.635</td>
<td>0.617</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Standard errors in parentheses, * p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001
Quantitative Findings: Determinants of Western ISIS Foreign Fighters

Results

I develop multiple regressions for all Western countries with available foreign fighter data according to reports issued by the Soufan Group.\textsuperscript{30} These regressions include foreign fighter data for each country for both 2015 and 2017.\textsuperscript{31} Table 2, therein, presents the results of four time series and cross-national regressions, comparing various social, political, economic, and online variables to a country’s output of foreign fighters as a percentage of the total population. When predicting Western ISIS foreign fighters, the model identifies four significant determinants. A country’s acceptance of migrants, economic inequality, unemployment rate, and internet usage are all causal factors in a country’s number of foreign fighters.

Across all models, a country’s acceptance of migrants is significant at the 99\textsuperscript{th} percent confidence interval. This significance is paired with a negative association between a country’s output of foreign fighters by population and Gallup’s 2017 Migrant Acceptance Index, meaning that countries more accepting of migrants are less likely to produce foreign fighters. While the theoretical explanation of Hypothesis 1 cannot be confirmed without qualitative analysis and subsequent fieldwork, the negative causation supports the hypothesis. Moreover, the measure of ethnic fractionalization was insignificant in predicting ISIS foreign fighters.

In addition to migrant acceptance, a country’s economic inequality is also significant. Contrary to the argument in the third hypothesis, Table 2 shows that a country’s economic

\textsuperscript{30} For foreign fighter data as a percentage of total population in both 2015 and 2017, see Table 3 in the Appendix.

\textsuperscript{31} Only Bulgaria, Moldova, New Zealand, and Romania do not contain information for both years.
inequality, measured by the Gini Index, is negatively correlated with foreign fighters by population. A separate bivariate correlation between economic inequality and foreign fighters by population remains statistically significant with a negative association but lacks important controls. Therefore, as economic inequality increases foreign fighters as a percentage of the population decreases. This relationship suggests that societies with greater economic equality produce more foreign fighters, rejecting Hypothesis 3a. Additionally, Table 2 does not capture significance for the study’s measure of economic prosperity and development, represented by gross domestic product, in any of the four models. Therefore, the multiple time series regressions fail to reject the null hypothesis and reject Hypothesis 3b as well. Furthermore, a positive and highly significant correlation between a country’s foreign fighters by population and the percent of its labor force that is unemployed indicates that higher unemployment is an important causal factor in the radicalization of foreign fighters. Again, the underlying logic of Hypothesis 3c requires greater qualitative analysis, however the positive causation supports Hypothesis 3c.

Although the average age of ISIS foreign fighters is 26-30 years old (Milton and Dodwell 2018), younger adults all around the world are more likely to use the internet and more likely to use social media than are older individuals (Lenhart et al. 2010; Poushter et al. 2018). Since the internet and social media act as breeding grounds for ISIS’ radicalization, Columns (2)-(4) investigate the effects of youth unemployment on a country’s output of foreign fighters. These regressions utilize all the same variables for control measures as in Column 1 but replace total unemployment with total youth unemployment as a percentage of the labor force aged 15 to 24 years old, male youth unemployment as a percentage of the male labor force aged 15 to 24
years old, and female youth unemployment as a percentage of the female labor force aged 15 to 24 years old. Data for these variables are collected from the World Bank’s World Development Indicators database and derive from the International Labour Organization’s estimates.\textsuperscript{32} These results indicate that youth unemployment remains a significant determinant of foreign fighters, but the effect is weaker than with total unemployment. Additionally, I find that male and female youth unemployment are significant causal factors that, individually, produce equally as significant effects on a country’s output of foreign fighters.\textsuperscript{33}

\textbf{Figure 5: Foreign Fighters by Muslim Population}

Following the substitution of various forms of youth unemployment for total unemployment, the significance of a country’s Muslim population as a percentage of the

\textsuperscript{33} To include both male and female youth unemployment in the same model would produce large variance inflation factors.
population increases. When running a bivariate correlation on the foreign fighter percentage and Muslim population percentage held constant from 2010, Muslim population is highly significant with a positive correlation. Therefore, Columns (2)-(4) demonstrate that as a country’s Muslim population increases its output of ISIS foreign fighters also increase. Figure 5 illustrates this positive association. While these results may initially appear contrary to isolation theory, it is unsurprising that a country with a larger Muslim population will produce a higher percentage of ISIS foreign fighters since ISIS, as an Islamic terrorist group, only appeals to Muslims.34

Finally, Table 2 shows the positive association of internet use in the production of foreign fighters. Across all models, the percent of a country’s population that is using the internet is significant when held to a one-tailed test. Due to the study’s low number of observations, a one-tailed test is deemed appropriate. Additionally, a strong theoretical expectation outlined the causal direction beforehand, also making a one-tailed test acceptable. These findings indicate that higher use of the internet increases a country’s number of foreign fighters, supporting Hypothesis 4.

Discussion

This study’s quantitative findings cannot speak directly to the different theories explaining the observed relationships and trends. With the data providing foreign fighter insight at the national level, the findings can only evidence positive and negative causal relationships.

34 To further support this finding, I interact Muslim population with data drawn from Gallup’s Migrant Acceptance Index to refute that more Muslims in a country improve the citizens’ attitudes toward migrants. The interaction was insignificant.
However, the study’s findings do provide important implications relative to the study’s theoretical framework.

First, the negative association between ISIS foreign fighters as a percentage of the population and Gallup’s 2017 Migrant Acceptance Index potentially offers support for the first hypothesis’ argument in favor of social isolation and identity uncertainty. This negative causation may hold that countries more accepting of migrants – including Muslim immigrants, native Muslims with immigrant lineage, or Muslims who are mistakenly perceived as migrants due to Islam’s Middle Eastern roots – create an environment conducive to self-expression, alleviating self-doubt and the tendency to identify oneself with radical groups to regain identity certainty. Acceptance may thereby be a powerful deterrent of radical identification and depress a country’s output of foreign fighters.

Table 2 also demonstrates, contrary to expectation, that economic inequality is negatively related to foreign fighters by population. Therefore, more equal societies actually produce more foreign fighters. While this relationship may be, as Klor and Benmelech (2016) argue, a result of ISIS recruitment targeting well-developed countries, it may also very well suggest that equal societies do not produce a scapegoat for unsatisfied individuals to blame for their hardships. Without a wealthy elite to fault for their problems, individuals in equal societies may end up condemning society as a whole for their troubles. I posit that a harbored disdain for society could contribute to frustrated individuals seeking out an alternative community within ISIS or lashing out against society through political violence with ISIS serving as an organized outlet for violent activity.
Furthermore, a highly significant positive causation between a country’s foreign fighters and the percent of its labor force that is unemployed may relate to Gurr’s (1970) theory of relative deprivation. That is, unemployed individuals may feel as though they deserve employment or income, producing discontent and a greater likelihood of engaging in political violence, such as through ISIS. Relative deprivation as a consequence of unemployment may also increase the susceptibility of individuals to fall victim to ISIS’ promises of employment and provision of free social services (Graham 2017). With respect to youth unemployment, an inability to find work to help support their families may harm aspirations for future employment opportunities and lower the opportunity costs for minors to leave home, thereby increasing a minor’s likelihood of joining ISIS. Moreover, those who experience unemployment in their youth may cultivate resentment that carries into adulthood and becomes amplified by unemployment during adulthood as well, resulting in joining ISIS at a later age also due to relative deprivation and lowered opportunity costs for leaving home. The positive causation between unemployment rates and foreign fighters may thereby support the underlying logic of my third hypothesis.

Finally, the positive relationship between the percent of a country’s population using the internet and the percent of the population who become ISIS foreign fighters presents key implications about the novel quantitative variable. While an admittedly limited measure of the internet’s impact on radicalization due to its restriction to only one variable, the positive causation may provide foundational support for self-radicalization through an unchecked online learning process as put forth in the theory behind Hypothesis 4. This positive relationship may therefore exist because when the percent of a population using the internet increases it
becomes likelier that citizens will use the medium for information and religious social learning. Accessing the internet for religious information and guidance may subsequently expose individuals to radical content, distance them from their offline communities, and result in the imitation of extremist behaviors with online training and knowledge. Alternatively, the online process of radial social learning in the context of ISIS may only be effective against individuals already susceptible to ISIS recruitment, suggesting the internet only serves as a medium of communication and a tool of recruitment, rather than a causal determinant.

Ultimately, these explanations require robust fieldwork through either in-depth interviews or detailed surveys to substantiate these arguments. Although such research is beyond the resources of this study, I consider the outlined logic through the cases of five foreign fighters in the subsequent section.

Real Foreign Fighters and Their Stories

Figure 6: Where Case Study Fighters Come From
Taylan Ö.Y.
Ankara, Turkey

Identified only as Taylan Ö.Y. to protect his identity, Ö.Y. was 14 years old when he left his home in Ankara, Turkey to join ISIS in Syria. Ö.Y. dropped out of school to work as a garlic vendor along with other members of his family. In 2014, he and four or five friends paid the equivalent of nine U.S. dollars to smugglers to cross the border into Syria. Soon after arriving in Raqqa, his friends returned to Turkey while Ö.Y. chose to stay behind. The teenager joined the militant group and began receiving intensive military training and Quran lessons. A few days after leaving home, Ö.Y. contacted his father telling him he was in Syria for a “good cause” and would not be returning to Turkey (“14-Year-Old Turkish ISIL Militant Found by Soldiers” 2014).

After training with ISIS for over a month, shrapnel from an explosion during combat inflicted a serious injury on Ö.Y. The teenager was left near the Turkish-Syrian border by his fellow ISIS militants where he was rescued by Turkish soldiers and hospitalized (“14-Year-Old Turkish ISIL Militant Found by Soldiers” 2014; “14-Year-Old Turkish ISIL Militant Found at Border” 2014; Starr 2014).

Following the ordeal, Ö.Y. expressed his regret to Doğan News Agency about joining ISIS and not returning home to Turkey with his friends. When interviewed by the press, Ö.Y.’s father, Yaşar Y., issued a warning to parents everywhere:

“What we have been through should be a lesson for all of the mothers and fathers. We are secular, but devout people; we have never supported ISIL’s point of view and have nothing to do with them. People should pay more attention to what their children do on the Internet to not to [sic] find themselves in the same situation as us” (“14-Year-Old Turkish ISIL Militant Found at Border” 2014).
Ö.Y.’s father also called for increased border security to prevent other children from crossing into Syria to join the terrorist organization (“14-Year-Old Turkish ISIL Militant Found by Soldiers” 2014; “14-Year-Old Turkish ISIL Militant Found at Border” 2014; Starr 2014).

Despite losing a lot of blood before arriving at the hospital, doctors provided a statement to the press that assured Ö.Y. was in good hands. Sources also reported that the former ISIS militant made it out of the intensive care unit and was in a “critical but stable condition” (“14-Year-Old Turkish ISIL Militant Found by Soldiers” 2014).

**Maxime Hauchard**  
*Bosc-Roger-en-Roumois, France*

Maxime Hauchard was a pizza delivery man from a small Normandy village in France. In an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, Hauchard’s neighbors described him as good and considerate in his youth (Penketh 2014). Additionally, Hauchard and his family were considered “well-integrated” in the community with residents speaking highly of his parents (Penketh 2014). He received a standard education at the local schools, and the community experienced little to no issues with Hauchard, his friends, or any other village youth (Penketh 2014). In a television interview with BFM, Hauchard said he converted to Islam at the age of 17 after watching YouTube videos, despite growing up Catholic (“Normandy Man” 2018; Des Beauvais 2015). In the same interview, he also announced that his personal goal was to achieve martyrdom in his fight for ISIS (Glum 2014; Naden et al. 2014). French police later suggested that he had been radicalized after engaging with ISIS recruiters on Facebook (Penketh 2014).

Hauchard travelled to Mauritania in 2012 but felt that the religious education was “not strict enough” (Penketh 2014). In 2013, he travelled to Turkey under the guise of a
humanitarian worker and subsequently crossed the border into Syria (Penketh 2014). The Frenchman entered the public eye in 2014 at age 22 when he was identified as an executioner in an ISIS propaganda video that showed the beheading of a U.S. aid worker, Peter Kassig, and 18 other Syrian military personnel (Naden et al. 2014). Hauchard is now believed to be dead (“French 'Daesh Executioner’” 2018).

**Shamima Begum**  
**London, England**

Shamima Begum was born in the United Kingdom, although both her parents are of Bangladeshi heritage (“Shamima Begum Will Not Be Allowed Here” 2019). Begum lived in London where she attended Bethnal Green Academy with Kadiza Sultana and Amira Abase (Halliday et al. 2015; Perraudin 2015). During the Academy’s half-term break in February 2015, Begum and her two school friends travelled to Syria to join ISIS and their friend Sharmeena Begum, also from Bethnal Green Academy, who had joined ISIS in 2014 (Perraudin 2015; “Syria Girls” 2015). Before leaving, Begum’s mother stated that “there was no indication whatsoever [that her daughter planned to leave home and join ISIS]. She was just herself. There was nothing different about her. There were no changes in her behavior in anything” (“Syria Girls” 2015). Based on Begum’s Twitter account, however, before leaving for ISIS she followed numerous ISIS related accounts, many of which belonged to female ISIS recruiters (Iqbal 2015).

The girls flew to Turkey and crossed the border into Syria (Perraudin 2015). In Raqqa, about three weeks after arriving, Begum married a Dutch-born foreign fighter (Perraudin 2015;  

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35 Shamima Begum has no relation to Sharmeena Begum.
Loyd 2019). In recent interviews, Begum stated that the two friends with whom she arrived and Sharmeena Begum had also all married ISIS men (Dodd 2016). She later gave birth to three children, all three of whom died in infancy (Perraudin 2015).

Begum’s third child has since stirred international controversy, as Begum sought to return to the United Kingdom in February 2019, now 19 years old, when she was still pregnant to protect her unborn son (Addley and Boffey 2019). Security concerns resulted in the stripping of Begum’s British citizenship and prevented the mother from entering the country, during which time the baby boy was born and died from pneumonia (“Shamima Begum: IS Teenager's Baby” 2019). Begum did not regret joining ISIS and considered herself weak for wanting to return home, praising Sharmeena Begum and Abase for staying (Busby and Dodd 2019; Loyd 2019).

In an interview she gave when trying to reenter the United Kingdom, Begum mentioned that her life in Raqqa was a normal life, much like how life is represented in propaganda videos with the exception of bombings (Loyd 2019). It is still undecided whether or not Begum will be allowed back into the United Kingdom and if she will be charged with terrorist activity.

_Damian Clairmont
Calgary, Canada_

Damian Clairmont was born in Nova Scotia to a French-Canadian family. Clairmont’s mother, Christianne Boudreau, described him as an inquisitive and compassionate little boy (Bradford 2016). However, as a child, Clairmont was abused by his mother’s partner and

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36 Sultana’s death had already been reported in 2016 (Busby and Dodd 2019).
witnessed the abuse of his mother as well (Bradford 2016). Clairmont carried depression into his adulthood as he struggled with his peers and became more withdrawn in high school, attempting suicide at age 17 (Newton 2015; Bradford 2016). After the attempt he made on his own life, Clairmont found Islam. Despite raising Clairmont as a Christian, Boudreau was happy that her son could find contentment as a Muslim and seemed to be experiencing positive changes (Newton 2015).

Three years following his conversion, Clairmont joined a new mosque and sought out more radical content online (Newton 2015). Boudreau also began noticing behavioral changes as her son expressed outrage at the Syrian President and the Canadian government’s failure to intervene (Bradford 2016). In 2012, Clairmont told his mother that he was travelling to Egypt to study Arabic, only finding out later from the Canadian Security Intelligence Service that her son had actually gone to Syria to fight for ISIS.

After several phone calls, Boudreau gathered that her son really felt as though he was accomplishing good in Syria (Newton 2015). In her interview with CNN, Clairmont’s mother stated that he joined ISIS to help women and children in the Syrian civil war (Newton 2015). She argued that Clairmont found someone online who exposed his vulnerability and his desire to make a difference and successfully convinced him to join the terrorist organization (Newton 2015). “We’ve got a whole medium out there now,” Boudreau warned, “that reaches out to our children on their smartphones and their iPads, through whatever medium there is, that we as parents don’t have control over” (Newton 2015). After a phone call from a reporter looking for a photo of Clairmont, Boudreau learned that her son had died at aged 22 near Aleppo in 2014 (Bradford 2016; Newton 2015).
Hoda Muthana
Hoover, Alabama, United States

Hoda Muthana was born in New Jersey in the United States in 1994 to a naturalized U.S. citizen and Yemeni diplomat, Ahmed Ali Muthana (Holpuch 2019; “The ISIS Bride” 2019). Muthana attended the University of Alabama Birmingham where she studied business while living in the nearby city, Hoover, Alabama (Hall 2015; Corcoran 2015). The University of Alabama Birmingham attracts a sizeable Muslim population to Hoover, which has three mosques, due to its international programs (Hall 2015). The Birmingham Islamic society, however, openly condemns ISIS (Hall 2015).

Muthana graduated from high school before receiving her first smartphone as a graduation gift in 2013 (Hall 2015). As a conservative man, Muthana’s father checked her phone to ensure she did not use social media or messaging apps to engage with anyone who was not family (Hall 2015). Muthana described her family as very strict (Hall 2015). Her father noticed the presence of numerous Islamic apps, such as the Quran and hadiths, and he was unconcerned and proud of her devoutness (Hall 2015). Unknown to her father, Muthana had secretly been operating her own radical Islamist Twitter accounts, posting under @AhlulDhikr and @ZumarulJannah, and befriending known ISIS members, sympathizers, and foreign fighters (Hall 2015). In an interview, Muthana suggested that she watched lectures about Islam on YouTube and learned more from internet scholars than her Islamic community (Hall 2015). Friends described Muthana as “quiet” and “shy,” and suggested that her Twitter persona was unlike how she behaved in reality (Hall 2015; Corcoran 2015). Over time, she became more withdrawn. In an interview with BuzzFeed, Muthana stated, “I literally isolated myself from all
my friends and community members the last year I was in America. As I grew closer to my *deen*,
I lost all my friends. I found none in my community that desired to tread the path I was striving
for” (Hall 2015).

Muthana admitted that the people she had met online helped her plan her escape to
Syria (Hall 2015). In November 2014, when she was only 19 years old, she informed her parents
that she needed to attend a school trip to Atlanta which would normally not be allowed by her
conservative father, but her father made an exception because it was for her studies. However,
Muthana had actually enrolled in extra classes at her university and dropped them so she could
cash the refund check and purchase a plane ticket to Turkey (Hall 2015; Corcoran 2015). While
her family thought she was in Georgia with her schoolmates, Muthana flew to Turkey and
entered Syria. By December 2014, Muthana was married to Suhan Rahman, a 23-year-old
Australian foreign fighter. Her husband died 87 days into the marriage after a Jordanian
airstrike (Hall 2015). She was remarried to a Tunisian foreign fighter with whom she had her
son. Her second husband died in Mosul and she briefly married and divorced a Syrian fighter
(Hall 2015; Corcoran 2015).

Now, in 2019, Muthana seeks to return to the United States with her 18-month-old son,
suggesting she had made a “big mistake” and “deeply regrets” travelling to Syria (Chulov and
McKernan 2019). However, the Obama administration has since revoked her passport and the
status of Muthana’s citizenship is up for debate (Zuckerman 2019).
Qualitative Findings

Results & Discussion

When comparing the stories of these five citizens from developed and developing Western nations who chose to leave their homes and join ISIS, a stronger and more comprehensive narrative emerges regarding the role that the internet plays in radicalization. All of the selected cases include explicit references to the internet by either a first-degree family member, a friend, or the foreign fighter themselves. While the focus on the internet may be a result of agenda-setting or a shock value that media outlets exploit, the prominence of the internet across these stories indicates that it is a factor that cannot be ignored when predicting foreign fighters.

Although the internet cannot be directly traced to the radicalization of each of these foreign fighters or evidenced to match this study’s theoretical flow of online self-radicalization, the internet did bridge the Western world to radical Islam through information and social learning. In the cases of Maxime Hauchard and Hoda Muthana, I find important support for the theoretical explanation behind Hypothesis 4. Both Hauchard and Muthana accessed the internet to obtain more information about Islam and further their faith, eventually manifesting in their imitation of radical behaviors and their decisions to join ISIS. In a BFM interview, Hauchard stated that YouTube videos inspired his initial conversion to Islam, and according to French police he was later contacted by ISIS recruiters through Facebook. Hauchard exemplifies self-radicalization in that he educated himself about Islam through online videos, leading to his conversion, exposure to radical content, and ultimately his decision to join the terror group. Hauchard also provides convincing evidence for self-radicalization because he made the costly
decision to travel to Mauritania for religious education before joining ISIS, and only left for ISIS territory after deciding that his Islamic education was not rigorous enough. However, the exact role of ISIS recruiters and the extent of their communication with Hauchard remains unknown.

In Hoda Muthana’s story, her radicalization did not begin until she was given her first smartphone. The smartphone gave her access to Islamic apps and YouTube, teaching her more about her religion, and eventually guiding her to more radical content. Access to the internet, for example, allowed Muthana to observe and learn from known ISIS members on Twitter, reinforcing radical teachings from internet scholars. Her multiple Twitter accounts also provided her with a platform to safely mimic radical behaviors until she felt prepared to physically join the group. Meanwhile, Muthana’s decision to isolate herself from her offline community demonstrates a personal decision that limited her social interactions and promoted malign behaviors, as suggested by social control theory (Nye 1975), also contributing to her decision to leave home. Again, the exact degree of contact with ISIS recruiters and their role in Muthana’s radicalization is largely unidentified, producing limited support for self-radicalization.

The role of self-radicalization through an unchecked online learning process is less clear in the lives of Damian Clairmont, Taylan Ö.Y., and Shamima Begum; however, the internet maintains significance in these cases as well. In an interview, Damian Clairmont’s mother suggested that he exhibited unusual behaviors after joining a new mosque and seeking out radical content online. It is unclear whether radicalization stemmed first from Clairmont’s internet use or from the environment of his new mosque. After all, Clairmont was not the only Canadian to become radicalized and join ISIS who prayed at the 8th and 8th Mosque in
downtown Calgary (Baksh and Heroux 2017; Heroux and Baksh 2017; Potkins 2017; Robertson 2018). Whether it was the internet that guided him to the radical community or vice versa is impossible to know without interviewing Clairmont, who died in 2014. Moreover, for young Taylan Ö.Y., his father warned other parents to pay attention to what their children are doing on the internet, intimating that Ö.Y. had either accessed Islamic propaganda or directly connected with an ISIS recruiter online. However, the media interviews with his father offer no more information about whether Ö.Y. was radicalized by the internet, the friends that joined him, or an alternative source. Finally, Shamima Begum followed numerous Twitter accounts known to belong to female ISIS recruiters before leaving home and no evidence suggests her direct engagement with these accounts. She also referred to ISIS propaganda videos in a later interview, indicating her exposure to the material. Therefore, a pursuit of online social learning may have guided her to the recruits and videos, but without more information it cannot be known whether the internet or other social factors contributed to her radicalization.

Despite the limited generalizability of this sample, the internet played an important role in the radicalization of two of the five foreign fighters through extremist social learning, and the internet was at least partially involved in the journeys of the other three foreign fighters on their paths to ISIS. These qualitative findings highlight the results from the study’s time series regressions, which show the significance of the population’s usage of the internet in determining a country’s output of foreign fighters. Nevertheless, the conclusion that the internet helped ISIS mobilize existing grievances and vulnerabilities felt by these individuals, rather than the internet acting as a causal determinant, cannot be ruled out. Although the
stories may support an unchecked online learning process, more fieldwork is necessary to determine the deeper roots of radicalism.

With respect to the social factors included in the model, Muslim and migrant discrimination were not described by sources as contributors to radicalization. Although the omission of stories of discrimination do not imply that discrimination did not occur, it does suggest that interviewed sources did not regard discrimination as a significant determinant and often regarded other factors, such as the internet, as more important. Of all five cases, Damian Clairmont of Canada captures the effects of social isolation and uncertainty-identity theory the most clearly. Clairmont experienced isolation at school, depression, and abuse before turning to Islam and increasingly radical content. Clairmont’s emotional suffering contributed to self-doubt that motivated him to seek fulfillment online. His social isolation and identity uncertainty were likely the factors that led him to identify with the unambiguous Islamist radicals both in his mosque and online, providing support for the logic behind the study’s first hypothesis.

In the cases of Hauchard and Muthana, however, I find evidence that they became isolated because they felt that their Muslim communities were not strict enough. Hauchard originally moved from France to Mauritania, but he was unsatisfied by the religious education and subsequently moved on to ISIS. Likewise, Muthana personally admitted to isolating herself from her community because she did not feel as though the Muslims around her were devout enough. While this may be because both were already radicalized, it may also suggest that the lack of a strict but peaceful outlet within a community contributes to isolation, making ISIS appear to be the only group strict enough to facilitate a faithful practice of Islam.
As with the quantitative section, the qualitative portion of the study also finds no support for political determinants regarding the restriction of civil liberties. None of the cases refer to government oppression or a lack of freedoms as a precursor to leaving home for ISIS. Again, the omission of a political narrative does not necessarily abolish its potential interaction with other variables due to the study’s demographically unrepresentative sample, but its insignificance across both methods of study is enough to support a rejection of Hypothesis 2.

When evaluating the economic arguments made in Hypothesis 3, tentative evidence arises from two of the five cases. Both the Turkish foreign fighter, Ö.Y., and the French foreign fighter, Hauchard, demonstrated low economic opportunity costs when joining ISIS due to their employment. Ö.Y. had dropped out of school and sold garlic along with other family members, while Hauchard worked as a pizza delivery man. Although both individuals were young during their employment and these jobs are typical for teenagers, the low pay and, especially for Ö.Y., what might appear to be dismal employment prospects, may have contributed to senses of relative deprivation and lowered opportunity costs when leaving home and joining ISIS. In addition to partial evidence for the logic behind the study’s economic arguments, these two cases also identify underemployment as a potential determinant for joining ISIS that should be included in future research.

Finally, the comparison of these cases also identifies two variables that are not causal factors, but are interesting nonetheless. The first of these factors is friendship. In two of the five cases, a group of friends traveled to Syria together to join ISIS. Ö.Y. left Turkey with four to five friends and Begum left with two friends. In Begum’s case, a third friend had already traveled to Syria and joined ISIS beforehand. These two cases represent the importance of peer influence
in determining foreign fighters. Whether or not joining ISIS was initially their idea, convincing friends to join together alleviates the anxieties of leaving home and entering the unknown. Joining ISIS as a group thereby makes it easier than joining alone and produces a larger number of foreign fighters. While friendship alone is not enough to leave home for ISIS, peer support is certainly a factor that pushes on-the-fence foreign fighters to join the terrorist organization.

The second interesting but non-causal factor is love and marriage. A reader may wonder why this study does not draw any conclusions regarding the role of love or marriage in joining ISIS earlier, especially with respect to women. Afterall, both female foreign fighters captured in this qualitative study were married soon after entering Syria. In addition to these two fighters, Begum’s three friends were also all quickly married to ISIS men. In an interview with The Times, when asked what was good about her time with ISIS, Begum responded, “I met my husband, he treated me really well. I can’t deny that. I would never have found someone like him back in the U.K.” (“Shamima Begum: 'I'm Not That Stupid 15-Year-Old Girl’" 2019). The quick marriages and Begum’s fondness of her husband may indicate that a desire for love and marriage motivates young, Western women to join ISIS; however, as other scholars correctly suggest, this conclusion is dangerous because it frames women as vulnerable and impressionable when “women are often active participants in Islamic State operations” (Jacobs 2017; Milton and Dodwell 2018). Logically, a desire for love alone is not enough to become radicalized, leave behind friends and family, and join ISIS. Therefore, while love may be considered a bonus for foreign fighters, it cannot be considered a causal factor or excuse the actions of female ISIS members.
Conclusion

Findings

Despite ISIS’ waning territory, reports from the Soufan Group evidence that foreign fighters are still aiming to disrupt peace and democracy. So, why do citizens from developed and developing Western nations leave behind their lives and join ISIS? In this study, I demonstrate causal links between a country’s output of foreign fighters and its social, economic, and online factors. I argue that individuals living in countries with anti-Muslim sentiments are more likely to become foreign fighters, and I find significance for this argument through OLS regressions measuring a country’s attitude toward migrants. I also find support for this argument’s logic of social isolation and uncertainty-identity theory in the study’s evaluation of five foreign fighters. While I also initially argue that citizens who enjoy fewer civil liberties are more likely to join ISIS, I find no meaningful support for this claim within either the quantitative or qualitative studies. Contrary to expectation, I also observe that low economic inequality predicts a larger number of foreign fighters and a country’s gross domestic product is insignificant. Meanwhile, higher rates of unemployment and youth unemployment determine a larger number of foreign fighters. In the qualitative portion, I find tentative support for the underlying arguments of my economic hypothesis in that unemployment may contribute to relative deprivation and lower the opportunity costs an individual faces when joining ISIS. Finally, and most importantly, I find that the percent of a country’s population that is using the internet is significant in contributing to the number of foreign fighters through quantitative means, supporting my argument that greater access to the internet, a primary tool of ISIS recruitment, increases a country’s number of foreign fighters. This argument’s theoretical
explanation of self-radicalization through an unchecked online learning process is also nominally supported in at least two of the five foreign fighter cases.

Limitations & Future Research

Like all studies, this study faces certain limitations. The first restriction is missing foreign fighter data for a plurality of countries. The small quantity of available data reduces the number of observations in the regression models and constrains their descriptive capacity. Additionally, missing data for countries over time and only two years’ worth of foreign fighter data limits the robustness of a time series regression. Therefore, to better understand the foreign fighter phenomenon and support counterterrorism efforts, countries must attribute resources to collect and publicize their respective foreign fighter data annually. Another limitation for the regression model is incomplete internet measures that restrict the comprehension of the study’s fourth hypothesis. No publicly available databases exist with global demographic information for social media platform use. Therefore, this study calls for an expansion of data collection based on the different nationalities, genders, and ages utilizing different social media platforms. As technology continues to integrate into the everyday lives of people around the world, the usefulness of this data will transcend counterterrorism efforts in scholarship. Furthermore, the study’s qualitative conclusions are limited by an inability to capture an entirely random and representative sample of ISIS foreign fighters due to its reliance on existing interviews and media sources detailing the lives of these fighters. This section is also limited in that the application of the quantitative results to these cases requires readers to logically
accept that national level indicators can help describe decision-making at the individual level, despite using alternative units of analysis.

The limitations of this study recommend that future research implement in-depth fieldwork through interviews and surveys with foreign fighters. Only through thoughtful questioning and a deeper knowledge of a foreign fighter’s background can the determinants of radicalization and their underlying theories emerge with greater certainty and the applicability of national level determinants on the individual level be understood. Additionally, future research should continue investigating the causal role of the internet in radicalization through an evaluation of multiple online variables as well as its facilitation of ISIS propaganda and recruitment communications. The enduring importance of the internet mandates that research not overlook this pivotal factor. Finally, the future of counterterrorism research would also be best served with a continuation of mixed methods approaches to compensate for the weaknesses of both quantitative and qualitative research and to identify national level determinants with individual level contextualization. Although ISIS is shrinking, academic research regarding this terrorist organization is still valuable in understanding and predicting future terrorism and other radical groups.

Implications

Based on the contemporary nature of foreign fighters, this paper has important implications for counterterrorism efforts and policy makers. The study’s findings demonstrate that anti-migrant attitudes in developed and developing Western nations result in more foreign fighters. This causation in conjunction with the rise of the far right in Europe, wherein parties
are mobilizing popular anxieties about immigration in strong anti-migrant campaigns, is particularly concerning. Therefore, this study highlights the importance for policy makers to promote positive attitudes towards migrants within their countries and policies that will help integrate migrants into the community. The results also suggest that policy makers should continue concentrating on lowering unemployment rates, particularly among the young.

Another implication that was made evident through the qualitative portion of the study is the weakness of the Turkish-Syrian border. Four of the five cases entered Turkey and crossed into Syria, with the travel pattern of the fifth foreign fighter unknown. However, these foreign fighters all traveled to Syria before the completion of the border security wall in 2018. Hence, the effectiveness of the wall in inhibiting foreign fighters to join ISIS remains to be seen.

Perhaps the most important implication of this study, however, is that countries need to continue digital counterterrorism efforts. As ISIS’ physical territory continues to shrink, the group’s online territory will grow in size and importance. Therefore, counter terrorism coalitions and operations, such as the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, must continue intelligence-sharing efforts and work in conjunction with multinational technology companies and social networking service companies to destroy ISIS’ online threat. Mediating ISIS’ online recruitment will also require a careful and uniform approach to avoid promoting a digital model of governance that threatens free speech.

For the foreseeable future, ISIS still aims to pose a threat to peace and democracy as it transfers its caliphate to the digital realm. ISIS presents an important concern, not because of the causalities it inflicts which are minimal, but because it exports an effective recruitment model to other harmful terrorist organization, radical groups, and cults. Therefore, developed
and developing Western nations must continue the fight against extremism and prevent their citizens from joining the violence as foreign fighters – even as the battlefield shifts to cyberspace.

This study concludes with a firm reminder that Islam is not the enemy. The enemy is the radicalized group of terrorists who spread their murderous ideology through a guise of piety, hiding behind the title: the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.
Appendix

Gallup’s 2017 Migrant Acceptance Index Questions
“Now, I would like to ask you some questions about foreign immigrants -- people who have come to live and work in this country from another country. Please tell me whether you, personally, think each of the following is a good thing or a bad thing.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Immigrants living in this country</th>
<th>A good thing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>An immigrant becoming your neighbor</td>
<td>A bad thing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An immigrant marrying one of your close relatives</td>
<td>(It depends)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Don’t know/Refused)*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* = Volunteered response

**Quoted directly from the Index source:
## Freedom House Civil Liberties Methodology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure of Civil Liberty</th>
<th>Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Freedom of Expression and Belief (0–16 points)** | 1. Are there free and independent media and other forms of cultural expression? (Note: In cases where the media are state controlled but offer pluralistic points of view, the survey gives the system credit.)  
2. Are religious institutions and communities free to practice their faith and express themselves in public and private?  
3. Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free of extensive political indoctrination?  
4. Is there open and free private discussion? |
| **Associational and Organizational Rights (0–12 points)** | 1. Is there freedom of assembly, demonstration, and open public discussion?  
2.a. *(2015 Methodology)* Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations? (Note: This includes civic organizations, interest groups, foundations, etc.)  
2.b. *(2017 Methodology)* Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations? (Note: This includes civic organizations, interest groups, foundations, etc., with an emphasis on those engaged in human rights– and governance-related work.)  
3. Are there free trade unions and peasant organizations or equivalents, and is there effective collective bargaining? Are there free professional and other private organizations? |
| **Rule of Law (0–16 points)**                  | 1. Is there an independent judiciary?  
2. Does the rule of law prevail in civil and criminal matters? Are police under direct civilian control?  
3. Is there protection from political terror, unjustified imprisonment, exile, or torture, whether by groups that support or oppose the system? Is there freedom from war and insurgencies?  
4. Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population? |
| **Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights (0–16 points)** | 1. Do citizens enjoy freedom of travel or choice of residence, employment, or institution of higher education?  
2. Do citizens have the right to own property and establish private businesses? Is private business activity unduly influenced by government officials, the security forces, political parties/organizations, or organized crime?  
3. Are there personal social freedoms, including gender equality, choice of marriage partners, and size of family?  
4. Is there equality of opportunity and the absence of economic exploitation? |
Freedom House Civil Liberties Total Scores Rating

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Points</th>
<th>Score</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>53–60</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44–52</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35–43</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26–34</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17–25</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8–16</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0–7</td>
<td>7</td>
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</table>

**Quoted directly from the 2015 and 2017 Freedom House Freedom in the World methodology:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Foreign Fighters / Population 2015 (%)</th>
<th>Foreign Fighters / Population 2017 (%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Albania</td>
<td>0.00003124</td>
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<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
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Bibliography


