

# SPECIAL REPORT

A S P I

## The American face of ISIS

Analysis of ISIS-related terrorism in the US

March 2014–August 2016



Authors: Robert Pape, Jean Decety, Keven Ruby,  
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Contributors: Piper Mik, Sarah Starr, Ala Tineh,  
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## About CPOST

The Chicago Project on Security and Threats (CPOST) is an international security affairs research institute based at the University of Chicago. Founded in 2004 by Robert Pape, Professor of Political Science at the university, CPOST is best known for creating and maintaining the most comprehensive and transparent suicide attack database available. It continues to pursue empirically based research but does not ignore the human element.

Drawing on the diverse expertise at the University of Chicago, CPOST finds counterintuitive solutions to complex threats. We are creating a non-partisan open source toolkit to better address emerging threats for government and corporate partners, while training the next generation of difference-makers in policy, business, the military and academia.

CPOST's extensive rigorously verified databases allow us to pursue projects ranging from analysing al-Qaeda's response to drone strikes in Yemen to scanning subjects' brains as they watch ISIS propaganda videos (in a ground-breaking collaboration with leading neuroscientist/psychologist Dr Jean Decety). Follow us on Twitter @CPOST\_UChicago or sign up for our newsletter on the web at <http://cpost.uchicago.edu/>.

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In this undated photo provided by the United States Attorney for the Southern District of New York, Samy el-Goarany poses for a photo with a weapon and the Islamic State group flag. Prosecutors showed this photo of Samy el-Goarany in federal court 17 January 2017, during the trial of Ahmed Mohammed el-Gammal who is accused of helping Samy el-Goarany reach Syria where he trained with the Islamic State group before he was killed. The photo was shown while Samy el-Goarany's brother, Tarek el-Goarany, was testifying. (US Attorney's Office for the Southern District of New York via AP and AAP.)



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is mobilising sympathisers in the US at rates much higher than seen for previous terrorist groups, including al-Qaeda.

To understand this new American face of ISIS, the Chicago Project on Security and Threats (CPOST) study examined 112 cases of individuals who perpetrated ISIS-related offences, were indicted by the US Justice Department for such offences, or both, in the US between March 2014 and August 2016. The offences fall into three categories:

1. attacking or conspiring to attack targets in the US
2. travelling or conspiring to travel to join ISIS abroad
3. facilitating others seeking to attack or travel.

Commentary to date on the type of people in the US who support ISIS is typically based on a few high-profile individual cases and some speculation. This is the first comprehensive analysis of ISIS-related cases to examine the profiles of indictees overall, as well as to identify characteristics associated with each of the three offence types.

Our key findings are as follows:

- US ISIS indictees are very similar to the overall US population.
  - Their rates of marriage, college or higher education, and employment are close to the US average.
- Indictees are mostly born and raised in America.
  - 83% are US citizens, and 65% were born in the US.
  - None is a refugee from Syria.
- A significant proportion are converts from outside established Muslim communities.
  - 30% are converts to Islam, including 43% of US-born indictees.
- Those indicted for attacking or conspiring to conduct an attack in the US are as likely to be US-born converts to Islam as to be from established Muslim communities.
  - 51% are recent converts to Islam.
  - 49% are from established Muslim communities.
- ISIS propaganda videos played a central role in the radicalisation of indictees.
  - 83% watched ISIS propaganda videos, including execution videos and lectures by terrorist leaders.
- ISIS has been more successful than al-Qaeda in mobilising support in the US.
  - ISIS is mobilising US indictees at a rate four times higher than al-Qaeda's.
  - ISIS indictees are significantly more likely to be US citizens and recent converts than their al-Qaeda indictee counterparts.

## Policy takeaways

- Stopping immigration from Islamic countries won't prevent support for ISIS in the US.
- Defeating ISIS in the US requires a better understanding of the group's propaganda strategy and why it's more successful than that of older groups, such as al-Qaeda.



# INTRODUCTION

Who becomes a sympathiser of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and why? What explains why some travel to fight for the group in Syria, others choose to attack at home, and others limit their activity to facilitating travel and attacks? Are today's ISIS sympathisers different from those of al-Qaeda who threatened the US with 9/11 and its aftermath?

To answer these questions, the Chicago Project on Security and Threats (CPOST) conducted a comprehensive review of the 112 cases of individuals who perpetrated offences or were indicted by the US Justice Department for ISIS-related offences in the US between March 2014 and August 2016.<sup>1</sup> These offences are:

1. attacking or conspiring to attack targets in the US
2. travelling or conspiring to travel to join ISIS abroad as 'foreign fighters'
3. facilitating others seeking to attack or travel.

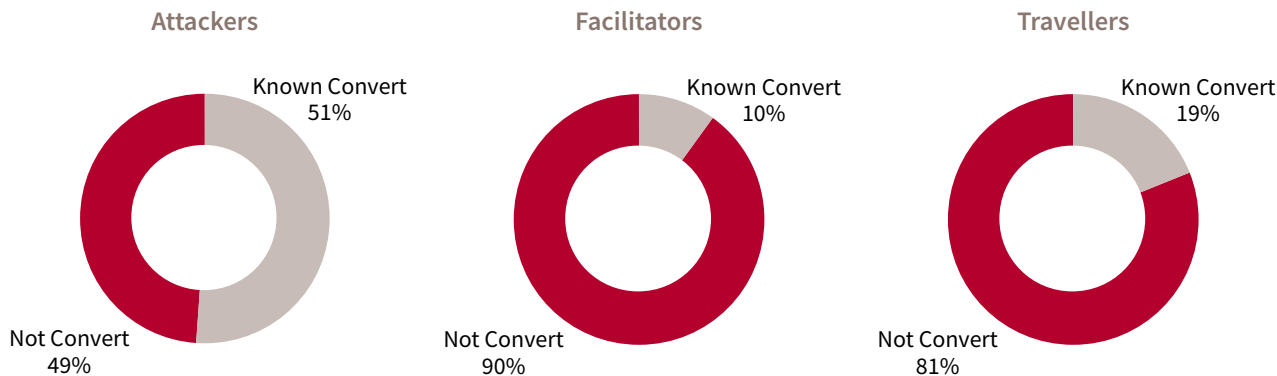
## We found striking patterns

First, US ISIS indictees<sup>2</sup> look more like average Americans than is commonly understood. While the image of the 'typical terrorist' is that of a young, single male under the age of 25 years, the profile emerging from our research presents a different picture. US ISIS indictees are older—nearly half are over 25—and a notable fraction (11%) are women. In addition, their rates of marriage and higher education are comparable to the US national average, and three-quarters were either students or employed at the time of the offence. In short, they are engaged with society and have educational and career opportunities. They aren't loners operating from the fringes of society. Nevertheless, their opportunities and social relationships didn't prevent them being radicalised and active supporters of ISIS.

Second, the indictees are truly homegrown. The vast majority are US citizens (83%), and 65% were born in the US. None is a Syrian refugee. Indeed, only three of the 112 had refugee status at the time of their offences, and two of those had arrived in the US before 1999. Two of the three were from Bosnia and one from Iraq. However, a significant fraction of those born in the US are second-generation Americans, consistent with studies investigating ISIS recruitment in other Western countries, such as France.<sup>3</sup> While data on the families of US indictees is limited, we know that at least 17 were born into Muslim immigrant families, and evidence points to an additional four for whom that is highly likely (together comprising 29% of the 73 US-born indictees).

Third, many indictees come from outside established Muslim communities. Half (51%) of those who chose to attack in the US are recent converts to Islam, including some who converted less than a year before their arrest (Figure 1). This is in sharp contrast to the smaller number of converts among those who chose to travel to fight in Syria (19%) or who facilitated attackers and 'travellers' or foreign fighters with money and logistical support (10%). Travellers were on average the youngest offenders, at 25 years old. Facilitators were not only the oldest, averaging 29 years, but also the least likely to be unemployed.

Figure 1: Percentage of converts for each offence



Note: Based on 112 cases.

Source: CPOST ISIS Indictree Database.

Fourth, ISIS propaganda, and especially videos, played a central role in their radicalisation. Eighty-three per cent of indictees reported watching ISIS videos, including videos of executions, which ISIS distributes widely on the internet. Travellers were most likely to report watching videos (92%) and attackers the least (76%), although all groups demonstrate a high rate of watching video propaganda.

Finally, ISIS has been more successful than al-Qaeda in mobilising support in the US, with four times more indictees per year. ISIS indictees are also significantly more likely to be US citizens and recent converts than their al-Qaeda counterparts. ISIS's comparative success underscores not only the effectiveness of its propaganda strategy but also the centrality of the internet in making the group's propaganda available to potential supporters across the globe.

These findings challenge conventional stereotypes of terrorists and even the standard profiles of past groups.

The popular view of ISIS terrorists, commonly reinforced in some American media, is that they are Muslims from outside the US or from within established Muslim-American communities.<sup>4</sup> This view has led to some policy proposals to exclude Muslims from migrating to the US. They are also regularly portrayed as young—with a high proportion of teenagers—mostly male, and as lonely outsiders with little education and low job prospects, leaving them especially vulnerable to the allure of terrorist groups.<sup>5</sup>

This popular view persists despite the fact that past expert studies have shown that terrorists are typically broadly representative of their communities in terms of socioeconomic and educational measures.<sup>6</sup>

Our study built on existing research<sup>7</sup> on the threat of ISIS in the US by including more recent cases, expanding the variables to include a particular focus on propaganda consumption, and engaging in new analysis of subgroups of offenders by citizenship and offence type that allows us to draw new insights into the face of ISIS in America.

Our findings are based on a comprehensive and rigorous review of the documentary evidence on the 112 indictees in our database, more than 1,600 pages of formal indictment material, criminal complaints, and media coverage. Based on this review, we systematically identified and collected a broad spectrum of demographic and socioeconomic characteristics as well as factors associated with radicalisation and the consumption of militant propaganda.

We were able to source data on these variables for the overwhelming majority of indictees. Of note, we have data for all 112 cases on the categories of age, offence type, citizenship, country of birth, religion, and whether they are recent converts to Islam. We identified educational attainment for 72 individuals (64%), employment for 90 (80%), marital status for 74 (66%), and propaganda consumption for 87 (78%). Violent criminality and mental illness aren't common among ISIS indictees. According to our data, 14% had confirmed mental illness, while 13% had been convicted of a violent crime.



Our data allows us to identify patterns and make inferences based on important observable characteristics. Additional research, including interviews, would be necessary for a systematic evaluation of motivations and other psychological factors in these cases.

ISIS has been remarkably successful in mobilising US citizens, in particular recent converts, at rates higher than al-Qaeda's. Other commentators have suggested that the path to 'conversion' may have been part of the *jihadi* radicalisation and recruitment process. Indeed, this perspective is consistent with the relatively high number of recent converts among attackers.

The average ISIS indictee is a 27-year-old male with no criminal record or mental illness who attended some college, is employed or still in school, is in personal relationship, is a Muslim but may be recent convert, and is part of a local group of like-minded radicals.

Our findings have significant policy implications.

The increase in 'born and bred' Americans supporting ISIS and the very limited number of refugees in our study suggest that limiting or halting immigration from Muslim countries will not eliminate or even markedly mitigate the threat posed by ISIS to the US.

Taken together, the increase in 'born and bred' Americans supporting ISIS and the very limited number of refugees in our study suggest that limiting or halting immigration from Muslim countries will not eliminate or even markedly mitigate the threat posed by ISIS to the US. Significantly, in the light of current debates about security threats associated with Syrian refugees from the current conflict, there are no cases in our data of a refugee from Syria perpetrating an ISIS-related offence in the US.

Additionally, because our study doesn't point to a narrow, easily distinguishable profile, law enforcement officers can't simply expect to identify ISIS supporters by tracking large numbers of traditionally religious Muslim men. Instead, our security forces and intelligence forces must focus on limiting access to the tools used to carry out attacks and the propaganda that inspires them.

To do so, we need to deepen our understanding of the appeal of this propaganda in order to sever the link between individuals' sense of disenfranchisement, perceived lack of opportunity and other factors and support for ISIS.

# MORE NORMAL THAN YOU THINK

What kind of person decides to fight for or support a foreign terrorist group like ISIS? CPOST's data on individuals indicted for ISIS-related offences in the US sheds new light on this question. The popular view is that individuals likely to be attracted to Islamist extremist groups are most often young male Muslims who are from established Muslim communities in the US or have come to the US from such communities abroad.<sup>8</sup> This view assumes they are uneducated loners with few economic opportunities and little to lose, making them vulnerable to recruitment by militant groups such as ISIS promising them purpose and opportunity.

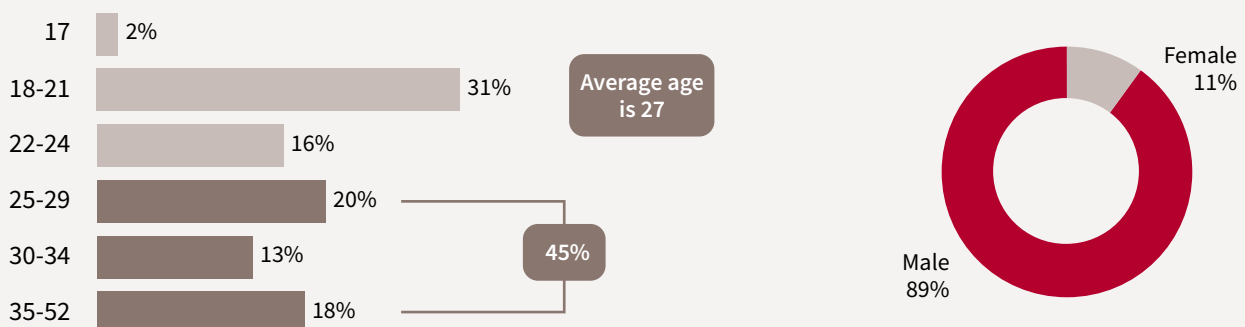
Those assumptions don't tell the whole story.

Strikingly, our study found that a substantial proportion of indictees doesn't fit that profile. Indeed, on many demographic and socioeconomic factors, the 112 indictees in our study are nearly indistinguishable from average Americans.

## Older and a higher proportion of females than expected

Although one might expect ISIS indictees to be males in their late teens or early twenties, the data shows that the group is far more heterogeneous (Figure 2). The average age is 27 years, ranging from a low of 17 to a high of 52. Nearly half are older than 25, the age commonly thought to be the upper bound for people willing to join and fight for extremist groups.<sup>9</sup> For example, a comprehensive study found the average age of suicide bombers from 1982 to 2003 to be 23.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, the fact that 11% of indictees on terrorism-related charges are female challenges the presumption that support for ISIS comes only from young males, and that if women are involved it would only be in a passive manner.<sup>11</sup> The role of women in terrorist groups has long been noted, but the potential appeal of Islamist groups like ISIS to women may be underappreciated.<sup>12</sup>

Figure 2: Age and sex



Based on 112 cases.

Source: CPOST ISIS Indictee Database.

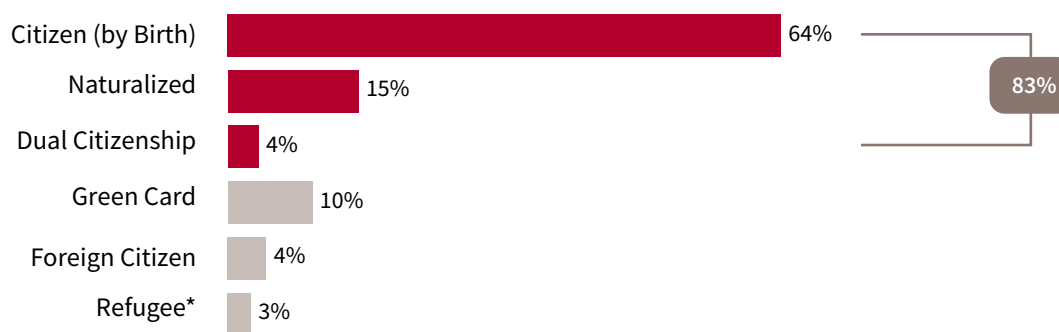


What drove female indictees to support ISIS varies. Three operated together with male significant others, including Jaelyn Young, who was arrested for attempting to travel to Syria with her fiancée, Muhammad Dakhalla, using their honeymoon as cover.<sup>13</sup> Others, such as Shannon Maureen Conley, had developed a romantic relationship with an ISIS fighter in Syria online; Conley was arrested after attempting to travel to join her man.<sup>14</sup> Yet others, such as Noelle Valentzas and Asia Siddiqi, conspired to attack targets in the US in apparent retaliation for US policy in Syria and, in Valentzas's words, to 'make history'.<sup>15</sup>

## US citizens, not foreigners or refugees

A key finding is that the vast majority are US citizens, and a strong majority were born in the US (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Citizenship status



\*Held refugee status at time of arrest.

Notes: Based on 112 cases. Direct evidence of citizenship was not available for 2 of the 112 indictees in our database (Jalil ibn Ameer Aziz and Imran Rabbani) and birth country for 4 confirmed US citizens (Ali Saleh, Robert Blake Jackson, Daniel Seth Franey and Darren Arness Jackson). However, contextual evidence suggests all six are American-born US citizens, and we have coded them as such.

Source: CPOST ISIS Indictree Database.

Almost two-thirds were US citizens born in the US. In addition, about half of the non-US born individuals have become naturalised US citizens. This highlights that the main threat from ISIS within the US stems from our own citizens, not foreigners or refugees from the Middle East.

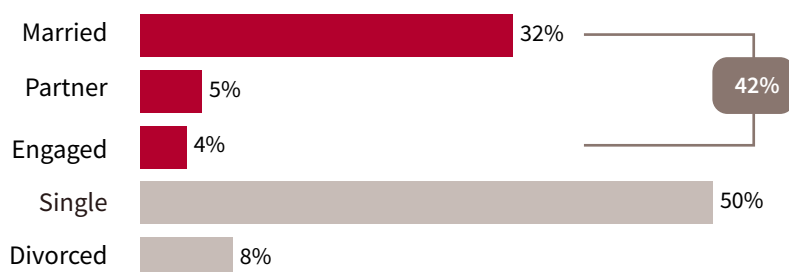
A typical example is Edward Archer, arrested for shooting and almost killing a police officer in Philadelphia after pledging allegiance to ISIS.<sup>16</sup> A US-born citizen and lifelong US resident, Archer was radicalised not by travelling to Syria or Iraq, but by ISIS propaganda or by ISIS operatives via social media.

Only three of the 112 had refugee status at the time of their arrest. Two of the three are from Bosnia and have been in the US since 1999. None is a Syrian refugee. Aws Mohammad al-Jayab, a refugee from Iraq who arrived in the US in 2012, is the only recent refugee among the 112 cases. He travelled to Syria to fight with a group that would later join ISIS and was arrested upon returning to the US.<sup>17</sup> That ISIS indictees are much more likely to be US-born citizens than in any other category means that radicalisation largely takes place inside the borders of the US.

## Partners, not loners: nearly half were in a relationship

It's commonly assumed that being married or otherwise in a relationship is incompatible with terrorism, which is why terrorists are expected to be loners.<sup>18</sup> However, consistent with recent research, relationships are prominently represented in our sample (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Relationship status

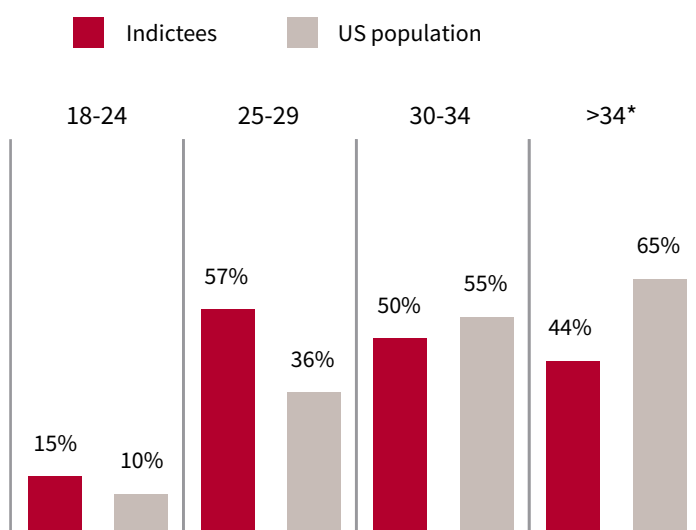


Note: Based on 74 cases.

Source: CPOST ISIS Indictree Database.

We have data on the relationship status for 74 (66%) of the 112 indictees (Figure 5). Of those, 42% were in some sort of relationship at the time of their arrest, and a significant number (24) were married. Only half were single and had never married. Even if we assume that all of the individuals for whom data on relationships was missing were single, the total in a relationship would still be 30%, suggesting that relationships aren't a prominent factor in preventing individuals from supporting ISIS, particularly in relation to seeking to mount an attack in the US or facilitating support.

Figure 5: Marriage: ISIS indictees vs. US average



\* US average for ages 35–59.

Note: Based on 74 cases.

Source: CPOST ISIS Indictree Database; US Census 2012.

In three cases, both partners in a relationship were indicted for their roles in a joint operation. For example, Jaelyn Young and Muhammad Dakhalla, arrested on their way to a Mississippi airport in order to travel to Syria, were engaged at the time, and were seeking to travel together to live in the so-called Islamic State and aid ISIS.<sup>19</sup> Syed Rizwan Farook and Tashfeen Malik, responsible for killing 14 in San Bernardino in December 2015 in an attack claimed by ISIS, were married and had a daughter. Overall, 65% of indictees were radicalised to support ISIS alongside like-minded others in some form of local group, including 13 with their spouses or extended family members.

In other cases, the indicted individual was married, but their partner wasn't involved in illegal activity and may not even have been aware of it. Mediha Salkicevic, married with four children, was charged with transferring money used to fund ISIS fighters in Syria, seemingly without her husband's knowledge.<sup>20</sup> Being married and having a family

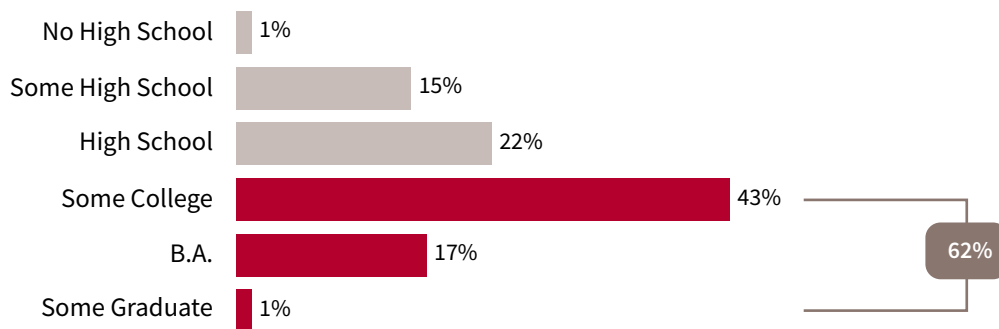
didn't prevent Salkicevic from actively supporting ISIS, even if having a large family may have made perpetrating an attack or travelling to Syria less likely.

The distribution of married indictees closely matches that of the US population as a whole. Overall, indictees are just as likely to be people in relationships and with other ties as average Americans. While surprising, the high percentage of married indictees is consistent with recent studies, especially for transnational terrorists.<sup>21</sup>

## Almost two-thirds attended college, similar to national average

The educational status of indictees is quite similar to that of American society as a whole, indicating that support for ISIS is not explained by a lack of educational opportunities (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Educational attainment

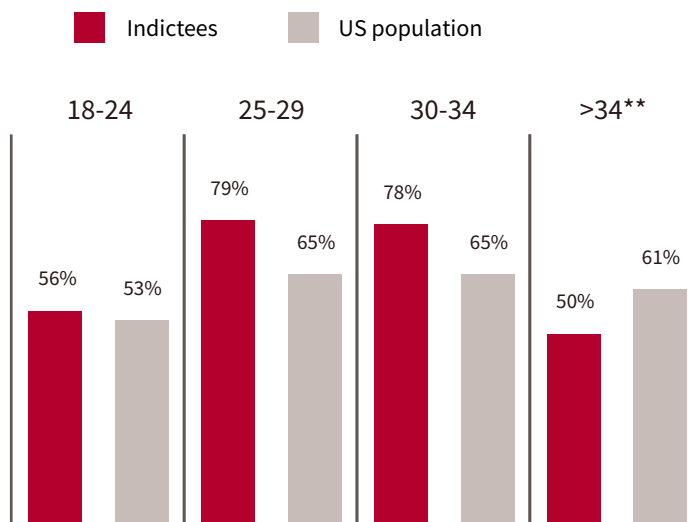


Note: Based on 72 cases.

Source: CPOST ISIS Indictree Database.

Of the 72 indicted individuals for whom educational status is known, 64% had completed some college or more (Figure 7), in line with the US average of 62% for the same age range as the indictees. In fact, the rate at which indictees attended college matches the national averages for specific age groups. The overwhelming majority of those with high school or some college attended secular institutions, which means they are not the product of religious educational institutions.

Figure 7: Some higher education: indictees vs. US average, by age



\*\* Averages some college rates for ages 35–54.

Note: Based on 72 cases.

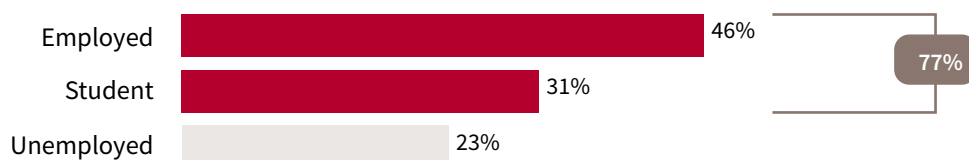
Source: CPOST ISIS Indictree Database; US Census 2015.

All but one of the perpetrators of the San Bernardino attack, the attack on the convention centre in Garland, Texas, and the Pulse Nightclub attack had a university degree. The exception, one of the Garland attackers, had attended college but dropped out. An example of a more educated indictee is Mohammad Jamal Khweis, who travelled to Syria and joined ISIS after completing a degree in Administration of Justice from Northern Virginia Community College.<sup>22</sup> Khweis illustrates the trend of people with numerous educational and career opportunities becoming radicalised. Overall, ISIS supporters in the US include people gaining an education and trying to further their prospects in a manner quite similar to the typical American their age.

### Three-quarters had jobs or were students

As with education, the data suggests that unemployment wasn't a deciding factor in motivating individuals in the US to perpetrate ISIS-related offences (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Offender employment status



Note: Based on 90 cases.

Source: CPOST ISIS Indictree Database.

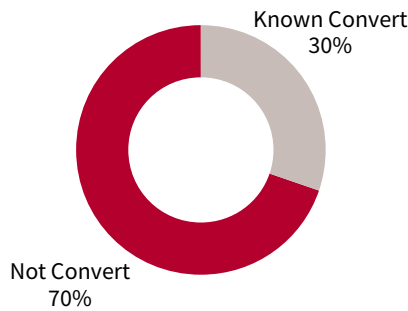
ISIS indictees generally had occupations and worked regular jobs with regular hours. Seventy-seven per cent of individuals indicted either held a job or were students. For example, Nicholas Young, indicted for providing financial support to ISIS, had been steadily employed as a transit police officer for over 12 years in Washington DC at the time of his arrest.<sup>23</sup> With stable employment and no reports of economic insecurity, Young doesn't fit the stereotype of an unemployed and poor member of society with no opportunities beyond terrorism. Syed Farook, one of the two San Bernardino shooters, was employed as an environmental health specialist in the San Bernardino County Health Department, making US\$53,000 per year.<sup>24</sup> With a comfortable salary and no indication of financial problems, Farook too seems not to have been driven to terrorism by economic incentives or a lack of alternative options. In short, like average Americans, the indictees are mostly occupied in some way, either as wage-earning employees or as students.

### Nearly one-third are recent converts to Islam

With one exception, all of the indictees were Muslims.<sup>25</sup> However, 30% are recent converts to Islam, and some had converted a year or less prior to their arrest (Figure 9). These are individuals who don't come from established Muslim communities, don't have family or cultural ties to the Middle East, and are unlikely to have longstanding grievances related to the region.



Figure 9: Proportion of converts

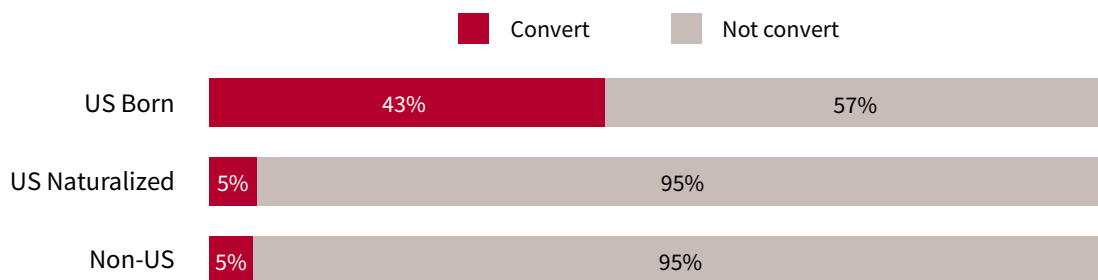


Note: Based on 112 cases.

Source: CPOST ISIS Indictree Database.

Not surprisingly, the proportion of converts to Islam is highest among US-born citizens. Figure 10 shows the distribution of converts to Islam across the three citizenship groups.

Figure 10: US-born most likely to be converts



Note: Based on 112 cases.

Source: CPOST ISIS Indictree Database.

Forty-three per cent of US-born citizens who perpetrated or were indicted for ISIS-related offences were converts to Islam. This further emphasises the appeal of ISIS to those outside the communities from which support for the group is typically most expected in the US.

This group is significant in size, and contains individuals from all offence types. James Gonzalo Medina, a New York-born offender of Hispanic descent, was arrested for attempting to detonate a bomb at a synagogue in Florida. He seemingly had no connection to Muslim communities before his conversion to Islam four years before his arrest, and even after that had very sparse contact.<sup>26</sup> Christopher Lee Cornell, an Ohio-born US citizen arrested for buying weapons and ammunition for a planned attack, converted to Islam just six months before his arrest.<sup>27</sup> Alexander Ciccolo, the Massachusetts-born son of a Boston police chief, converted to Islam in the year prior to his arrest on similar charges.<sup>28</sup>

The high prevalence of recent converts among indictees underscores the effectiveness of ISIS's recruitment, and especially propaganda, in mobilising individuals without longstanding ties to Islam or the Middle East to either take up arms and attack targets in the US on ISIS's behalf, travel to Syria in order to join the group, or facilitate the activity of others.

# EXPLAINING DOMESTIC ATTACKERS, FACILITATORS AND FOREIGN FIGHTERS

So far, our analysis has treated the 112 ISIS indictees as a group, and as a group they have more in common with average Americans than the standard profile of terrorists. However, we were able to go further than past reports and investigate whether the characteristics of indictees vary by different offence types. What makes someone choose to attack targets in the US in the name of ISIS, rather than travelling to fight for the group in Syria or assisting those wishing to attack or travel?

To answer those questions, we coded every individual in our dataset for one of three possible offence categories:

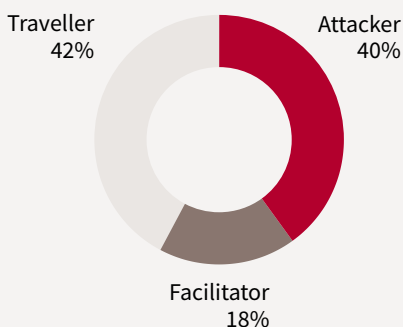
- Attackers: those conspiring to attack or having carried out an attack in the US
- Travellers: those conspiring to travel or having travelled to join ISIS in Syria
- Facilitators: those providing material aid to attackers or travellers with no evidence of intending to do either.

Offence type was assigned based on the best available evidence for a demonstrated willingness to attack, travel or facilitate, such as mounting or preparing to mount an attack, travelling or making preparations for travelling to Syria, or providing money or planning to assist others to attack or travel. Every indictee was coded with only a single offence type based on the strength of the evidence.

Mohammad Badawi is an example of a facilitator. He was indicted for purchasing a one-way airline ticket for Nader Elhuzayel to aid Elhuzayel's travel to Syria, but did not plan to travel or attack himself.

Attackers and travellers account for 82% of offenders and are roughly evenly split (Figure 11). Facilitators make up the smallest group, accounting for the remaining 18% of offenders.

Figure 11: Distribution, by offence type



Note: Based on 112 cases.

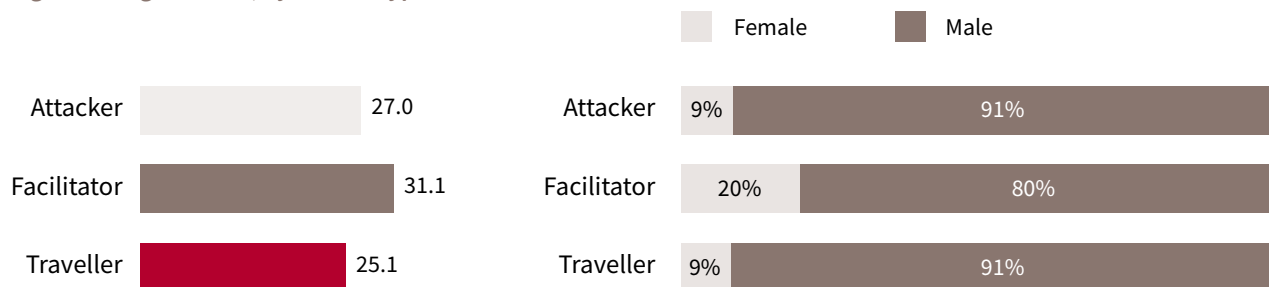
Source: CPOST ISIS Indictee Database.

How does the profile of offenders vary by demographic and socioeconomic characteristics? Do they have different pathways to radicalisation, including ties to Islam? The following analyses address these questions.

## Travellers are younger; facilitators are older and include a higher proportion of females

At an average 25 years old, travellers are the youngest among the three types of offenders and, along with attackers, include the lowest proportion of females. Facilitators—those whose offence was to provide money and logistical support to others—are far more likely to be older (on average 31) and female than the other two categories. Indeed, women are twice as likely to be facilitators as either travellers or attackers (Figure 12).

Figure 12: Age and sex, by offence type



Note: Based on 112 cases.

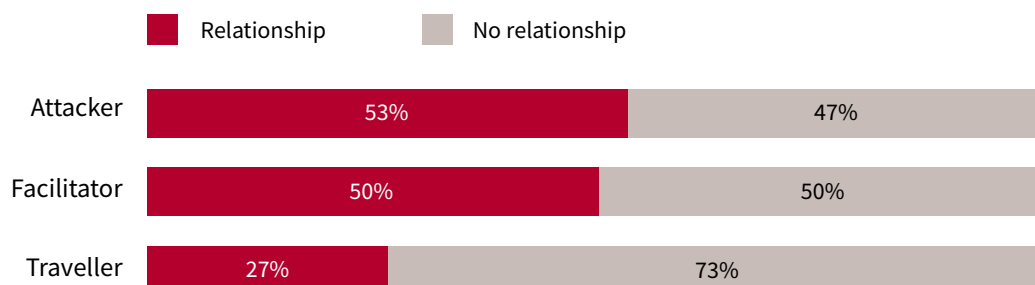
Source: CPOST ISIS Indictree Database.

This distribution makes sense: travelling to fight abroad and attacking at home are high risk and therefore more likely to appeal to younger males, while the decision to facilitate others in their offences poses a lower risk and is more likely to appeal to older and more established individuals, who are also more likely to have the resources to help finance the activities of others.

## Attackers most likely to be in a relationship

The data shows that 53% of attackers—those indicted for attacking or conspiring to attack targets in the US—were in a longstanding relationship (Figure 13). This is surprising because relationships, through attachments and responsibility, are commonly assumed to mitigate egoistic motivations for terrorism.<sup>29</sup> The high proportion of relationships among attackers further underscores the divergence between the stereotypical terrorist and ISIS indictees.

Figure 13: Relationship status, by offence type



Note: Based on 74 cases.

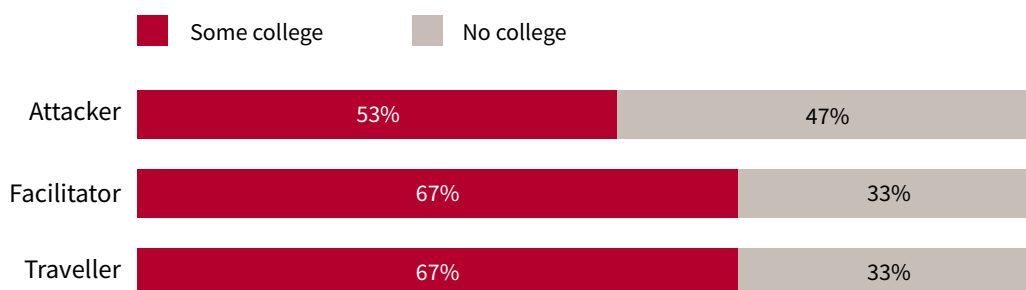
Source: CPOST ISIS Indictree Database.

In contrast to the profile of attackers, the relationship patterns of travellers and facilitators are consistent with expectations. Travellers are the least likely to be in a relationship (about half as likely as attackers or facilitators). Travellers are younger and therefore less likely to be in long-term relationships, especially marriage. Moreover, being in a relationship could complicate travelling to Syria, which requires the individual to leave their old life and relationships behind. Facilitators are older and more likely (50%) to be in an established relationship.

## Education and employment don't matter

One might expect education and employment to differ based on offence type, particularly given the differences in average age. However, while the data shows some differences, they are typically minor, and without a strong pattern (Figure 14).

Figure 14: Higher education attainment, by offence type



Note: Based on 72 cases.

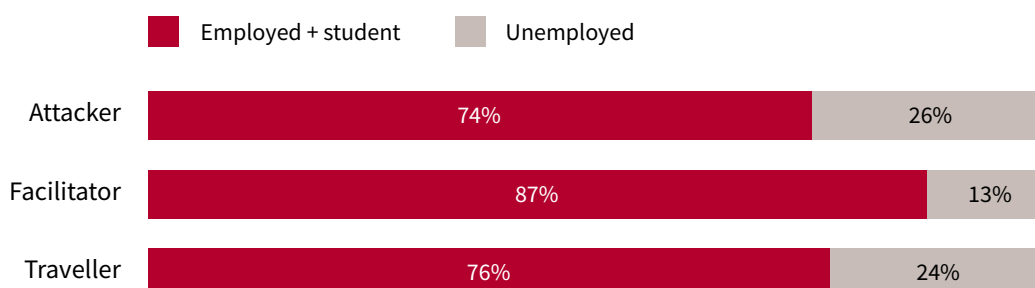
Source: CPOST ISIS Indictree Database.

Overall, attackers, travellers and facilitators attended college or other higher education at roughly similar rates.

Overall, attackers, travellers and facilitators attended college or other higher education at roughly similar rates. Attackers are less likely than facilitators and travellers to have attended some college, but at 14% the difference is small. Despite being a much younger group, 67% of travellers had attended at least some college, implying that they were not without connections and opportunities in the US prior to their decision to leave for Syria.

Employment, like relationship status, does not differ substantially across offence types (Figure 15).

Figure 15: Employment, by offence type



Note: Based on 90 cases.

Source: CPOST ISIS Indictree Database.

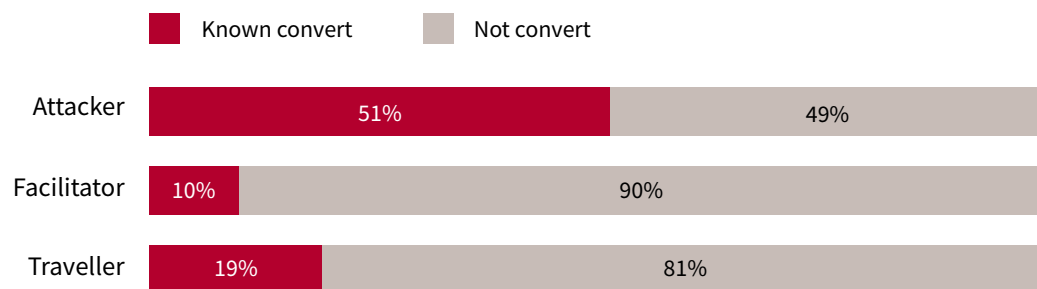


Attackers and travellers are nearly equally likely to be unemployed, and roughly a quarter of each group were jobless at the time of arrest. Facilitators were half as likely to be unemployed: 13% were not students or holding a job. Higher rates of employment among facilitators is consistent with the fact that providing money and logistical support requires income. Facilitators are also more likely to be foreign-born, and immigration to the US generally requires one to have good prospects of getting a job. Finally, the facilitator role is the easiest role to have alongside a job (and a family, etc.), increasing the likelihood that people with jobs seeking to support ISIS do so as facilitators.

## Most attackers are recent converts to Islam

The most striking finding in our analysis of offence types is that attackers are much more likely than facilitators or travellers to be recent converts to Islam (Figure 16).

Figure 16: Convert rate, by offence type

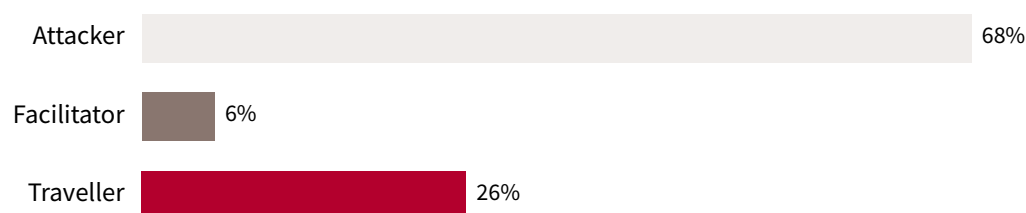


Note: Based on 112 cases.

Source: CPOST ISIS Indictree Database.

While recent converts to Islam make up 30% of all indictees, they make up 51% of attackers. The percentage of converts among attackers is between two and five times higher than that of converts among facilitators and travellers. The high proportion of converts among attackers is the effect of deliberate choice. Sixty-eight per cent of converts chose to attack in the US rather than travelling to Syria or aiding others in ISIS-related offences (Figure 17).

Figure 17: Percentage of converts, by offence type



Note: Based on 73 cases.

Source: CPOST ISIS Indictree Database.

What explains this pattern? Converts may be more likely to adopt the attacker role due to a lack of personal and cultural connections to the Middle East, which would make it harder to establish the networks needed to be a facilitator and make it less desirable to travel and live within the Islamic State.

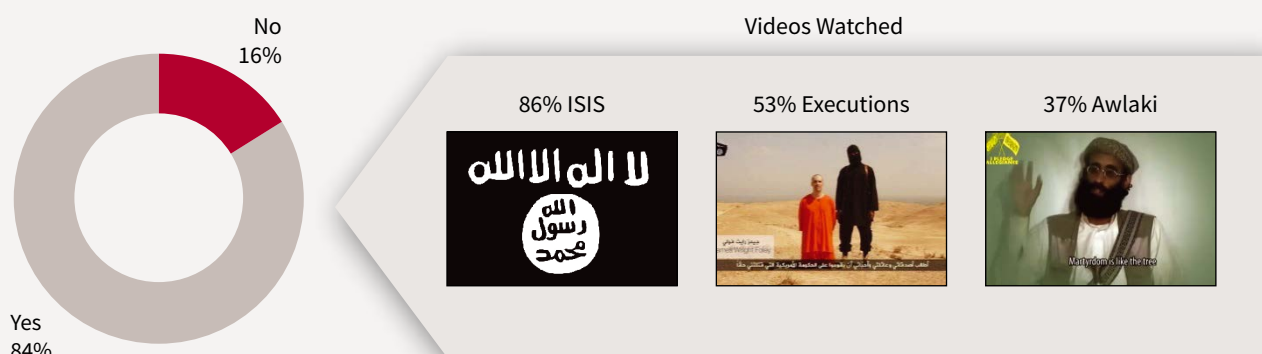
The relatively high number of recent converts among attackers, including in a number of cases a lack of contact with established Muslim communities and mosques before or after conversion, suggests that conversion may have been part of the radicalisation and recruitment process rather than that radicalisation occurred separately from conversion to Islam.

# VIDEOS PLAY A MAJOR ROLE

ISIS is well known for its use of high-quality video propaganda to entice individuals and supporters to join it in Iraq and Syria or attack enemies of the group abroad. While al-Qaeda and other groups have disseminated videos over the internet, none rivals ISIS in the quality and quantity of the videos. Because the content of these videos is frequently sensationalistic in its brutality (for example, showing the beheading of foreign hostages), they are widely viewed and shared among sympathisers and the curious alike. As a result, knowledge of ISIS videos and exposure to them is widespread, including in the US.

The CPOST ISIS Indictree Database has data on propaganda consumption for 87 of the 112 indictees. Eighty-four per cent of those indictees watched extremist propaganda videos, chiefly those produced by ISIS (Figure 18).

Figure 18: Exposure to propaganda videos



Note: Based on 87 cases, in which data on specific videos was available for 59.

Source: CPOST ISIS Indictree Database.

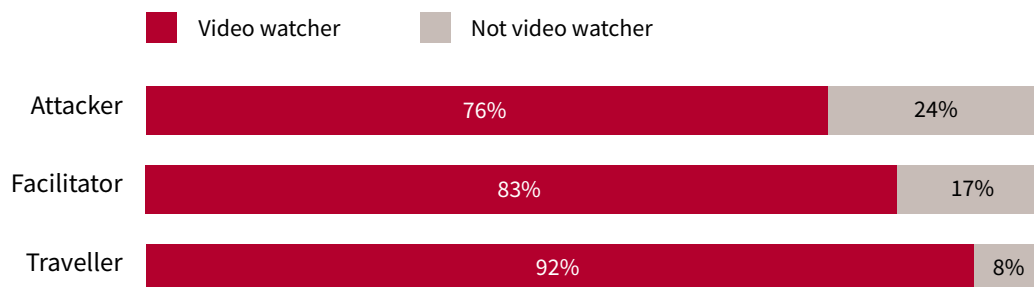
Eighty-six per cent of the 59 video watchers for whom data on specific videos was available specifically mentioned ISIS videos. ISIS has produced many hundreds of videos since it declared a caliphate in Iraq and Syria in July 2014, including recruitment videos targeting Western audiences and specific appeals to sympathisers in the West to attack targets where they live. Fifty-three per cent reported watching execution videos, including the video showing the group's execution of a captured Jordanian fighter pilot. While many who watched executions were attracted by the violence that the videos depicted, others, such as Hamza Naj Ahmed, testified that although he watched execution videos, he was more affected by videos that showed ISIS 'helping the innocent people'.<sup>30</sup>

Six indictees specifically identified the ISIS video 'Flames of War', released in response to the start of the US-led air campaign against the group in September 2014 and one of the earliest videos to achieve the high production quality for which ISIS has become infamous. In addition to videos made by ISIS, 37% reported watching video versions of lectures by American-born imam Anwar Al-Awlaki, who left the US for Yemen in 2004 and became a central figure

in the militant group Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. Shannon Maureen Conley ‘left behind a pile of Awlaki DVDs’ when she attempted to travel, and Munther Omar Saleh said he watched ‘almost all of [al-Awlaki’s] lectures’.<sup>31</sup> Awlaki was killed by a US drone strike in 2011, but his lectures on Islam and jihad remain popular among Islamists.

Travellers are most likely to have watched some sort of propaganda video: more than nine in ten have done so (Figure 19). Evidence suggests that propaganda videos have played an important role in radicalisation for all offence types, as more than three-quarters of attackers and facilitators have viewed them as well. The vital trend is that all offenders, regardless of role, are highly likely to have watched propaganda videos (Figure 20). ISIS videos seem to be highly effective in at least speeding up radicalisation and encouraging people to act on their beliefs. ISIS’s effective use of the internet for propaganda purposes has increased the rate at which it’s able to attract active supporters, especially outside of its area of territorial control, compared to other groups, past and present.

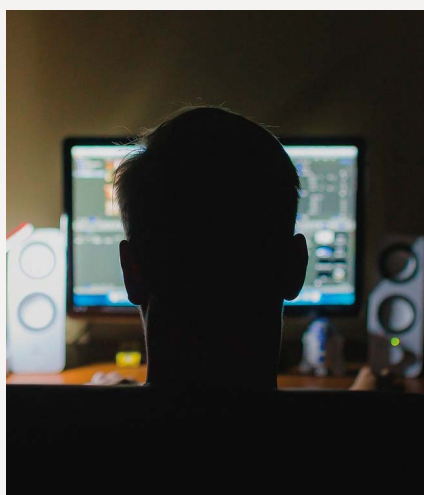
Figure 19: Propaganda video consumption, by offence type



Note: Based on 87 cases.

Source: CPOST ISIS Indictree Database.

Figure 20: The average ISIS indictee



- Male **89%**
- Average **27 years**
- US citizen **83%** (by birth **64%**)
- Some higher education **62%**
- Employed or studying **77%**
- Known convert **30%**
- No history of mental illness **86%**
- Radicalised in group **65%**
- Traveller or attacker **82%**
- Watched propaganda videos **86%**

Source: CPOST ISIS Indictree Database.

# A NEW BREED: COMPARING ISIS TO AL-QAEDA INDICTEES

To get a better sense of the characteristics of ISIS indictees, we compared them with individuals who committed or were indicted for conspiring to commit offences in the US on behalf of al-Qaeda.

Table 1 compares key demographic and socioeconomic factors between the 112 ISIS indictees in the CPOST ISIS Indictee Database and the 171 individuals indicted for al-Qaeda-related offences between 1997 and 2011 profiled by Robin Symcox and Emily Dyer of the Henry Jackson Society in 2013.<sup>32</sup>

Table 1: Comparison of ISIS and al-Qaeda indictees

Variables	ISIS	Al-Qaeda	ISIS indictees ...
Average age	27 years	30 years	are younger
% Female	11%	5%	are more likely to be women
% Some college	64%	65%	have the same education
% Unemployed	23%	31%	are less likely to be unemployed
% Converts	30%	23%	are more likely to be converts
% US citizens	82%	55%	are far more likely to be US citizens

Source: CPOST ISIS Indictee Database; Symcox and Dyer 2013.

The most striking finding is ISIS's higher rate of mobilisation in the US: it recruits almost four times as many individuals as al-Qaeda per year (an average of 45 per year for ISIS, compared to 12 per year for al-Qaeda).

Compared to al-Qaeda indictees, ISIS indictees are much closer demographically to the average American. Most strikingly, 82% of ISIS indictees are US citizens, compared to just 55% of al-Qaeda indictees. In addition, ISIS indictees are more likely to be employed, bringing them closer to the average American than al-Qaeda indictees. The higher proportion of converts to Islam among ISIS indictees implies that ISIS is more effective at radicalising Americans who have no family or cultural connection to Islam.

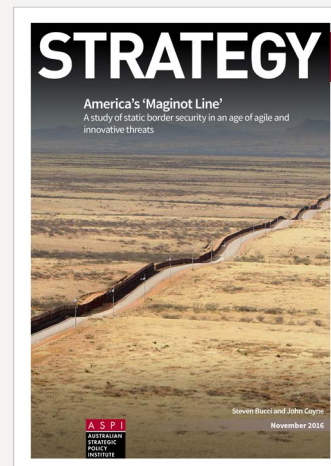
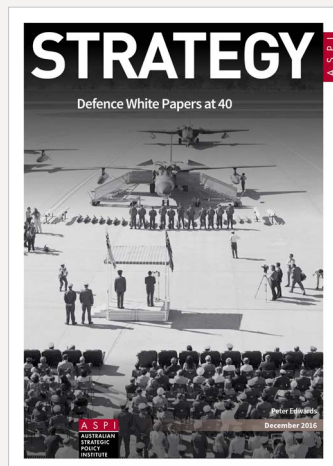
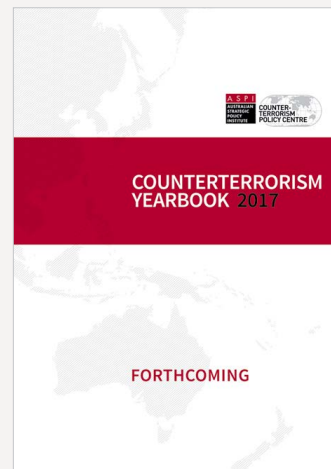


# NOTES

- 1 The study includes only cases of individuals judged to have acted in support of ISIS. We exclude seven unnamed indicted minors (individuals under the age of 17) for which little public information is available.
- 2 For simplicity, we refer to all cases as 'indictees'. The vast majority of cases, 104 out of 112, are indictees. The remaining eight were never indicted because they died in the course of perpetrating a domestic attack or fighting in Syria, but surely would have been had they survived.
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- 5 Rukmini Callimachi, 'ISIS and the lonely young American', *The New York Times*, 27 June 2015, [online](#); Meredith Melnick, 'Why are terrorists so often young men?', *Huffington Post*, Healthy Living section, 23 April 2013, [online](#); David Brooks, 'How ISIS makes radicals', *The New York Times*, 8 December 2015, [online](#).
- 6 Robert A Pape, *Dying to win: the strategic logic of suicide terrorism*, Random House, New York, 2005; Alan B Krueger, Jitka Maleckova, 'Does poverty cause terrorism? The economics and the education of suicide bombers', *New Republic*, 2002; Brent L Smith, Kathryn D Morgan, 'Terrorists right and left: empirical issues in profiling American terrorists', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 1 January 1994, 17(1):39–57.
- 7 Lorenzo Vidino, Seamus Hughes, *ISIS in America from retweets to Raqqa*, George Washington University Program on Extremism, December 2015; Sebastian L Gorka, Katherine C Gorka, *ISIS: the threat to the United States*, special report, Threat Knowledge Group, November 2015.
- 8 Berger, 'Anatomy of the terror threat'; Kyle Balluck, 'Extremists have targeted refugee program to enter US, McCaul says', *The Hill*, 7 December 2015, [online](#).
- 9 As Smith and Morgan note, 'Virtually all studies of the personal traits of terrorists conclude (or assume) that the average terrorist is young, usually between 20 and 25 years of age.' 'Terrorists right and left', 50.
- 10 Pape, *Dying to win*, 207.
- 11 Erin Marie Saltman, Melanie Smith, May 2015, *Till martyrdom do us part: gender and the ISIS phenomenon*, Institute for Strategic Dialogue.
- 12 Lindsey A O'Rourke, 'What's special about female suicide terrorism?', *Security Studies*, 2009, 18(4):681; Matthew P Dearing, 'Like red tulips at springtime: understanding the absence of female martyrs in Afghanistan', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 17 November 2010, 33(12):1079–1103; Pape, *Dying to win*, 208–209.
- 13 Devlin Barrett, 'Mississippi couple arrested for allegedly attempting to join ISIS', *Wall Street Journal*, US section, 11 August 2015, [online](#).
- 14 'Colorado woman who tried to join Islamic State sentenced to 4 years', *Los Angeles Times*, 23 January 2015, [online](#).
- 15 Stephanie Clifford, 'Two women in Queens are charged with a bomb plot', *The New York Times*, 2 April 2015, [online](#).

- 16 Jeremy Roebuck. 'FBI Director: cop shooter loyal to ISIS likely acted alone', *The Philadelphia Enquirer*, 15 January 2016, [online](#).
- 17 Jon Seidel, 'More questions than answers at hearing for "hipster terrorist"', *Chicago Sun Times*, 11 August 2014, [online](#).
- 18 Russel and Miller, in their 1977 study of 18 terrorist groups, capture the logic: 'The unmarried terrorist is still the rule rather than the exception. Requirements for mobility, flexibility, initiative, security and total dedication to a revolutionary cause all preclude encumbering family responsibilities ...'. Charles A Russel, Bowman H Miller, 'Profile of a terrorist', *Military Review*, August 1977, 57(8):21–34.
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- 20 Marwa Eltagouri. 'Schiller Park mother of four faces terrorism charges', *Chicago Tribune*, 7 February 2015, [online](#).
- 21 For suicide bombers, see Pape, *Dying to win*. For the members of the IRA, see Paul Gill, John Horgan, 'Who were the volunteers? The shifting sociological and operational profile of 1240 Provisional Irish Republican Army members', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 1 July 2013, 25(3):450–451.
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- 26 'Synagogue bomb plot suspect facing additional charge', *South Florida Sun-Sentinel*, 30 June 2016, [online](#).
- 27 'Christopher Lee Cornell: the man who allegedly plotted to attack US Capitol "fulfilling the directives of violent jihadists"', *Washington Post*, accessed November 17, 2016, [online](#).
- 28 'Son of Boston police captain arrested as possible terrorist', *ABC News*, 14 July 2015, [online](#).
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## Some previous and forthcoming ASPI publications



## **The American face of ISIS**

Analysis of ISIS-related terrorism in the US  
March 2014–August 2016