

Foreign Fighters: How Are They Being Recruited? Two Imperfect Recruitment Models

Clinton Watts

Currently, debate focuses on two models of foreign fighter recruitment and transit to theaters of open conflict. The first model is one of top-down recruitment where al-Qa'ida recruits young men and coordinates their travel to an operational theater. The second model suggests the opposite where young men recruit themselves and find their way to open theaters of conflict joining a global Jihadi movement inspired but not necessarily led by al-Qa'ida.

Both models assign a role to the Internet in this process. The first model (top-down) holds that militant propaganda on the Internet makes young men susceptible to recruiters. The second model (bottom-up) holds that the Internet not only radicalizes young men, but also helps them find a way to travel to open theaters of conflict.

The Sinjar records¹ illustrate that neither of these models adequately illustrates modern Jihadi recruitment patterns in the Middle East and North Africa. First, the models assign too much importance to the Internet in the Middle East and North Africa, where it plays a limited role in radicalizing, recruiting, and coordinating young men. Second, Sinjar data does not portray al-Qa'ida globally or locally to have sufficient operational space, communication and logistical support to execute large-scale, top-down recruitment. Third, both of these models ignore the key role played by veteran foreign fighters, who are extremely effective radicalizers, recruiters, and coordinators.

1) Foreign Fighter Recruitment: Not on the Net

Western journalists and academics increasingly focus on the Internet as a source for terrorist recruitment. Although the Sinjar records do not explain how young men are radicalized, they do eliminate the Internet as a major factor for three reasons. First, Sinjar recruits rarely mention utilizing the Internet to reach Iraq. Second, many North African and Middle Eastern countries have limited access to the Internet. Third, most North African and Middle Eastern countries producing large numbers of foreign fighters access militant websites with less frequency than Western countries that produce far fewer foreign fighters.

The first indication of limited Internet recruitment of foreign fighters comes from Sinjar recruits' explanations for how they encountered their coordinators. This study analyzed 177 records in

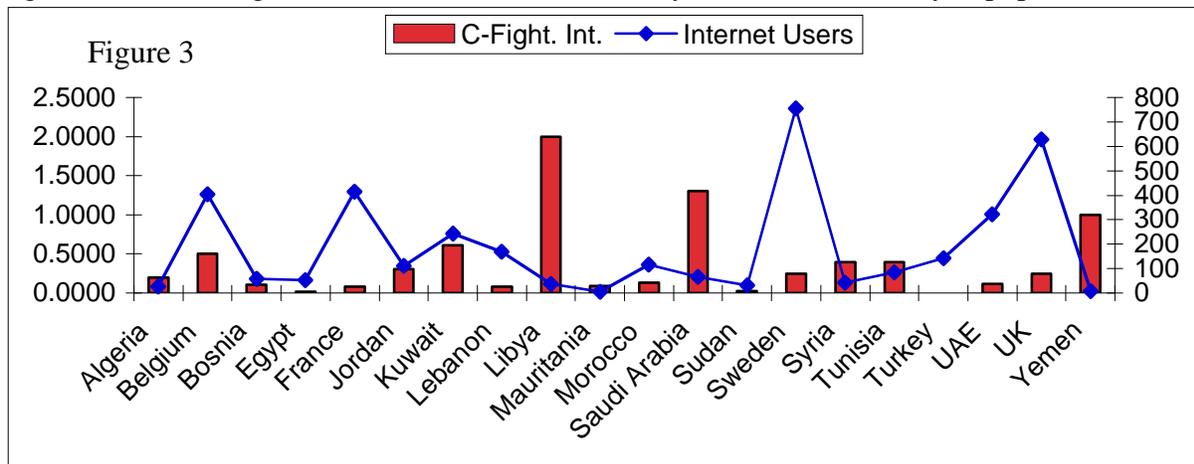
Coordinator	# Report	% Total
Religious	11	6.2
Social	149	84.2
Family	11	6.2
Internet	6	3.4

which fighters annotated how they encountered their coordinators, and broke them into four categories: religious (example response: “through the mosque”), social (example response: “through a brother”), family (example response: “my cousin”), and Internet (example response: “through the Internet”)ⁱⁱ. Overall, 97% of respondents encountered their coordinators through a social

(84%), family (6%), or religious (6%) connection (See Table 3). The Sinjar records only mention six cases of contact with coordinators through the Internet. Five of these six Internet contacts occurred in Idlab, Syria. All of these individuals arrived through a coordinator named Abu Ishaq and encountered an Abu Omar in Syria. Four of these five fighters also arrived together. While this is one demonstrated example of Internet recruitment and facilitation that might be examined as a case study, it appears to be an anomaly rather than the norm. The remaining 171 coordinator contacts were categorized as social, family or religious.

Many countries producing large numbers of foreign fighters have limited connectivity to the Internet. Using the United Nations data for access to the Internet in 2004 and the number of foreign fighters per 100,000 Muslims in a country, I find that countries with more Internet users correlated with *lower* numbers of fighters. (See Appendix D.) Simply having access to the Internet does not suggest a country will produce more terrorists. Analysis of flashpoint cities (Part I of this study) such as Darnah, Libya, el Oeud, Algeria, and Sanaa, Yemen suggest it is unlikely large numbers of foreign fighter recruits have access to the Internet.

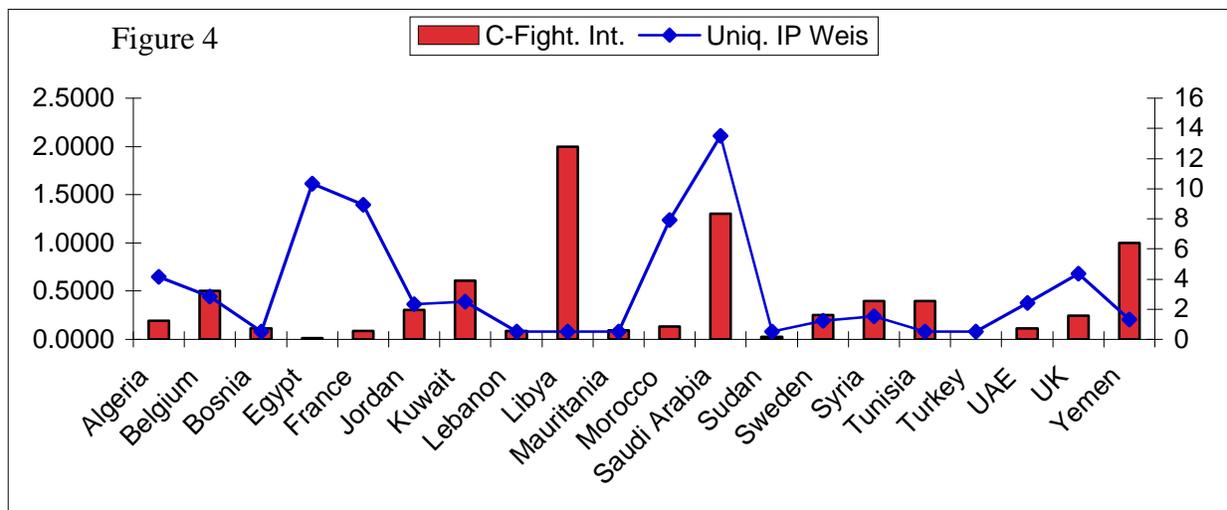
For example, Darnah produced the highest rate of Sinjar fighters in Part I of this study. Utilizing the United Nations data, Libya would have roughly 36 Internet users per 1000 people. (See Figure 3.) Assuming the Internet is distributed evenly over the entire Libyan population, Darnah



would be projected to have 3,052 Internet users in a population of more than 84,000 people.ⁱⁱⁱ If those 3,052 Internet users were evenly distributed over the Darnah population, one would only

project that roughly two of the fifty-two foreign fighters were Internet users. For a city like Sanaa, Yemen where only 9 in 1000 people might have access to the Internet, a uniform projection would suggest that 0.126 of the Sanaa fighters had access to the Internet. It is plausible that these fighters, many of which claim to be young students, seek out the Internet. But how many can that be?

Flashpoint cities and high foreign fighter producing countries often show a lower propensity to access militant websites than Western countries. Analysis of country access to militant Internet propaganda on terrorist websites shows that wealthier, Western nations, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, not the majority of Sinjar foreign fighter producing countries, tend to access militant websites (See Figure 4). Looking at the Internet research of Aaron Weisburd at the Society for Internet Research (SOFIR), one finds data for the unique IP addresses tracked on 30 extremist websites between 1 January and 1 April 2007.^{iv} The SOFIR research identifies Saudi Arabia, Egypt, France, and Morocco as the top visitors of Jihadi websites. While Saudi website visits mirror Saudi fighter production, residents of Egypt, France, and Morocco showed a high propensity to access militant websites but their countries produced lower rates of foreign fighters than the 20-country dataset.^v While this data comparison is extremely limited, there appears no strong link between accessing militant websites and actually becoming a militant.



Aside from Morocco and Saudi Arabia, the Internet likely plays a minor radicalization role in flashpoint cities. In high foreign fighter producing countries, conversations, sermons, print and radio communication, family and social networks present foreign fighter recruits with local justification for joining the jihad.

2) Foreign Fighter Recruitment: AQ, Inc., Not Likely

The Sinjar records do not support many Western analyses of top-down AQ recruitment models where “card carrying” terrorists span the globe, creating recruitment depots to attract new recruits. In this recruitment model, AQ Central would oversee the entire recruitment and

integration process, rapidly bringing new recruits to specified battlefields utilizing mass media campaigns and affiliate terror groups. However, the Sinjar records suggest that AQ 1) lacks the operational space to conduct sustained formal recruiting in North African and Middle Eastern countries, 2) has limited cross-group communication between headquarters and regional affiliates, relying instead on smuggling networks for logistics and 3) often lacks intra-group communication to effectively integrate recruits in a top-down manner.

AQ in Saudi Arabia, AQ in the Islamic Maghreb or the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) likely lack sufficient operational space to conduct large-scale, top-down recruitment efforts within a global architecture. Currently, the internal security apparatus of Saudi Arabia, Algeria and Libya prevent the formal operation of these groups for any sustained period. Recent statements by Nu'man bin-Uthman, a former leader of the LIFG, says self-recruitment is due "to the weakness of recruitment channels or groups in Libya...this means that there are no groups in Libya that are well organized and capable of recruiting people and fostering the convictions of individuals or awakening youth in jihadist or Islamic action. Accordingly, the youth took their own initiative by determining to resist the occupation and to become martyrs for the sake of God."^{vi} Although it still produces the preponderance of foreign fighters, Saudi Arabia has also made great strides in recent years detaining large groups of militants and supposedly rehabilitating former fighters.

The Sinjar records provide limited evidence of cross-group communication between AQ in Iraq, AQ Central in Pakistan, or regional AQ affiliates such as AQ in the Islamic Maghreb (a.k.a. the GSPC). Only two of 563 entries mention involvement of other terrorist organizations. Wail Muhammad Bishtawi^{vii} found his coordinator through the Fatah al-Islam Organization in Lebanon, where he gained experience in urban warfare. The other mention comes from Hisham, who "knows a brother who has ties with the Group for Call and Combat" or GSPC.^{viii} Many Western analysts spend great amounts of time linking AQ and its affiliates on large organizational charts reminiscent of the Cold War. While there undoubtedly is communication between group leaders and logisticians and at a minimum verbal support from affiliates, the Sinjar records provide little evidence of cross-group direction from a higher headquarters. An additional indicator is the reliance of Sinjar recruits on smuggling networks. The records reflect that new recruits were queried about their treatment by Syrian facilitators, specifically concerned about financial graft. The absence of a centralized recruitment process left AQ in Iraq vulnerable to Syrian smugglers who didn't necessarily share the same commitment to jihad. Hierarchical recruitment would utilize internal logistics networks.

While Western military forces dismantled AQ in Iraq through 2007, foreign fighters, lacking centralized communication with AQ and the support of a top-down recruitment model, continued to flow into Sinjar; many found no mission upon arrival. Lacking hierarchical, formal recruitment and integration plans, foreign fighters entered Iraq "and would then wait in the desert for months."^{ix} An Emir of AQ in Iraq said, "foreigners would then become discouraged...and return to their home countries."^x The lack of formal AQ communication and logistics networks suggests large-scale hierarchical recruitment does not exist.

3) The Best Recruiter of a Foreign Fighter is a Former Foreign Fighter^{xi}

Anecdotal evidence from Sinjar suggests the catalyst for local recruitment is not the Internet or official AQ members. Instead, the records demonstrate that the best recruiter of a foreign fighter is a veteran foreign fighter. As seen in Part I of this study, local, grass roots recruitment efforts centered in areas that have the requisite mix of limited employment opportunities, intense religious polarization, and social isolation provide fertile recruitment grounds. Former foreign fighters are uniquely empowered to farm this ground as they can perform the functions of 1) youth radicalization through familial, religious and social networks, 2) rapid recruitment by duplicating the process which secured their commitment to jihad, and 3) logistical coordination routing recruits through facilitation networks they have navigated.

While new recruits may seek out the opportunity of global jihad, North African and Middle Eastern youth find their way to Iraq through local leadership provided by veteran foreign fighters. Former foreign fighters, either acting as informal leaders through local respect or as formal leaders still maintaining contact with larger AQ, can rapidly radicalize new recruits. While religious ideologues and family members reinforce ideological and political justifications for jihad against the West, the former foreign fighter has demonstrated his devotion to his faith and community. His tales of Jihadi adventure are appealing to un-/under-employed youth in flashpoint cities seeking a life purpose. Unlike the Internet and other mass media outlets, the veteran fighter is a trusted source of information within his community and can rapidly send the new foreign fighter to the frontlines through logistical networks he recently navigated.^{xii}

Former foreign fighters help explain the exaggerated recruitment from certain cities vis-à-vis other cities.^{xiii} In Part I, I found that certain cities produced far greater than expected numbers of foreign fighters. Why? Former foreign fighters raise the perceived value of Jihadi participation in these cities.^{xiv} As seen in Table 3, 149 of 177 recruits encountered their coordinators through a social connection. Twenty-two more found them through family and religious contacts. All of these networks are filled with former foreign fighters.^{xv} Eleven Sinjar records go beyond giving only the name of the coordinator and mention how veterans of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Lebanon were the conduits to a coordinator.^{xvi} In Aden, Yemen, two fighters encountered their coordinator, Abu Musab, through a veteran fighter. In Mecca, Saudi Arabia, two recruits encountered their coordinator, Abu Rawan, through a veteran foreign fighter. Although they did not declare it, many fighters brought in through the same coordinators (Abu Musab and Abu Rawan) likely encountered and were recruited by the same veteran foreign fighters.

Recent analysis from Saudi Arabia reinforces this notion. This past November, the Saudi government released 1500 militants from a re-education program, arrested 112 for supporting terrorism in Iraq, and admitted there are thousands more former foreign fighters in the country and many local imams that encourage new recruits to fight in Iraq.^{xvii} In contrast, the lack of former foreign fighters may be a barrier to entry for potential Western recruits and illustrative of their lower numerical presence despite their greater propensity to access militant websites. Without the support of a former foreign fighter, a Western recruit would be far more reliant on the Internet or might have to preemptively travel to a flashpoint city to integrate into the

recruitment process. An example of this may be Abdallah Awlad al Tumi^{xviii} from Tunisia. He found his coordinator through a large mosque in Dublin, yet he integrated into the movement in Tunisia. Other examples may be Badr Shuri^{xix} from Morocco, who pointed out that he held a Spanish passport, and Muhriz^{xx} and Radwan al Nafati^{xxi} from Tunisia who have connections to France and Denmark.

What to think of our two recruitment models

Certainly, official AQ members at times directly initiate recruitment in North African and Middle Eastern countries. Occasionally, individuals self-radicalize and independently seek out the greater jihad, possibly using the Internet for ideological indoctrination and communication with facilitators. However, both of these scenarios represent only a portion of foreign fighter recruitment. Most North African and Middle Eastern foreign fighters are instead recruited through social, family and religious networks empowered by former foreign fighters who catalyze the radicalization process. These local networks are efficient, built for the community and adaptable to local conditions. Such networks are difficult to create in either a hierarchical AQ Central (top-down) or a self-selecting (bottom-up) system.

An alternative foreign fighter recruitment model might reflect all three patterns described above. My hypothesis for future research estimates that global foreign fighter flow consists of roughly the following:

- Self-selecting (bottom-up) recruitment accounts for 10 -15 percent of global foreign fighter recruitment. These self-recruits consist largely of second and third generation Muslims and converts to Jihadi doctrine based in Western countries, the majority of which reside in the EU. Their increased Internet access and propensity for militancy help radicalize them locally before moving through select intermediaries to more formal networks. These individuals are inexperienced, untrained and often a liability to the larger AQ movement as their conduct may stray from AQ's global message, and their operational and security mishaps endanger the group. However, their access to Western targets and their propaganda value remain a coveted prize for AQ and a worthwhile risk.
- AQ hierarchical (top-down) recruitment accounts for an additional 10 - 15 percent of global foreign fighter recruitment. AQ, under intense pressure from Western military and intelligence, expends effort to specifically recruit individuals that maintain valuable skills in weaponry, media, operational planning, finance and logistics. These recruits pose the greatest threat globally as their knowledge, skills, and experience create hallmark AQ attacks and maintain organizational coherence. While self-recruits are dangerous due to their access, these direct recruits are dangerous due to their ability.
- Former foreign fighters embedded in family, religious and social networks in flashpoint North African and Middle Eastern cities produce between 60 and 80 percent of global foreign fighter recruitment. Jihadi veterans and their networks are the center of gravity not only for al-Qa'ida but also for decades of Jihadi militancy. These communities are

motivated not only by militant ideology but by their perceived oppression from the West economically and politically, frustration over Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and the influence of Western values on their culture. High foreign fighter producing communities sustained the Afghan jihad during the 1980's, provide for current campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan, and will be the thread for future militant efforts at the close of current conflicts.

Recommendations:

Radicalization: Fear not what you can see, but what you cannot see.

Western fixation with AQ's propaganda has resulted in over-focus on countering media outlets that likely have limited and at best a secondary recruiting impact in high foreign fighter producing cities and countries. While AQ mass media propaganda is an important factor in the war of ideas, it should be addressed more in *Western counterterrorism efforts in Western countries* where socially isolated second and third generation Muslims and Western converts have limited direct access to militant ideologies, limited access to veteran foreign fighters, increased access to the Internet, and a propensity to access militant websites. The two non-Western exceptions to this might be Saudi Arabia and Morocco, which appear to have sufficient access and desire to utilize militant websites. However, the plethora of former foreign fighters in Saudi Arabia and Morocco is far more likely the radicalization culprit with the Internet acting as a distant second factor.

The West should fear instead what it cannot see on the Internet: the day-to-day interactions and subsequent radicalization occurring when veteran foreign fighters encounter young recruits in living rooms, ideological centers, schools, workplaces and neighborhoods in flashpoint cities. As discussed in Part I, city and nodal strategies are far more likely to disrupt the radicalization process than regional and country approaches. Within these city and nodal strategies, counterterrorism efforts should focus on the social and religious networks and look to interrupt or fragment face-to-face recruitment. Information operations and public diplomacy efforts might identify local leaders that counter the Jihadi narrative and subtly amplify their message through appropriate print and radio communications. Counter narratives should diminish the image of veteran fighters, casting them as a stain on local communities rather than a badge of honor. Accounts of foreign fighter atrocities and Muslim suffering from these atrocities must be injected into local dialogue in flashpoint cities. Currently, flashpoint cities hear the glory of jihad from returning foreign fighters, the aggression of Western forces from local media outlets, and little of the suffering of local Muslims in Iraq and Afghanistan at the hands of foreign fighters. One information operations strategy might create coverage of the foreign fighter equivalent of the My Lai massacre from Vietnam. North African and Middle Eastern journalists could follow the path of their local foreign fighters and report on Iraqi and Afghan suffering due to their local recruits. Such methods would ideally reduce the perceived value locally of becoming a foreign fighter globally.

Worry about the flow of fighters into Iraq. Worry more about the flow of fighters out of Iraq.

While the distribution and number of foreign fighters is alarming, foreign fighters leaving the battlefields in Iraq and Afghanistan are of greater concern. Looking at the hypothetical global foreign fighter flow outlined above, Western military and intelligence efforts continue to dismantle al-Qa'ida in South Asia and Iraq, thwarting top-down recruitment. Western law enforcement and immigration measures continue to improve identifying emerging cells before becoming operational. However, former fighters from flashpoint cities, the majority of Sinjar fighters, pose a tremendous challenge as national sovereignty prevents Western military, intelligence and law enforcement assets from effectively penetrating local networks. Instead, the West must rely on North African and Middle Eastern governments to execute counter-radicalization efforts. These efforts vary in effectiveness and potentially exacerbate local recruitment.

Western counterterrorism elements should make foreign fighter tracking as seamless as foreign fighter recruitment. Integration and analysis of immigration and travel patterns between flashpoint cities, Western countries, Iraq and Afghanistan must be combined with military efforts overseas and law enforcement efforts locally. Western countries might tie counterterrorism funding to participation in an international foreign fighter-tracking program, which Western intelligence and law enforcement can utilize to track migration patterns from flashpoint cities. While executing this will require a delicate touch, it will focus on the real counterterrorism goal, which is preventing trained foreign fighters from creating more attacks globally and recruits locally. Western analysts, from a national to a local level, should establish intelligence tripwires for law enforcement encountering individuals from flashpoint cities. Reducing global foreign fighter recruitment requires synchronization between the military eliminating formal AQ, diplomatic, surrogate and information campaigns penetrating foreign fighter networks in flashpoint cities, law enforcement disrupting cells domestically, and intelligence organizations coordinating and synthesizing across all three battlefields.

Clint Watts is a former US Army Infantry Officer, FBI Special Agent and Executive Officer of the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point. He currently serves as the Director for International and National Programs at PJ Sage, Inc. acting as a consultant to federal, state, and local law enforcement and intelligence agencies.

ⁱ See Appendix A for a discussion of the weaknesses of the Sinjar data. It is a small sample but one I hope to build upon. www.pjsage.com/products.htm.

ⁱⁱ Coding this data was subjective. For example, a respondent may answer the coordinator question with “through a brother.” This would be coded as a social connection rather than a family one assuming that the brother is a friend and not actually his family member. If the response was “through my brother,” then I coded the response as a family connection. Therefore, there may be some overlap between the social and family categories. Either way, both of these categories are social in nature compared to the Internet or religious categories.

ⁱⁱⁱ It is unlikely that the Internet is evenly distributed across any population. Businesses, governments, and schools are often the first to gain access to the Internet.

^{iv} See the work of Aaron Weisburd, the Society for Internet Research (SOFIR), www.sofir.org.

^v See again Appendices A and B for a discussion of Sinjar data weaknesses.

www.pjsage.com/products.htm. I suspect there are many Egyptian recruits not being captured by the Sinjar data, and thus Internet analysis is limited.

^{vi} Nu'Man bin-Uthman. Interview by Mustafa Zaru, Death Industry, Al-Arabiyah, 25 January 2008.

Also see Kevin Peraino, "The Martyr Factory, Why One Libyan City became a pipeline for suicide bombers in Iraq?", Newsweek, 28 April 2008, 24-30.

^{vii} See page 502- Sinjar Records, case number 603- PJ Sage Foreign Fighter database.

^{viii} See page 557- Sinjar Records, case number 666- PJ Sage Foreign Fighter database.

^{ix} Amit R. Paley, "Shift in Tactics Aims to Revive Struggling Insurgency: Al-Qaeda in Iraq hopes a softer approach will win back Anbar Sunnis." Washington Post, 8 February 2003, A13.

^x Ibid.

^{xi} This dynamic is reminiscent in the United States of the idea that "the best recruiter of a Marine is a former Marine."

^{xii} One might look at American employment patterns to better understand and mitigate the phenomenon of foreign fighter recruitment. While many Americans apply to jobs through the Internet or attend formal company recruitment efforts at job fairs, most will find their next jobs through word-of-mouth using informal connections developed in social networks. Classmates, neighbors, friends and family secure employment for their contacts by providing trusted information ("vouch") to an employer reference a potential employee. Al-Qa'ida and its recruits rely on similar trusted social networks and processes. The recruitment patterns of Tunisia may reflect this phenomenon best. Tunisia, not always recognized as a major source of terrorists, produced forty recruits. Analysis of recruit coordinators in Syria suggests Tunisian recruitment was likely influenced by Abu Omar al-Tunisi. Large numbers of recruits mention al-Tunisi and thus his social connections likely accelerated Tunisian recruitment to higher levels.

^{xiii} See Appendix C, Analysis of Cities. www.pjsage.com/products.htm

^{xiv} Although I have no data as of yet and I am only speculating on past military experience, I would estimate the recruitment patterns of US military recruits mirror to a large extent those of foreign fighter recruits. Local communities in the Midwest and the Southeastern United States are known for their higher enlistment rates. If you were to ask any military recruiter if he would be more successful being stationed in Vermont or Texas, his answer would likely be Texas. Why? The Texas location likely has shown historically higher recruitment numbers per capita. Is this because military commercials are more appealing in Texas? Probably not. These numbers likely correlate with higher percentages of military veterans living in local communities. Veterans that bolster the ideology of service to the United States and provide informal leadership in the recruitment process. For a recruiter in Texas, the local community does the recruiting for him. It is not likely to be any different in flashpoint cities across North Africa and the Middle East.

^{xv} Robert F. Worth, "Yemen's Deal with Jihadists Unsettle the U.S.," New York Times, 28 January 2008.

^{xvi} For examples of foreign fighters encountering veteran Jihadi fighters, see case number 10, 151, 182, 222, 235, 249, 334, 339, 349, 626 in the PJ Sage Foreign Fighter Database.

^{xvii} “Saudi Arabia: Persistent extremism generates terrorism.” Oxford Analytica-Global Strategic Analysis, 14 January 2008.

^{xviii} See page 199- Sinjar Records, case number 178- PJ Sage Foreign Fighter database.

^{xix} See page 193- Sinjar Records, case number 213- PJ Sage Foreign Fighter database.

^{xx} See page 315- Sinjar Records, case number 402- PJ Sage Foreign Fighter database.

^{xxi} See page 163- Sinjar Records, case number 185- PJ Sage Foreign Fighter database.

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