



# Saudi Foreign Fighters: Analysis of Leaked Islamic State Entry Documents

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# Executive Summary

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## Context

- In early 2016, a huge cache of entry documents containing a wealth of information on new recruits attempting to join the so-called Islamic State (IS) in Syria was leaked. The vast majority of the individuals named in these records joined the terrorist organisation in the years 2013 and 2014.
- One rarely gets the opportunity to view the internal documents of terrorist groups whose survival relies and depends on absolute secrecy. That is why such records are so valuable and important. This research paper presents an in-depth analysis of the leaked records of 759 Saudi Arabian foreign terrorist fighters contained in this cache, both citizens and residents, and presents key insights into the profile of the Saudi IS recruit.

## Aims

By analysing IS's own records and focusing on those pertaining to individuals hailing from a country that has always been targeted and regarded as the ultimate prize for terrorist groups and organisations (namely Saudi Arabia), this study represents an important step in increasing contextual knowledge. Such knowledge is vital when dealing with a phenomenon as intricate as terrorism and a process as complex as radicalisation.

## Main Findings

- This early cohort of Saudi IS foreign terrorist fighters (FTF) was mostly young and represents a new generation of Saudi jihadists. However, for the most part, they were neither teenage adolescents, nor socially loners and outcasts.
- While they do not come from a specific poor and discontented segment of Saudi society, al-Qassim province in central Saudi Arabia presented the highest ratio of Saudi IS foreign fighters per 100,000 residents by a significant margin.
- The vast majority, by self-admission, are not well-versed in religious knowledge. Even though this has been a consistent characteristic among the majority of recruits to terrorist groups in general, it is even more pronounced when it comes to IS.

- This group of Saudi FTF was not educationally underachieving; thus, it would be difficult to claim that they suffer from lack of opportunities or an absence of upward mobility. The greater political turmoil and instability and the heightened sectarianism in the region explains more about the radicalisation of Saudi IS foreign terrorist fighters than mere socioeconomic or pure religious ideology.
- IS attempts to exploit sectarian fault lines in societies and tailor its narrative and approach to the specific historical and social contexts of each country. It is therefore imperative to gain as much contextual knowledge as possible in order to be able to devise effective solutions to confront its menace.

# Introduction

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In early 2016, a cache of Islamic State (IS) foreign terrorist fighter (FTF) records was leaked. It was subsequently obtained by a handful of media outlets and academic institutions, including the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR) at King's College London, where I spent a year and a half working as a Visiting Research Fellow. This report takes an in-depth look at the leaked documents, focusing in particular on the citizens and residents who originated in Saudi Arabia.

The documents contain a wealth of personal information regarding those who joined the terrorist group in Syria at a time when its appeal was at its greatest. While these documents give us neither the whole picture of the organisation's structure, nor the complete number of its recruits, they are important because they provide us with a recruitment snapshot from a crucial period in recent history. They also provide valuable insights into the profile of local recruits, their travel flow, and the IS mobilisation infrastructure.

Even though IS has territorially collapsed in Syria and Iraq, it would be premature and naïve to assume that this will spell the end of its threat. More broadly, this study is relevant because extremist ideologies can still flourish as long as the circumstances that were conducive to their rise in the first place, such as sectarian policies and political upheavals and instabilities, still exist. What is more, extremist groups do not need territories to survive, easily reverting to insurgency and guerrilla warfare tactics to cause harm and inflict damage, as IS has already done.<sup>1</sup>

Several reports have already analysed the wealth of information contained in these leaked records.<sup>2</sup> However, none has yet focused on one national contingent. In general, and in order to maximise its appeal, IS tailors its narrative and approach to the specific historical and social contexts of targeted countries. This is especially true in the case of Saudi Arabia.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, a study such as this which analyses IS's internal records on a national-level and country-specific basis is important to contribute to a better understanding of the types of recruits that IS attracts from each locale or country, and to gain as much contextual knowledge as possible. That in turn can help us to devise effective solutions to disrupt the organisation's recruitment process and limit its appeal.

At various points throughout this study, references will be made to previous works that gathered biographical and personal information pertaining to earlier waves of Saudi jihadists in order to draw useful

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1 Hassan Hassan, 'Insurgents Again: The Islamic State's Calculated Reversion to Attrition in the Syria-Iraq Border Region and Beyond,' *CTC Sentinel* 10, no. 11, December 2017; *Arabian Business*, 'History Tells Us the Danger Posed by ISIL Has Not Yet Passed', 15 May 2018.

2 Brian Dodwell, et al., 'The Caliphate's Global Workforce: An Inside Look at the Islamic State's Foreign Fighter Paper Trail', *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point Report*, April 2016; Nate Rosenblatt, 'All Jihad is Local: What ISIS Files Tell Us About its Fighters', *New America Report*, July 2016; David Sterman and Nate Rosenblatt, 'All Jihad is Local: Volume II: ISIS in North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula', *New America Report*, April 2018; Brian Dodwell, et al., 'Then and Now: Comparing the Flow of Foreign Fighters to AQI and the Islamic State', *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point Report*, December 2016.

3 Abdullah K. Al-Saud, 'Deciphering IS's Narrative and Activities in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia,' *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 2017, DOI: 10.1080/09546553.2017.1378645.

comparisons, wherever possible, between them and the contingent under study in this report. A brief explanation of two specific studies is important at the outset. The first is the 2008 *Bombers, Bank Accounts, & Bleedouts* report by the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point (CTCWP) on the background and flow of foreign terrorist fighters (FTF) entering Iraq between August 2006 and August 2007.<sup>4</sup> The CTCWP's report is based on a trove of records obtained by the coalition forces in September 2007 during a raid on a suspected al-Qaeda safe house in Sinjar in northern Iraq. They were thus dubbed 'the Sinjar Records'. Saudis constituted forty-one percent of the 576 FTF whose nationalities were identified in the Sinjar records.

The second study is Thomas Hegghammer's outstanding *Jihad in Saudi Arabia* book, which included the database he had constructed of 539 biographies of Saudi militants who participated in violent activism in the period 1980–2006.<sup>5</sup> He divided them into three main categories: the first comprises the biographies of 161 Saudis who participated in early jihad fronts (in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Tajikistan, and Chechnya prior to 1996) when the notion of *jihad* was classical and relatively uncontroversial. The second category is of 197 who went to Afghanistan and joined al-Qaeda between 1996 and 2001, when *jihad* became a more controversial and risky activity. The third category is of 259 involved with al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) 2002–2006. It is important, however, to mention that not all biographical and socioeconomic data were available for inclusion in Hegghammer's dataset.

As will be seen, these two are not the only available datasets about previous Saudi militants or jihadists. However, they are the largest and most comprehensive sets predating IS, which make them both relevant and useful for comparison with the dataset under study to determine whether there have been any notable changes in the profiles of Saudi jihadists over time.

As shall be explored, the trove of Saudi IS documents under study in this report is both larger in size (759 FTF in total) and wealthier in terms of biographical and socioeconomic information than others previously examined or studied. This new cohort is both more financially and educationally capable than the prior Saudi fighters, but their much greater *jihad* participation rate may be mostly due to closer connection, especially in some provincial areas, to the opportunities provided by new sets of events and circumstances.

The report will proceed with a brief discussion of the methodology. A presentation and an analysis of the main data contained in the records, divided into three main thematic sections, will follow. Each section will contain a number of subsections related to its theme. The report will end with a conclusion based on the main findings.

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4 Brian Fishman (ed.), 'Bombers, Bank Accounts, & Bleedouts: Al-Qa'ida's Road in and out of Iraq', *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point Report*, July 2008.

5 Thomas Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia: Violence and Pan-Islamism since 1979* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

# Methodology

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The vast majority of those whose names appear on these records joined IS in 2013–2014. In order to enlist, they had to fill in a prepared form or document that contained a set of twenty-three fields. Not all fields were filled across all documents – in particular, some seemed to enquire about developments occurring post-recruitment, so were left intentionally blank to presumably be filled and updated later. These included three fields enquiring about the level of obedience, the place of current work, and most clearly the place and date of death, for example.

The other twenty fields ask about:

- The individual's name
- *Kunyah* (nom de guerre)
- Mother's name
- Blood type
- Date of birth and nationality
- Marital status
- Address and place of residence
- Educational qualification
- Level of religious knowledge
- Prior employment
- Travel history
- Point of entry into Syria
- Name of recommenders
- Date of entry
- Past jihadi experience
- Envisioned role with IS
- Speciality
- Deposit items
- Address to communicate with (of next to kin in case of death presumably)
- A final field of notes that was rarely filled.

All documents pertaining to Saudi citizens or residents were given code numbers and translated into Microsoft Excel spreadsheets. All information included in these documents were coded into different variables in the spreadsheets. In many of the cases, the quantitative method of cross tabulation could be used to analyse the relationships among two or more variables.

The cache of documents included many duplicates. Indeed, the April 2016 CTCWP report contends that approximately 6,700 out of the approximately 11,000 documents they received were duplicates.<sup>6</sup> In the specific context of the Saudi contingent, there was a sizable number of duplicates. Having discarded them and disregarded other near-duplicate documents that pertained to the same individual twice with minor changes, there were some 759 unique documents referring to Saudi citizens and/or residents. Given that the main timeframe

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<sup>6</sup> Dodwell, 'Caliphate's Global Workforce', p. 3.

of these documents is 2013–2014, this figure represents more than a third of all the Saudis who travelled to Syria in 2013 and 2014 (2,144 individuals according to official estimates).<sup>7</sup>

It is important to note that some data included in the documents could not be coded as a variable for the purpose of this study; some were inconsistent and arbitrary, such as the notes or address of communication, others were devoid of any analytical value, such as the mother's name or blood type, while some were too detailed and confusing to hold any explanatory value, such as the names of recommenders. For the purpose of clarity, the data used and analysed were codified into three broad thematic sections: biographical details; education and attainment; and jihadist profile.

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<sup>7</sup> Saudi official estimates as of the end of 2016.

# The Data

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## Section 1: Biographical Details

In this section, the data are explored from several angles. First, the focus is on age and marital status; then, the region and province of origin as well as the previous travel experience of the Saudi contingent will be explored. Among the main findings that have emerged from the analysis is the fact that those under study are mostly young and represent a new generation of Saudi jihadists. They were also diverse in terms of regional origin, hailing from every province in the Kingdom. However, what is intriguing is that, for the most part, they were neither poor nor parochial.

Furthermore, what is unique to this group, when compared to past groups of Saudi jihadists, is the overrepresentation from a specific province, namely al-Qassim in central Saudi Arabia, in comparison to other provinces when indexed against their respective population size. There are three possible explanations behind this sudden surge from al-Qassim province, which has no precedence in previous waves of Saudi jihadist FTF. The first is related to a certain context of activism post 2011, in specific the *Fukko al-A'ni* ('Set the captive free') campaign, that became concentrated in the province, in specific the city of Buraydah which saw a number of marches and sit-ins.<sup>8</sup> Expectedly, the campaign was utilised by radical individuals and groups to sow discontent and disgruntlement towards the state and any of its symbols. The second possible explanation is related to the role of social networks and highly influential early travellers from the province to the Syrian conflict who, arguably, became instrumental in garnering support, recruiting, facilitating, and connecting the local (al-Qassim) to the transnational (Syria). The third relates to a group of reigning salafi-jihadi ideologues from the region, dubbed the neo-jihadi scholars, who remain central to the global jihadist movement. Nonetheless, it is beyond the scope of this report to explore these three hypotheses in depth.<sup>9</sup>

### *Age and Marital Status*

While there is no field in the entry forms that states age at the time of entry into Syria, there are two fields asking fighters to state their date of birth and date of entry. Where both fields were filled, it was easy to calculate the fighter's age on entry. Not all Saudi fighters in our dataset provided both dates. There are eighty-eight out of the total 759 that did not fill either one or both of those two fields, and thus their age could not be calculated.

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<sup>8</sup> Stephane Lacroix, 'Saudi Islamists and the Arab Spring', *LSE research paper*, 2014.

<sup>9</sup> They are explained thoroughly in a separate study by the author; see Abdullah K. Al-Saud, 'The ISIL Jihadists of Saudi Arabia', in Satvinder S. Juss, *Beyond Human Rights and the War on Terror* (New York, NY: Routledge, forthcoming 2019).

The data indicate that this particular sample of Saudi fighters is relatively young. Their average age at the point of joining was just shy of 24 years of age (23.9 to be precise), which is more than two years younger than the average age of the 4,173 entrants in the records.<sup>10</sup> It is also younger than the average age of the al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) fighters found to be in the Sinjar Records (August 2006–August 2007), which is 24–25.<sup>11</sup>

Table 1 below shows the average age of Saudi fighters in the dataset, comparing it to the average age of Saudi militants in some past jihadi conflict zones.<sup>12</sup>

**Table 1. Average age of Saudi militant groups.**

Groups of Saudi militants	Average age
IS in Syria 2013–2015	23.9
Early Jihadi Fronts	20
Al-Qaeda 1996–2001	22.5
AQAP 2002–2006	27
Iraq 2003–2005	23

The current dataset shows a notably wide age range, with the oldest entrant born in 1958 and the youngest in 2005, meaning that he was only nine years old at the time of entry.<sup>13</sup> Further, only two individuals were over the age of fifty. One of them, Mani' bin Nasir Al-Mani', who is, incidentally, the only one with a PhD degree, has since left IS and returned to Saudi Arabia. Upon his return, he cited the lack of freedom of movement and belief (creed) and IS's proclivity for *takfir* (excommunication from the religion of Islam) ideology as reasons behind his disillusionment and subsequent disengagement.<sup>14</sup>

Almost sixty-five percent of the Saudi contingent in 2014–2015 were under the age of twenty-five when they entered Syria; almost eighty-seven percent were under thirty. This is interesting because it shows that, despite the fact that the vast majority of this group came of age during the post-9/11 era of the 'war on terror' and the fight against extremism, both domestically and internationally, they were still radicalised to action and, arguably, in greater numbers than in the second half of the past decade and the start of the current one.

10 Dodwell, 'Caliphate's Global Workforce', p. 12. The average age of the whole IS fighter corps was 26–27.

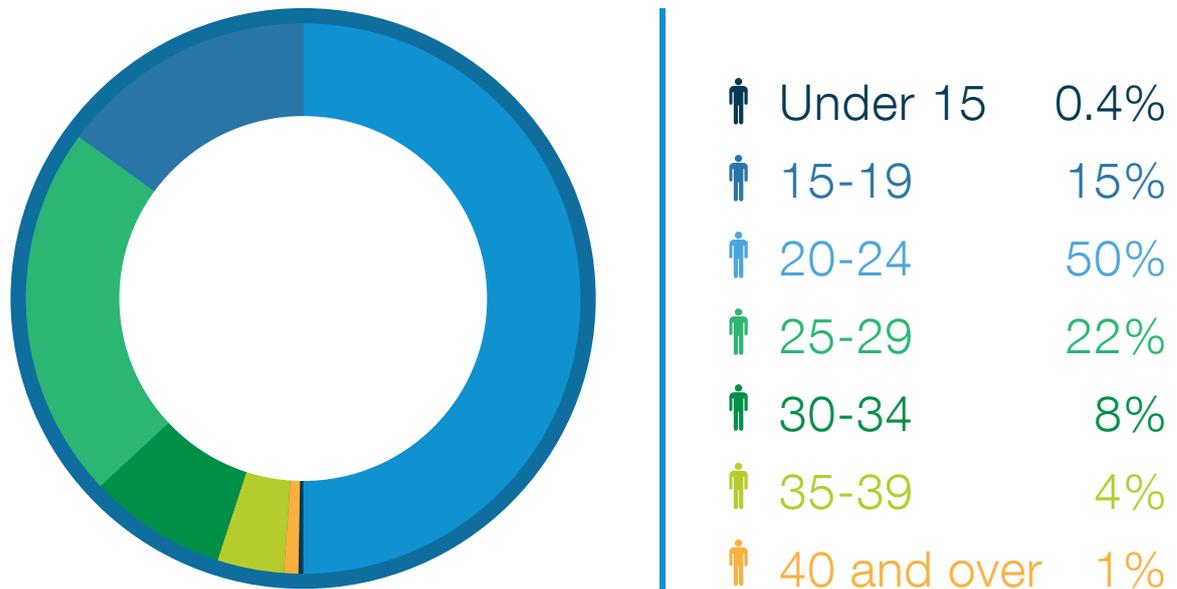
11 Fishman, 'Bombers'.

12 The average age of Saudis in Iraq during 2003–2005 was taken from: Thomas Hegghammer, *Saudi Militants in Iraq: Backgrounds and Recruitment Patterns*, FFI Report, 2007. The average age of Saudis in the early jihadi fronts, Al-Qaeda 1996–2001, and QAP 2002–2006 were taken from: Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia*.

13 The youngest prospective Saudi IS FTF in the records, aged nine, was travelling with his father who was born in 1978 and was aged 36 on entry.

14 See the following YouTube video: 'An interview with the Saudi Sheikh Mani' Al-Mani' on the programme *Humumuna* (Our Concerns) about the details of him joining IS and why he left them' (Ar.), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2nFAqdB4Fik>.

Figure 1. Age groups of Saudi IS FTF at the date of their entry.



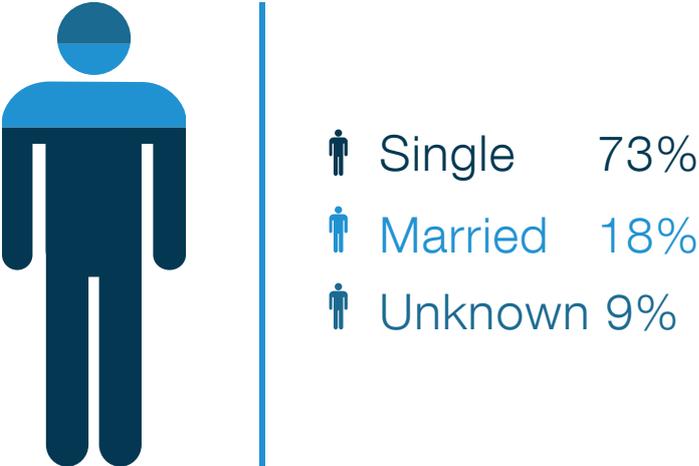
When visualised alongside demographic trends in the total population of Saudi Arabia, it becomes clear that the data do not offer a representative sample of the population. While a quarter of the Saudi population was above forty years of age, only one percent of the Saudi fighter contingent was. On the other hand, while only eight percent of the Saudi population was between the age of twenty and twenty-four, almost half of the Saudi fighter contingent was.<sup>15</sup>

On the other hand, each entry form contains a question about marital status with three possible fields to fill: single, married, and number of children. The Saudi contingent differs from the rest of the data with regard to marital status. There are markedly more unmarried individuals from Saudi Arabia than from elsewhere: whereas sixty-one percent of fighters in the whole dataset stated that they were single and thirty percent that they were married, seventy-three percent of Saudis in the dataset were described as single and only eighteen percent married.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> The total population count is taken from the Saudi General Authority for Statistics labor force survey for the first half of 2014, which was around the same period when the bulk of Saudis in our dataset made their journey into Syria. It can be accessed at: <http://www.stats.gov.sa/sites/default/files/en-manpower201401.pdf>.

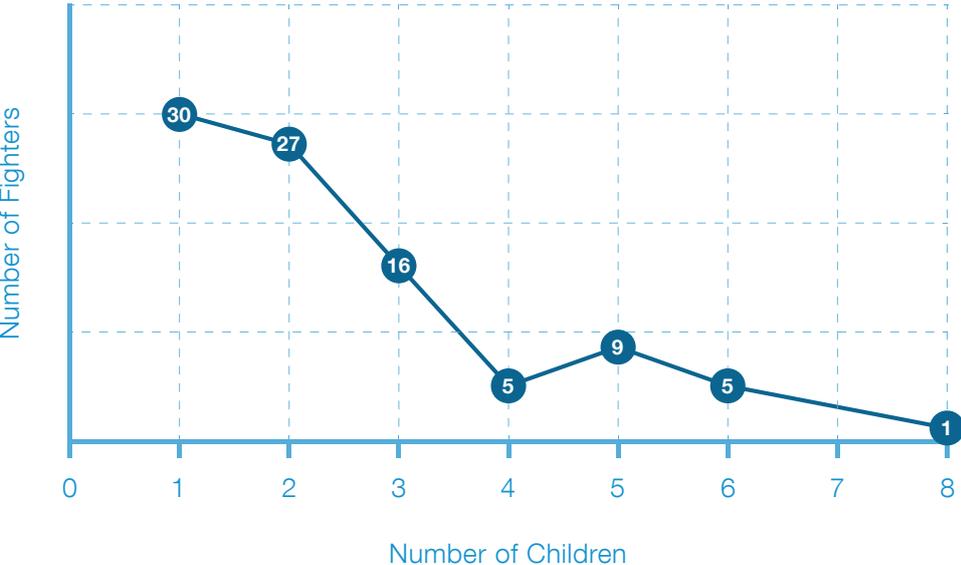
<sup>16</sup> There are seventy-one Saudi individuals that did not respond to this specific question, almost the same percentage as in the entire IS FTFs' documents (eight percent).

Figure 2. Marital status of Saudi IS FTF.



Still, eighteen percent of married individuals (sixty-eight percent of them have children) is not a marginal number that can remain unnoticed or explained as exceptions to the rule. These are 137 Saudi terrorist fighters in our dataset who have already started a family, with 93 of them reported having children. The number of children that these individuals have is specified in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Family size of FTF who have children.



### Region/Province of Origin

Each form contains a field for address and place of residence. While the majority of respondents provided the names of the countries and cities they hailed from, few specified their neighbourhoods. The regional diversity of the Saudi contingent – all thirteen administrative provinces were represented in the sample – indicates that IS’s recruitment efforts were not confined to a particular region or province of the Kingdom. The largest represented province, in raw numbers, was Riyadh, where 262 fighters of the total 759 originated. The next were al-Qassim and Makkah (134 fighters each). See Figures 4 and 5.<sup>17</sup>

While the national data show an average recruitment ratio of 2.6 terrorist fighters per 100,000 residents,<sup>18</sup> when this is calculated for each province, four scored a higher ratio and, interestingly, Riyadh is not the highest. Al-Qassim, which came second in raw numbers with 134 fighters, was first by a large margin with a ratio of 10.2 per 100,000 residents,<sup>19</sup> followed by Hail, Tabouk, and then Riyadh. The lowest ratio of fighters is in the three regions in the south of the Kingdom: Jizan, Najran, and Asir respectively (see Table 2).

**Table 2. Administrative region origin of Saudi IS FTF indexed to each region’s population size.**

Region	Population size (end 2013)	Saudi IS fighters per region	Ratio of fighters per 100,000 residents
All	2,9195,895	759	2.6
Riyadh	7,309,966	262	3.5
Al-Qassim	1,303,623	134	10.2
Makkah	7,471,975	134	1.7
Eastern	4,414,278	63	1.4
Hail	638,699	31	4.8
Tabouk	845,857	31	3.6
Al-Madinah	1,910,998	24	1.2
Asir	2,045,070	23	1.1
Al-Jawf	471,120	9	1.9
Al-Bahah	439,927	8	1.8
Najran	541,344	5	0.9
Jizan	1,460,540	6	0.4
Northern Borders	342,498	5	1.4

17 There are 24 FTF out of the 759 in our sample who did not provide any information as to their addresses or places of residence within Saudi Arabia. They are excluded from the percentages in Figure 4.

18 Overall and regional population figures were taken from The General Authority for Statistics, ‘Statistical Year Book for 2013’, <http://www.stats.gov.sa/ar/1160>. Note: the same twenty-four fighters in note 17 have also not provided any information regarding their city/region of origin and are not included in the Province totals.

19 For a detailed analysis of the context and possible explanations behind the upsurge in Saudi FTF from al-Qassim province specifically, see: Abdullah K. Al-Saud, *The ISIL Jihadists of Saudi Arabia*.

Figure 4. Saudi FTF by administrative province.

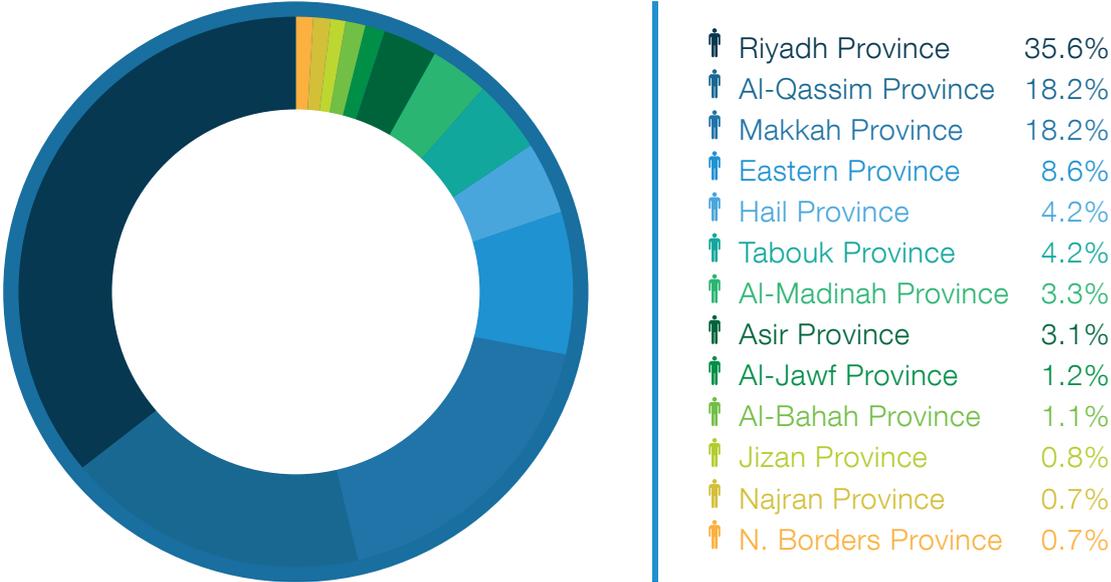
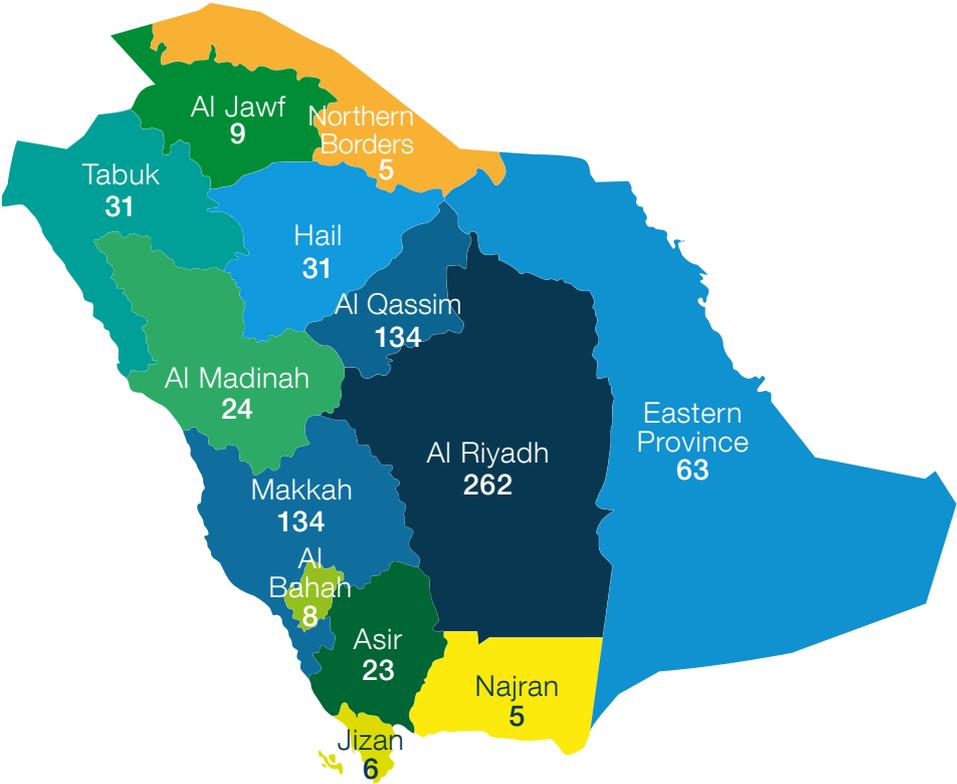


Figure 5. Map of Saudi Arabia showing the number of FTF from each of the thirteen administrative provinces.



Another way of looking at the data is by comparing the regions of origin of the Saudi FTF in Syria in our database to regions of origin of three earlier samples of Saudi militant jihadists, compiled by both Thomas Hegghammer and Aaron Zelin, and acquired through what has come to be known as the Sinjar Records. In 2008, the CTCWP published their detailed report based on the Sinjar Records. Even though the report was not solely focused on Saudi FTF, it provided detailed information regarding the region/hometown of 193 out of the 237 Saudis in the Sinjar Records.<sup>20</sup>

In 2010, Hegghammer published his book on jihad in Saudi Arabia where he constructed a dataset of 539 biographies of past Saudi militants and was able to present the geographical origin of 369 of them.<sup>21</sup> Finally, in 2014, Aaron Zelin published an article on Saudi FTF in Syria based on a database he compiled on foreign jihadist ‘martyrdom’ notices beginning in the fall of 2011 and up until late February 2014. According to him, ‘exactly 300 Saudis have died in Syria as of late February 2014’. Out of this total, 203 ‘martyrdom’ notices detail the city/origin of the deceased fighter.<sup>22</sup>

For the purpose of clarity, all thirteen provinces of Saudi Arabia were grouped into five regions according to their locations: north, south, east, west, and centre.<sup>23</sup> As Figure 6 shows, while in earlier waves and conflict zones the western region used to provide the highest percentage of Saudi jihadists, the central region seems to be the main provider when it comes to Syria in recent years. This in fact reinforces a process of ‘Najdification’<sup>24</sup> of the jihadist community in Saudi Arabia that, as Hegghammer contends, started earlier with al-Qaeda in the 1990s.<sup>25</sup> During the AQAP terror campaign in the Kingdom during 2003–2005, Riyadh and al-Qassim were central theatres for many terrorist attacks and responding government raids.<sup>26</sup> It seems that this tendency is still holding with regards to IS, as our dataset clearly shows that most recruits in raw numbers and ratio are coming from Riyadh and al-Qassim respectively.

20 Fishman, ‘Bombers’.

21 Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia*.

22 Aaron Zelin, ‘The Saudi Foreign Fighter Presence in Syria’, *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 7, issue 4 (2014).

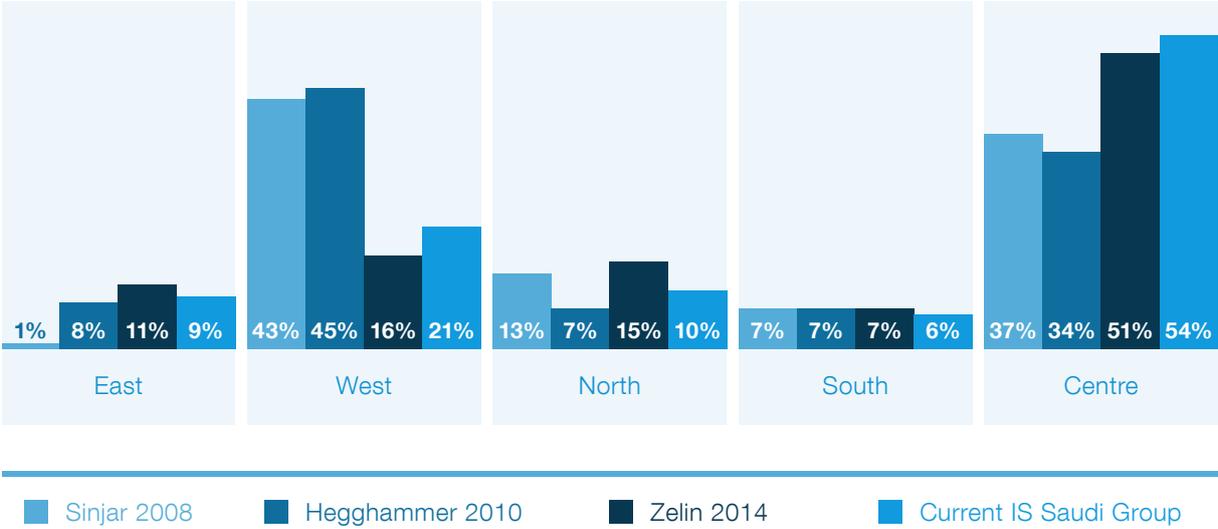
23 The north comprises the provinces of al-Jawf, Tabouk, Hail, and Northern Borders. The south comprises the provinces of al-Bahah, Asir, Jizan, and Najran. The East is just the Eastern province. The west comprises both Makkah and al-Madinah provinces, while the centre comprises both Riyadh and al-Qassim provinces.

24 Najd is the geographical central region of Saudi Arabia.

25 Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia*, p. 131.

26 Munif al-Sufouqi, ‘Al-Qassim the Most Famous Saudi Province for Religious Conservatism Appeared on the “Domestic Terrorism” Map Last July’ (Ar.), *Al Sharq Al Awsat*, 22 May 2004, <http://bit.ly/2dsMgs8>; Mulfi al-Harbi, ‘Heroic Epics of the Security Forces in Al Qassim in the Face of Terrorists’ (Ar.), *Al Riyadh*, 5 July 2006, <http://www.alriyadh.com/168788>; and ‘Main Terrorist Attacks in Saudi’ (Ar.), *Assakina*, 9 Feb 2012, <http://www.assakina.com/center/parties/21860.html>.

Figure 6. Comparison of regional origins of Saudi radicals.



It is noteworthy that the three provinces that provided the largest numbers of Saudi IS FTF in our database – Riyadh, Makkah, and al-Qassim – are the three provinces with the lowest percentages of families living in absolute poverty, with al-Qassim faring even better than Makkah and Riyadh in this regard.<sup>27</sup>

*Previous Travel Experience*

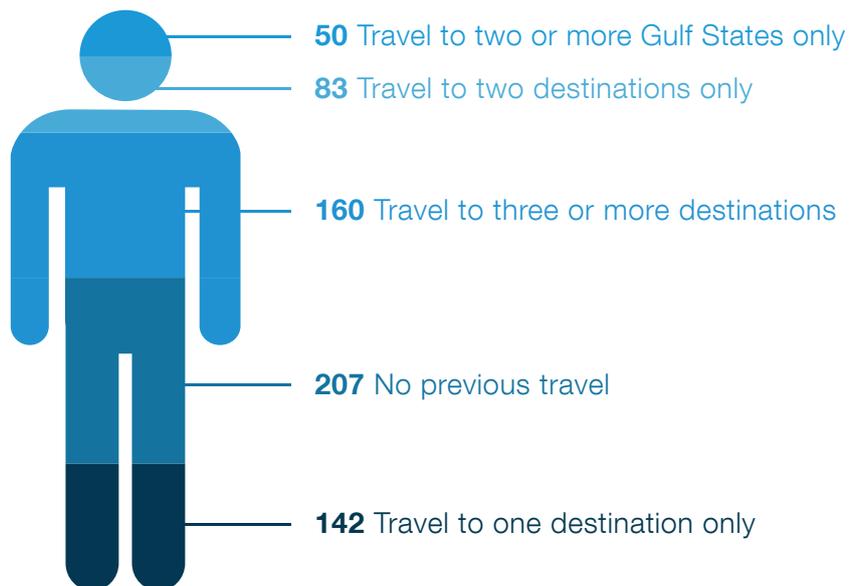
One of the most intriguing fields in the entry forms referred to where the fighter had travelled and how long he had stayed in what countries. Responses to the question about previous travel can be useful as rough indicators of socioeconomic status. In general, the more destinations visited, the more well-off that individual is, which could serve as an indicator of socioeconomic status. However, responses varied widely and some inconsistencies in terms of how Saudi IS fighters answered this question have to be taken into account.

While each fighter had to have travelled to at least one destination to cross into Syria, many indicated that they had no travel experience at all, suggesting that they understood the question to mean any travel prior to the journey into Syria. Others, however, listed Turkey as their only previous travel destination (38 fighters from the whole 759 Saudi IS sample), which was the main gate into Syria, without specifying whether their trip was for the purpose of crossing into Syria or prior to that for another purpose.<sup>28</sup>

27 Turki al-Suhail, 'Government Plans to Reduce Absolute Poverty to 13 Percent in 2009 Reaching 2.2 Percent by 2020' (Ar.), *Al Sharq Al Awsat*, 11 Jan2009, [http://archive.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=43&issueno=11002&article=502441#V\\_-OsJMrKu4](http://archive.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=43&issueno=11002&article=502441#V_-OsJMrKu4).  
 28 There are 117 out of the total 759 records of Saudi IS FTF that do not provide any response to this question.

While IS's desire to gauge the level of travel experience among its new fighters could be explained by a need 'to find candidates suitable for external operations, or to identify opportunities for recruitment from those locations', it is not necessarily apparent as to why this question was asked.<sup>29</sup> In any case, if travel experience can be taken as a rough indicator for wealth and cultural versatility (in the sense that the more destinations experienced the more well-off and, possibly, broadminded that individual is), then the data suggest that generally the Saudi contingent was neither poor nor parochial. Indeed, more than two-thirds of those who answered this question in our sample had some form of travel experience: thirty-two percent had never been abroad before; twenty-two percent had travelled before, but only to one destination; thirteen percent had travelled before to only two destinations, including at most one Gulf State<sup>30</sup>; eight percent had travelled to two or more of the Gulf States, but no others; and twenty-five percent had travelled to three or more destinations.

Figure 7. Previous travel experience.



<sup>29</sup> Dodwell, 'Caliphate's Global Workforce'.

<sup>30</sup> The Gulf States include, beside Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and Oman. Due to their geographical closeness to Saudi Arabia, thus ease of travel, and the fact that some respondents listed 'the Gulf States' as the answer to this question without specifying which ones or how many, the latter were listed as a distinct group not including Saudi Arabia.

## Section 2: Education and Attainment

In this section, the data will be explored from three different angles. First the focus will be on the terrorist cohorts' level of religious knowledge. Then the focus will shift to the level of educational qualification as well as the subject/discipline of study. Finally, their occupation prior to traveling to Syria will be explored.

What the data in this section mainly indicates is that socioeconomic factors hold limited explanatory value when it comes to the radicalisation of this group of Saudis, since the majority of them were neither social outcasts nor educational underachievers. It also suggests, as other researchers have previously pointed out, that the role of religious ideology in the process of radicalisation is mainly secondary to the role of political environments and social milieus and subcultures.<sup>31</sup> Political turmoil and instability in the region as well as the heightened sectarianism – largely as a result of the peaceful revolution turned vicious civil war in Syria – seem to hold a much higher explanatory value.

### *Level of Religious Knowledge*

In each of the registration documents, respondents were asked to state their level of *shari'a* (religious) knowledge. Recruits were given three options to choose from: Basic, Intermediate, and *talib 'ilm*. *Talib 'ilm* literally translates to 'knowledge-seeker' and denotes those who consider themselves to have deep interest in religious knowledge, having engaged in structured religious education in academic institutions and/or mosque seminaries. While the words *talib 'ilm* do not, per se, indicate the actual level of religious expertise – one could be at the start, middle, or end of his religious training and call himself *talib 'ilm*. For the sake of clarity, and because it was listed in the registration documents as the third option after Basic and Intermediate, we will consider it to mean 'advanced' in this context.

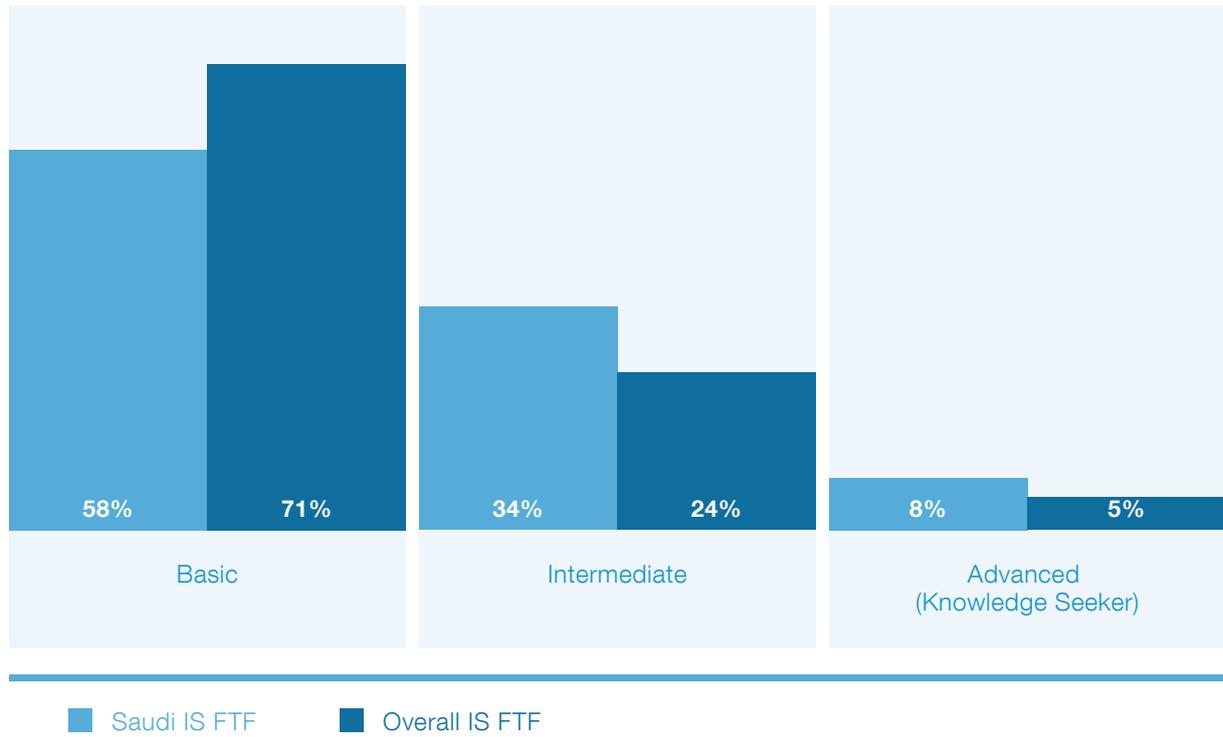
In comparison to the rest of the sample, the Saudis seem to consider themselves more advanced in terms of basic religious knowledge and expertise (see Figure 8). While seventy-one percent of the whole sample claimed to have basic religious knowledge, only fifty-eight percent of the Saudi contingent did. In contrast, the percentage in the Saudi sample who claimed to have intermediate and advanced religious knowledge is higher than the percentage in the total sample. Twelve percent and two percent of the respondents in our Saudi sample and the total sample, respectively, have not provided an answer to this specific question.

Given the Kingdom's relative conservatism in comparison to other countries of origin for fighters in the dataset – all students, starting from elementary level until high school, get religious education in Saudi schools – this is somewhat expected. Still, the Saudi contingent's religious fluency should not be exaggerated: fifty-eight percent of Saudi FTF acknowledged that they had only basic knowledge of the religion of Islam, and only eight percent claimed to be 'knowledge seekers'.

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<sup>31</sup> See for instance: Manni Crone, 'Radicalization Revisited: Violence, Politics and the Skills of the Body', *International Affairs* 93, no. 3 (2016), pp. 587–604; Arun Kundnani, *A Decade Lost: Rethinking Radicalization and Extremism* (London: Claystone, 2015); Rajan Basra, Peter R. Neumann, and Claudia Brunner, *Criminal Past, Terrorist Futures: European Jihadists and the New Crime-Terror Nexus*, ICSR Report, 2016.

Figure 8. Saudi vs overall IS FTFs' level of religious knowledge.<sup>32</sup>



<sup>32</sup> Percentages of the overall IS FTF were taken from Dodwell, 'Caliphates' Global Workforce'.

Figure 9. Saudi IS FTFs' educational level.

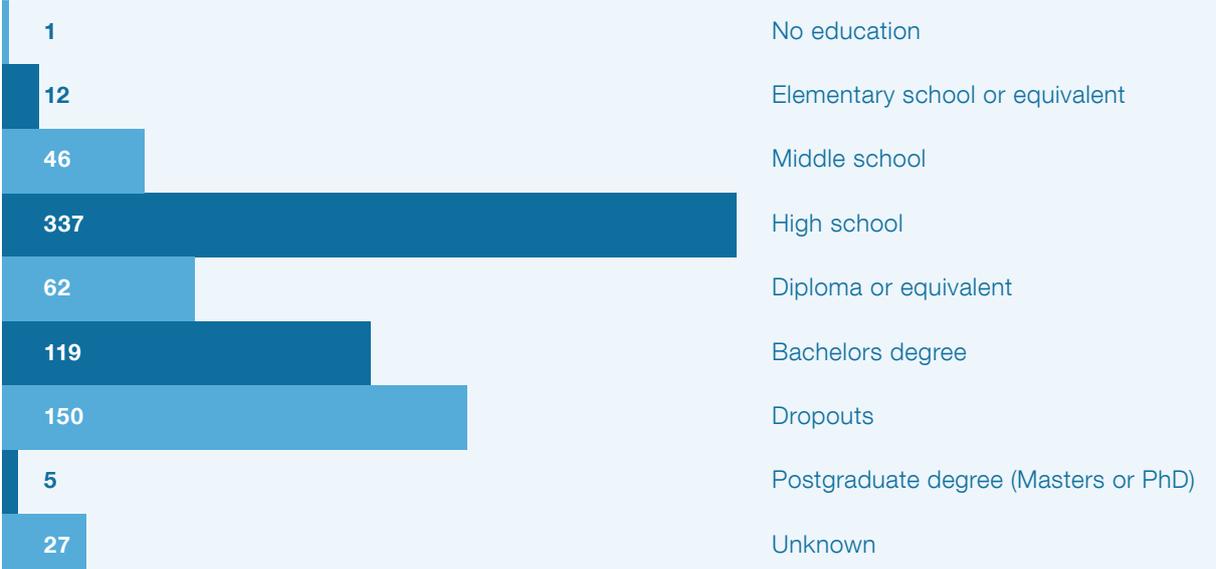
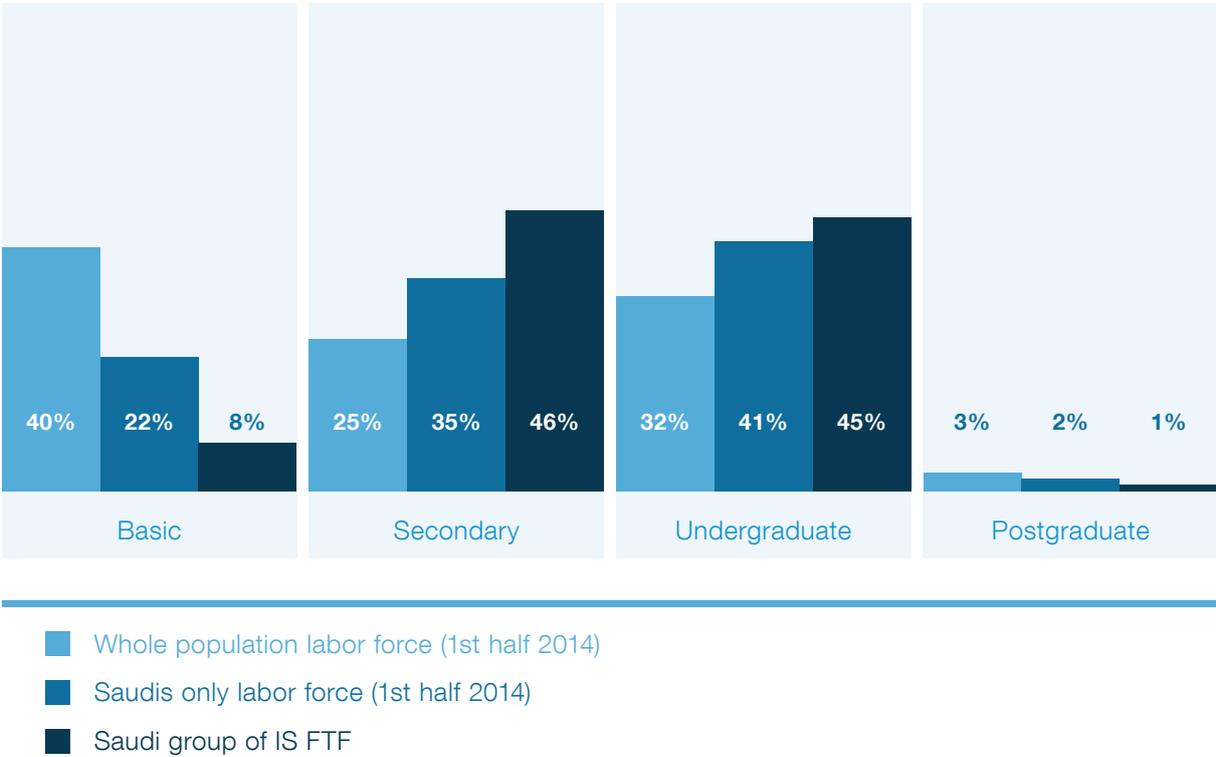


Figure 10. Comparison of educational level among the Saudi IS group, the whole Saudi population and the Saudi citizen-only labor force.



### *Level of Educational Qualification*

Each form contained a question about the level of educational qualification. Answers from the Saudi contingent to this question varied. Some respondents issued ambiguous statements about what schooling they had received, noting that they had engaged in Islamic studies, social sciences, and English-language training, while others were more specific, detailing their exact grade level and the location of their educational institution.<sup>33</sup>

Each qualification was placed into one of four categories: basic, secondary, undergraduate, and postgraduate. All of those who reported no education or elementary or middle school education only were coded into the basic category (eight percent). All of those who reported that they had attended high school were coded into the secondary category (forty-six percent). The undergraduate category (forty-five percent) includes those who reported diploma and bachelor degrees (finished and unfinished), and the postgraduate category (one percent) was reserved for those who reported Masters and PhD degrees (finished and unfinished).<sup>34</sup>

This data demonstrates that the Saudi contingent does not consist of educational underachievers, which can lead to the argument that they were not lacking in socio-economic opportunities. In fact, this group was, on average, better educated than the general Saudi labour force (see Figure 10).<sup>35</sup> However, it is important to keep in mind that education does not necessarily equate with job opportunities, and a sense of relative deprivation may still be relevant (15% of the total Saudi contingent under study reported to be unemployed as we shall discover).

The second observation is that the majority of fighters that dropped out evidently did so in order to make their way to Syria. We may infer that they believed strongly in the cause and were frustrated enough to risk their future by dropping out of college to join the fight in a foreign conflict-torn land.

It is also worth noting that, of the fifty-three Saudis who claimed to have had advanced knowledge of religion, thirty-five had either started or completed their higher education (twenty majored in religious studies) and four reported that they had either finished or embarked on their postgraduate studies (all of whom majored in religious studies).

However, how does this Saudi IS group's level of educational attainment compare with that of past Saudi violent radicals and with the overall IS FTF in the registration documents? Specific social and educational data on those who join terrorist organisations are generally scarce, which is one of the reasons why these IS registration

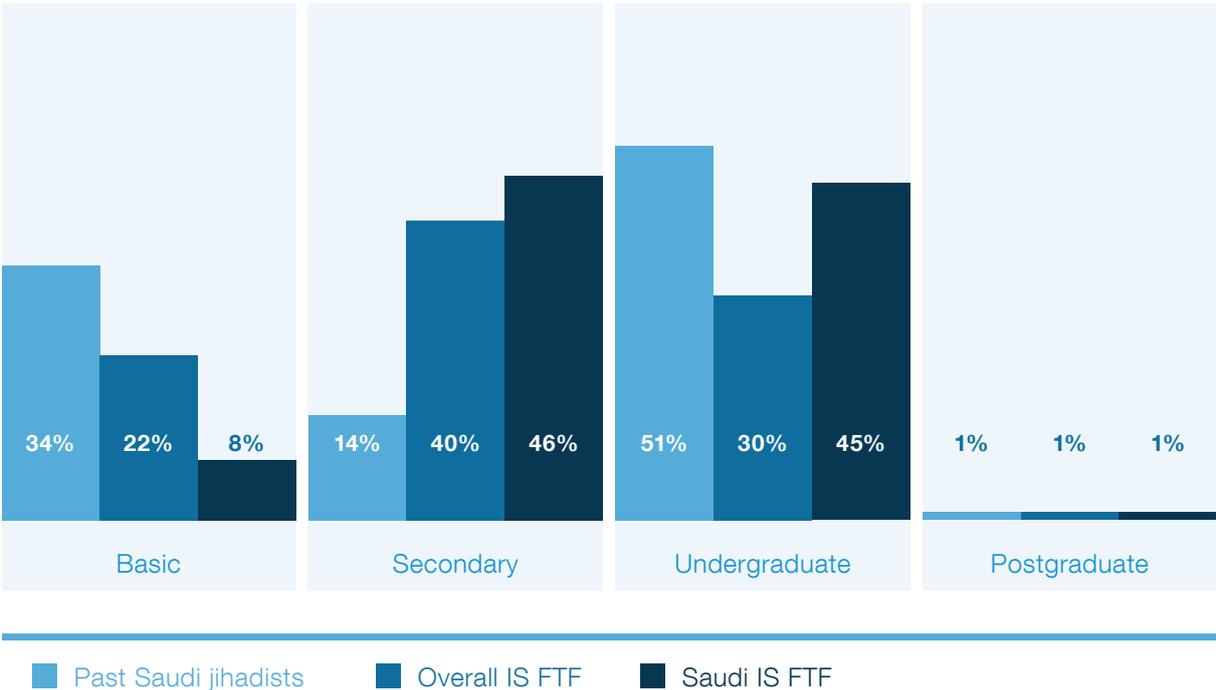
33 In very few cases where responses were not very clear, judgment calls had to be made based, primarily, on the age of the prospective fighter at the time of his travel in order to determine both his level of education and completion. For example, when a fighter states that he is a *jami'y* (a term derived from *jami'ah*, which, in this context, means a university student), the term itself could mean that the person holds a bachelor's degree or is still studying for it. Therefore, attention had to be paid to the age upon entry into Syria in order to determine whether the individual joined after graduating or dropped out of college in order to join IS.

34 Included in the basic education category is one fighter, who had no education at all, and three fighters from Buraydah in al-Qassim Province who listed *madaris al ikhwan* (the brotherhood schools) as their educational qualification. The twenty-seven Saudi FTF who have not reported their level of education were excluded from this count. The 'Buraydah Brotherhood' group has nothing to do with the 'Muslim Brotherhood' organisation. It is a small radical isolationist movement that, as one of its previous members contends, has undergone immense developments and changes since the 1990s to the point that its original ideas and beliefs are almost extinct after many of its members have moved to salafi-jihadism. For more on the Buraydah Brotherhood see: Mansour Al Nugaidan, *Buraydah Brotherhood are Wahhabi Sufis* (Ar.), 20 Jan 2013, <http://alnogaidan.com/2013-01-20-17-04-02/>.

35 Statistics were again taken from the 2014 Saudi General Authority for Statistics survey.

documents are valuable sources of information. However, Hegghammer was able to identify the educational qualification of 109 past Saudi radical militants out of his total of 539.<sup>36</sup> Figure 11 shows a percentage comparison among the Hegghammer sample of past Saudi militants, the overall IS sample based on the registration forms analysed by the CTC,<sup>37</sup> after categorising the different qualifications of both samples into our four aforementioned categories, and our Saudi IS sample of jihadists.

Figure 11. Educational level compared.



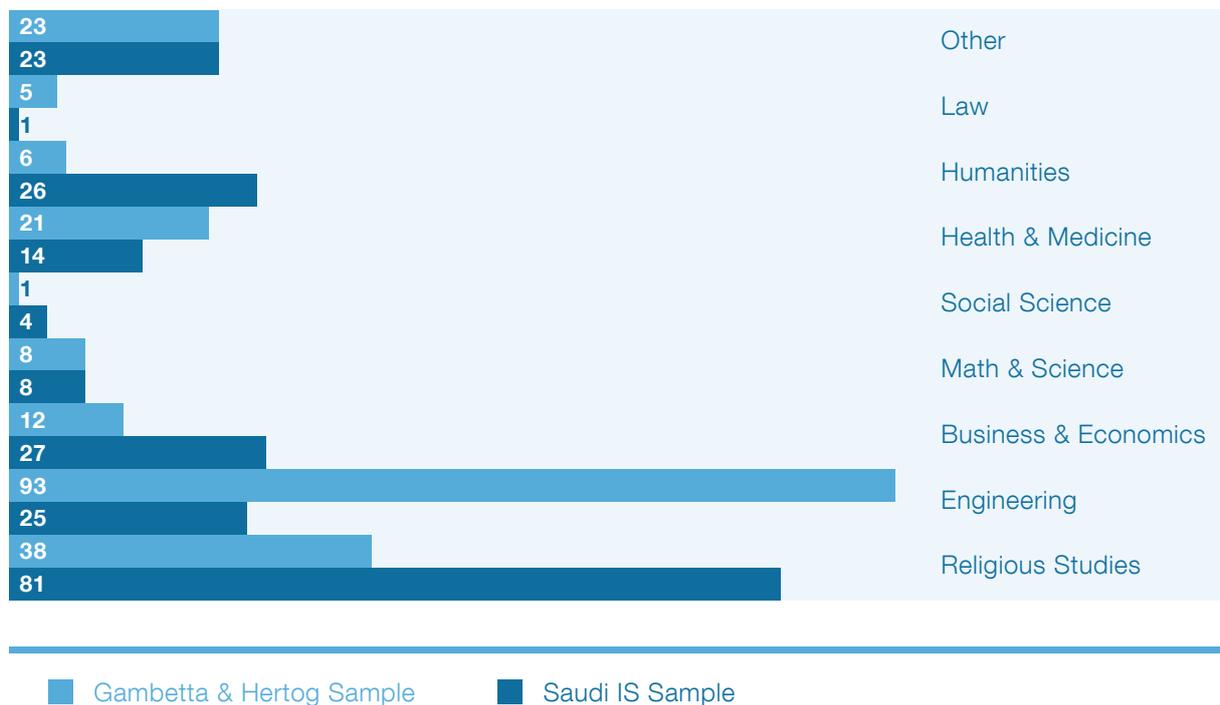
As the chart shows, whereas the postgraduate category comprises the same marginal percentage of fighters in all three samples, the Saudi IS contingent fared better in comparison to both the overall IS jihadists and the past Saudi jihadists in both the basic and secondary categories (scoring a lower percentage in the former and a higher percentage in the latter). However, in the undergraduate category, the Saudi IS jihadists also fared better than the overall IS jihadists (by a margin of fifteen percent), but were six percent short of their prior Saudi counterparts.

36 The 109 Saudi radical militants in Hegghammer’s data set represent three different generations of Saudi jihadi militants: 35 were participants in early jihadi fronts (Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chechnya), 44 were active members of Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan 1996–2001, and 30 were active members of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula 2002–2006. See: Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia*, pp. 239–243.

37 In the overall IS FTF sample in Dodwell, ‘Caliphate’s Global Workforce’, 199 fighters were listed under the category ‘other’, and a further 42 fighters were listed under the category ‘religious or religious unspecified’. They were not categorised under any of our four categories here as it is not clear under which they fall. Together, after excluding an additional 750 fighters who have not specified their level of education according to Dodwell, they constitute 7 percent of the remaining total of 3,423 fighters. The rest of the fighters were divided into the four categories above, with the 33 fighters who Dodwell classified under (none/unemployed), added to the Basic category for the sake of consistency. See: Dodwell, ‘Caliphate’s Global Workforce’, p. 16.

Overall, our group of Saudi IS recruits are relatively well-educated, not only compared to other jihadists, but also in the context of the overall population in their own country. This challenges the theory that a lack of education or absence of socio-economic opportunities are the main drivers behind the process of radicalisation. This is at least not the case when it comes to this specific group of Saudi IS terrorists.

Figure 12. Subject/discipline of education.



### Subject/Discipline of Study

Two hundred and nine individuals in the Saudi contingent specified their area of study in their answer to the question of educational qualification, or about sixty-one percent of the post-high school cohort. Although not a firm majority of those in our sample, these responses are worth comparing to other, similar data on jihadist education, such as that of Gambetta and Hertog, who compiled a list of 497 members of violent Islamist groups in the Muslim world active since the 1970s.<sup>38</sup> Educational information was noted for 335 of them, 231 of whom went on to higher education. For 207 of these individuals, Gambetta and Hertog were able to identify the specific area of study. Given that our own sample contains this information in 209 cases, it is useful to compare the two datasets, as in Figure 12.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Diego Gambetta and Steffen Hertog, *Engineers of Jihad: The Curious Connection between Violent Extremism and Education* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

<sup>39</sup> The twenty-three Saudi IS FTF classified under the (other) category include: fourteen whose discipline is in IT and computer science, four in education, two in agriculture, and three who studied journalism, media, and/or military sciences.

While the overwhelming majority of Gambetta and Hertog's sample were found to have studied engineering, they note that this was not the case in the context of Saudi Arabia – only two out of the twelve Saudis in their sample were known to have studied engineering. This is in line with the IS sample, which indicates that twelve percent were engineers by training.

### *Previous Occupation*

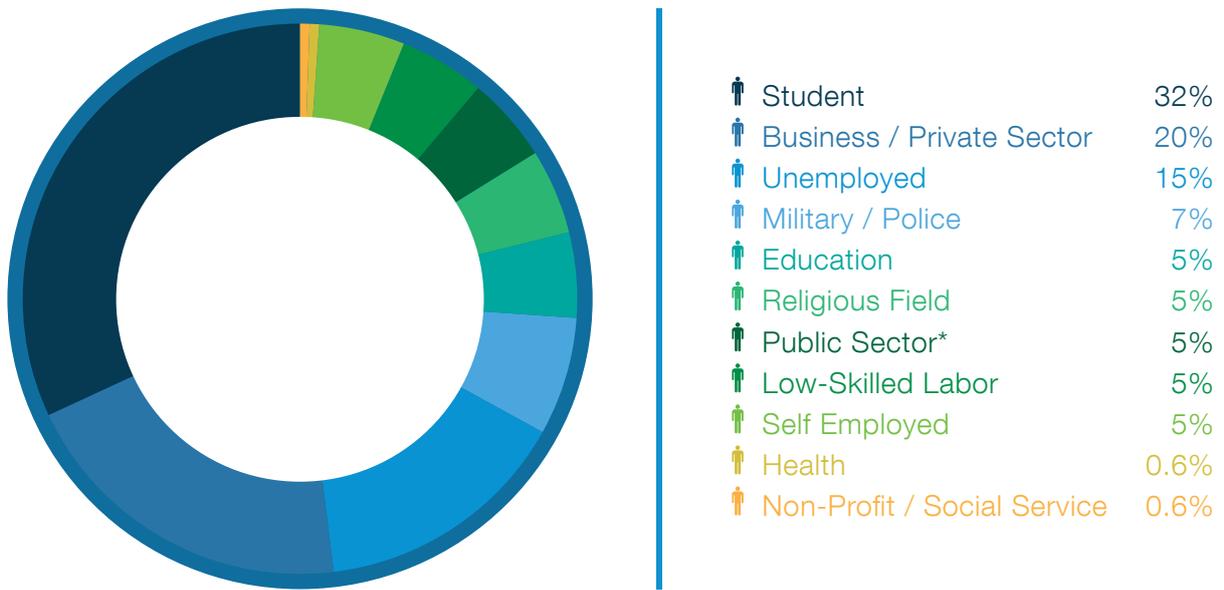
All but fifty-five of the Saudi contingent responded to the question in the leaked documents about prior profession or occupation. Similar to other aspects of the entry forms, these responses varied and were not consistent with a limited group of categories. In order to make sense of the diverse – and sometimes vague – entries, the professions were sorted into eleven categories, as depicted in Figure 13. In order of prevalence, they are:<sup>40</sup>

1. **Student:** 227, as students, either at elementary, middle school, high school, undergraduate, or postgraduate level.
2. **Business/private sector:** 139, as a category including engineers, traders, and merchants, as well as employees in private sector companies or companies that are either fully or partially owned by government but are run as private sector – such as Aramco, Ma'aden, Saudi Telecom Company, and the Saudi Electricity Company. Several of the more ambiguous entries specifying only the nature of the occupation rather than the place of employment (such as computer maintenance, public relations, or graphic designer) were also included in this category.
3. **Unemployed:** 109, reporting that they were unemployed prior to making the journey to Syria.
4. **Military/police:** 50, who held positions in the military/police sector.
5. **Education:** 37, who held teaching positions in the education sector.
6. **Religious field:** 36, including 13 who used to work for the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, while the others were either Imams at mosques or considered themselves to be religious preachers.
7. **Public sector:** 34, who held positions at various government ministries and institutions.
8. **Low-skilled labor:** 33, who held occupations such as fruit and vegetable sellers, taxi drivers, metal workers, and security guards.
9. **Self-employed:** 33, who reported that they were self-employed. While there is no way of knowing the exact nature of their work, the term 'self-employed' is sometimes used as a cover or alternative to 'unemployed'. Therefore, while it is possible that some of these individuals had thriving businesses, it is also possible that others were unemployed or had very small low-skilled jobs.
10. **Health:** 4, who held previous professions in the health sector.
11. **Non-profit/social service:** 4.

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<sup>40</sup> In a couple of cases, the same individual was coded under two different categories because he indicated that he had held two different jobs (both cases joined the private sector after military service).

Figure 13. Prior occupation categories.



Just three of the categories – students, business/private sector, and unemployed – contain over two-thirds of the Saudi contingent. The fact that students compose the largest category is not surprising. More or less, this has always been the case among new recruits in radical organisations.<sup>41</sup>

Individuals coded as unemployed comprise fifteen percent of the total contingent. If we exclude students from the total due, by definition, to not having entered the job market, the percentage of unemployed rises to twenty-three percent, which is much higher in comparison to the percentage of unemployment among the more than 4,000 IS FTF analysed by CTCWP (seven percent overall).<sup>42</sup> This is even more intriguing, given the fact that a large number of fighters in the Saudi contingent were well-educated, yet almost a quarter of them were still unemployed. One important caveat to mention here is that – given the average age of the Saudi contingent as just under 24 – it is very likely that some of the unemployed were recent graduates, as a couple of individuals indicated in their forms.

The fourth largest category, military/police, comprises fifty individuals. Even though they only constitute seven percent of the Saudi records, they are disproportionately represented in comparison to other nationalities, as only twenty-eight FTF of other nationalities whose documents, examined by CTCWP, stated that they had worked in the military or police.<sup>43</sup>

41 Fishman, 'Bombers', p. 44; Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia*, p. 243; Gambetta and Hertog, *Engineers of Jihad*.

42 Dodwell, 'Caliphate's Global Workforce', p. 21.

43 *Ibid*, pp. 23–24.

It is worth briefly ruminating on the fact that the religious field category makes up only five percent of the total number of Saudi fighters that responded to the question of prior occupation. This is much lower than the approximately twenty-two percent previously found in Hegghammer's study of past Saudi jihadists, who had had a profession that was religious in nature.<sup>44</sup> This variance could be because the narrative and message of IS is qualitatively different from that of al-Qaeda, the group that Hegghammer's studied.<sup>45</sup>

To sum up, despite the higher than average unemployment rate among the Saudi contingent, it does not seem that they were from a disproportionately disgruntled segment of Saudi society. Indeed, on the whole, they were, echoing Hegghammer, 'unremarkable in the sense that they were neither society's losers nor winners'.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia*.

<sup>45</sup> For more on this point see: Shiraz Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea* (London: Hurst, 2016), p. 210; Brian H. Fishman, *The Master Plan: ISIS, al-Qaeda, and the Jihadi Strategy for Final Victory* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2016), p. 51.

<sup>46</sup> Hegghammer, 'Terrorist Recruitment and Radicalization in Saudi Arabia', *Middle East Policy* 13, no. 4 (2016), p. 45.

## Section 3: Jihadist Profile

This section will again focus on the data from three angles. First, what was the projected role that the prospective jihadist expected when joining the IS. Second, what previous jihadi experience did each new recruit claim to have had prior to joining the IS. Lastly, what data was found to document each jihadist's journey into Syria, from the points and dates of entry to the names of vouchers and smugglers.

This data paints a picture of the average Saudi IS jihadist as a young and inexperienced fighter, part of a new generation of Saudi jihadists who have been radicalised in response to new sets of events and circumstances and are part of newly-formed radical social groups and networks.

### *Fighter, Suicide Bomber (Istishhadi), or Kamikaze Attackers (Inghimasi)*

Each form records whether a new recruit expected to be a fighter, suicide bomber (*istishhadiyyin*), or kamikaze attacker (*inghimasiyyin*). Ninety-eight percent of the forms include this information. Although the very next question in the form asks more generally about specialities, giving four options to choose from – fighter, theological/religious, security, or administrative – the previous question on intention implies that all new recruits are expected to be willing to participate in physical *jihad* regardless of the chosen (or assigned) speciality.

Before analysing the responses to this question, it is worth touching briefly on the meaning of *inghimasi* and how it differs from traditional suicide bombing. *Inghimasi* literally translates as 'the one who plunges or submerges', and *inghimasi* operations are distinct from suicide bombings in the sense that 'their success does not necessitate the perpetrators' death, although it does make it highly likely'.<sup>47</sup> In these operations, one or more attackers, usually wearing explosive belts, 'plunge' into enemy positions in order to inflict as much damage and harm as possible. Often, these attacks are concluded by the attacker or attackers detonating their vests.

The vast majority of individuals in our database – 625 individuals, or eighty-two percent of the whole contingent – volunteered to be fighters. Just 71 (nine percent) signed up to be suicide bombers, and only 44 (six percent) volunteered for *inghimasi* operations. Six individuals (one percent) stated that they would rather engage in a non-combat role (e.g., teaching and spreading religious knowledge). The forms provided no information for 13 individuals (two percent).

While the Saudi IS contingent does not differ much in its choice of roles from the overall IS recruits in the records, the difference is stark and evident when compared with their earlier counterparts in Iraq. It is important to note here that, according to the Sinjar Records, while the plurality of suicide bombers in Iraq during 2006 and 2007 were Saudis, 'Libyan and Moroccan nationals registered as "suicide bombers" at a higher rate than their Saudi counterparts'.<sup>48</sup> Still, the portion of Saudis

47 Charlie Winter, *War by Suicide: A Statistical Assessment of the Islamic State Martyrdom Industry* (The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, Feb 2017).

48 Fishman, 'Bombers', p. 6.

who volunteered for suicide operations back in 2006–2007 (forty-eight percent) is much higher than those who volunteered in 2013–2014 (around sixteen percent).<sup>49</sup> The most obvious and significant factor that can explain this dramatic shift is the fact that al-Qaeda in Iraq used to function as ‘an insurgent organization struggling for survival against a vastly superior military foe in the United States’.<sup>50</sup> IS, however, held a large swath of territory; tried, successfully to some extent, to build a functioning bureaucracy; and by mid-2014 self-declared itself a Caliphate. While the urge, desire, and thought of dying as a martyr is always present in the mind of most recruits, this different environment and the new exciting project that IS has been trying to sell and project in its messages make living, rather than dying, a more understandable and rewarding task.

It is worth noting that while just below eighteen percent of those who chose to be fighters were married and had already started a family, slightly above eighteen percent of those who volunteered to be suicide bombers and twenty-five percent of those that indicated a preference to be *inghimasi* attackers were married.

**Table 3. Family situation for different fighting choices.**

	Married	Had children
Fighters	111	74
Suicide bombers	13	10
Inghimasi attackers	11	7

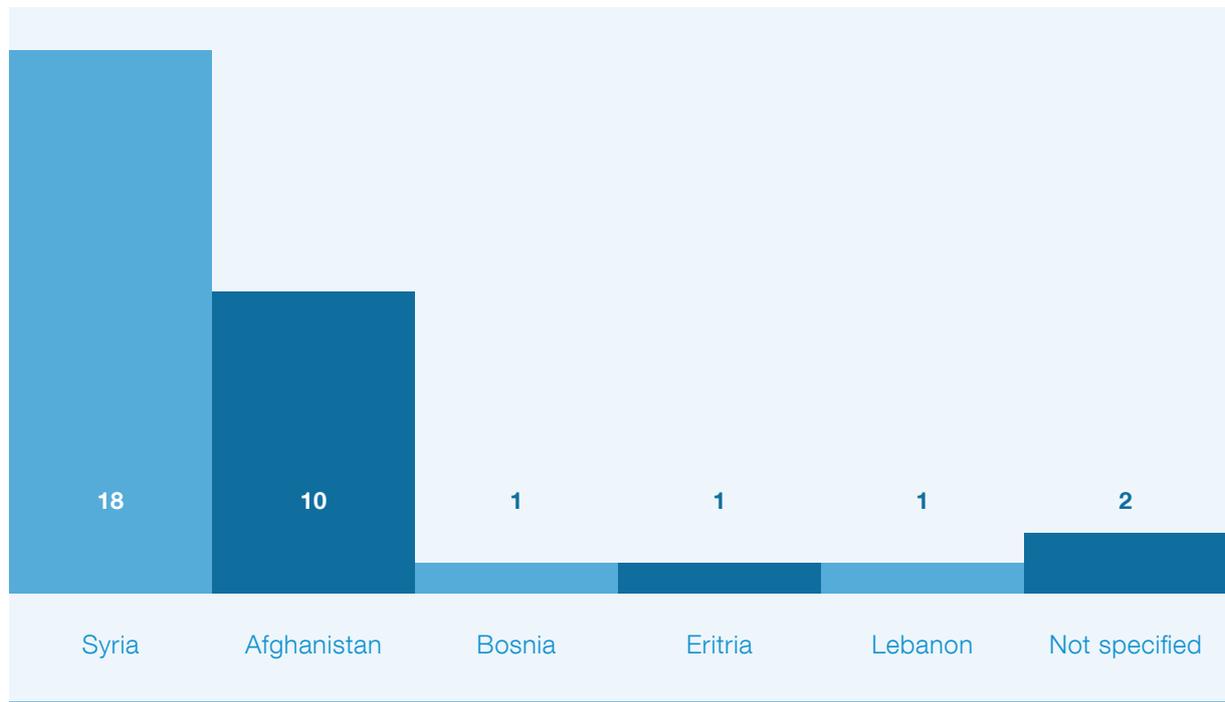
*Previous Jihad Experience*

Ninety-one percent of the Saudi contingent indicated that they had no prior jihadi experience anywhere before travelling to Syria. It appears that different recruits, or IS administrative officials filling the forms, variously understood the question, ‘Have you engaged in *jihad* previously?’ Among the four percent who answered, ‘yes’, some evidently took it to mean any previous experience prior to arriving into Syria, while others understood it as prior, instead, to joining IS, and thus, indicating that they joined IS after spending a period of time fighting with either Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham, or one of the Free Syrian Army’s factions. Yet, others, who are known to have had similar experiences are among the vast majority answering ‘no’.<sup>51</sup> In this case, only five percent failed to answer this specific question.

The percentage of veterans shrinks to only two once we account for those that did not answer the question, as well as those who answered in the affirmative but indicated that their previous experience with *jihad* was inside Syria. Figure 14 gives a breakdown of the locations mentioned by all thirty-two Saudi FTF in the records who indicated previous jihadi experience, whether inside or outside Syria.<sup>52</sup>

49 *Ibid.*, p. 56.  
 50 Dodwell, ‘Caliphate’s Global Workforce’, p. 29.  
 51 In some forms, the name of the group that was joined prior to joining the IS is mentioned under the ‘Notes’ section. Nonetheless, the percentages in Figure 17 are calculated based on the responses as they appear next to the question ‘have you engaged in *jihad* previously?’ despite the aforementioned caveat.  
 52 Note that one individual indicated previous experience training in Afghanistan and fighting in Bosnia.

Figure 14. Locations of previous *jihad* experience.



In comparison with the rest of the fighters recorded in the documents, about ten percent of whom claimed to have had prior experience, the Saudi group is significantly less experienced when it comes to combative *jihad*.<sup>53</sup>

### *Dates of Entry, Points of Entry, and Smugglers/Facilitators*

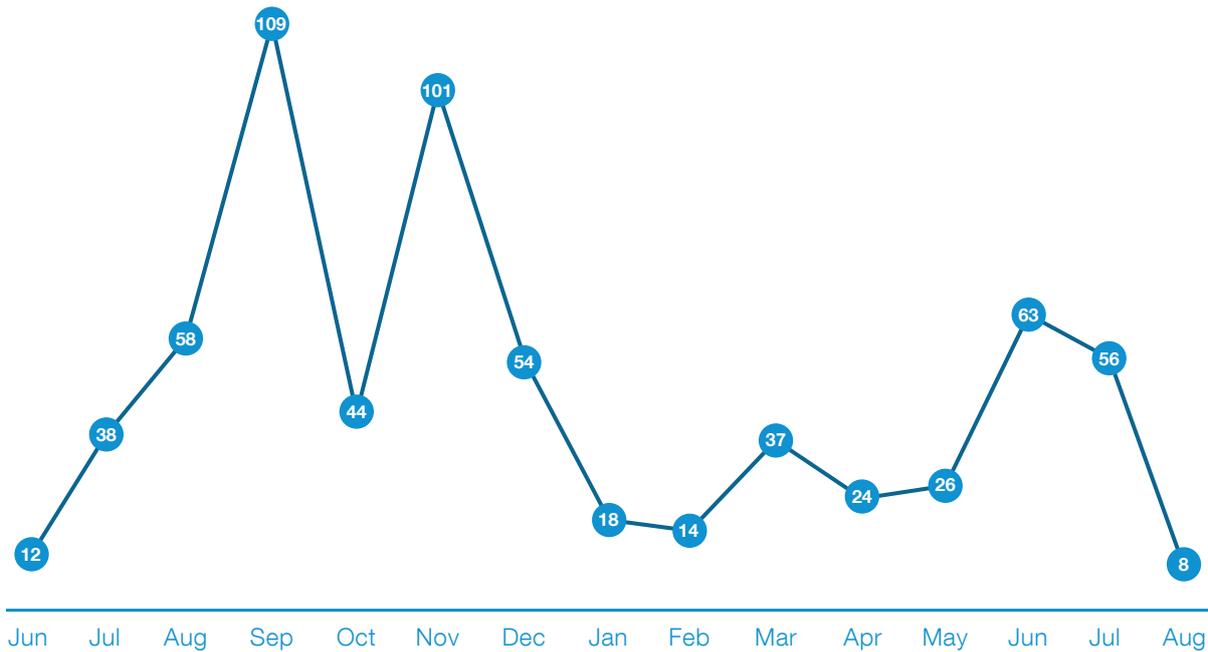
Besides demographic data pertaining to background and experience, the forms also contained questions regarding the logistics of actually entering Syria: namely, the date of entry, the names of smugglers and facilitators, and the names of those who provided *tazkiyyah* (recommendation). Of the 759 Saudis in the dataset, 748 specified their entry points, with 670 providing their date of entry, and a further 583 offering the smuggler’s name or *kunyah* (nom de guerre). The name or *kunyah* of the person who provided them with *tazkiyyah* was provided by 706. There were over 400 different individuals named in this section of the form.

53 Dodwell, ‘Caliphate’s Global Workforce’, p. 27.

Date of Entry

Of the 670 fighters who specified their date of entry into Syria on the forms, 662 claimed to have entered in the period June 2013–August 2014 (see Figure 15). Two of the remaining eight entered in 2011 (the earliest in June of that year), two in 2012, three in February and March of 2013, and the last entrant in our dataset has arrived in Syria in September 2014.

Figure 15. Monthly total Saudi entries June 2013–August 2014.



The month in which the most Saudi recruits arrived in IS territory was September 2013, close to the beginning of the time period covered in the entry documents. It is worth noting that July 2014, some ten months later and just weeks after the Caliphate declaration, is the month in which IS’s new recruit intake was highest overall.<sup>54</sup>

There are many reasons that can help to explain why the flow of Saudi FTF into Syria decreased since 2013.<sup>55</sup> They include the ease of travel, the fratricidal rivalry between al-Qaeda and IS<sup>56</sup>, and the public entrance of the Iranian-backed Shia militia, Hizbullah, in defence of the oppressive Syrian regime during the Qusayr battle in late May 2013, aggravating the overtly sectarian nature that started to colour the conflict.<sup>57</sup>

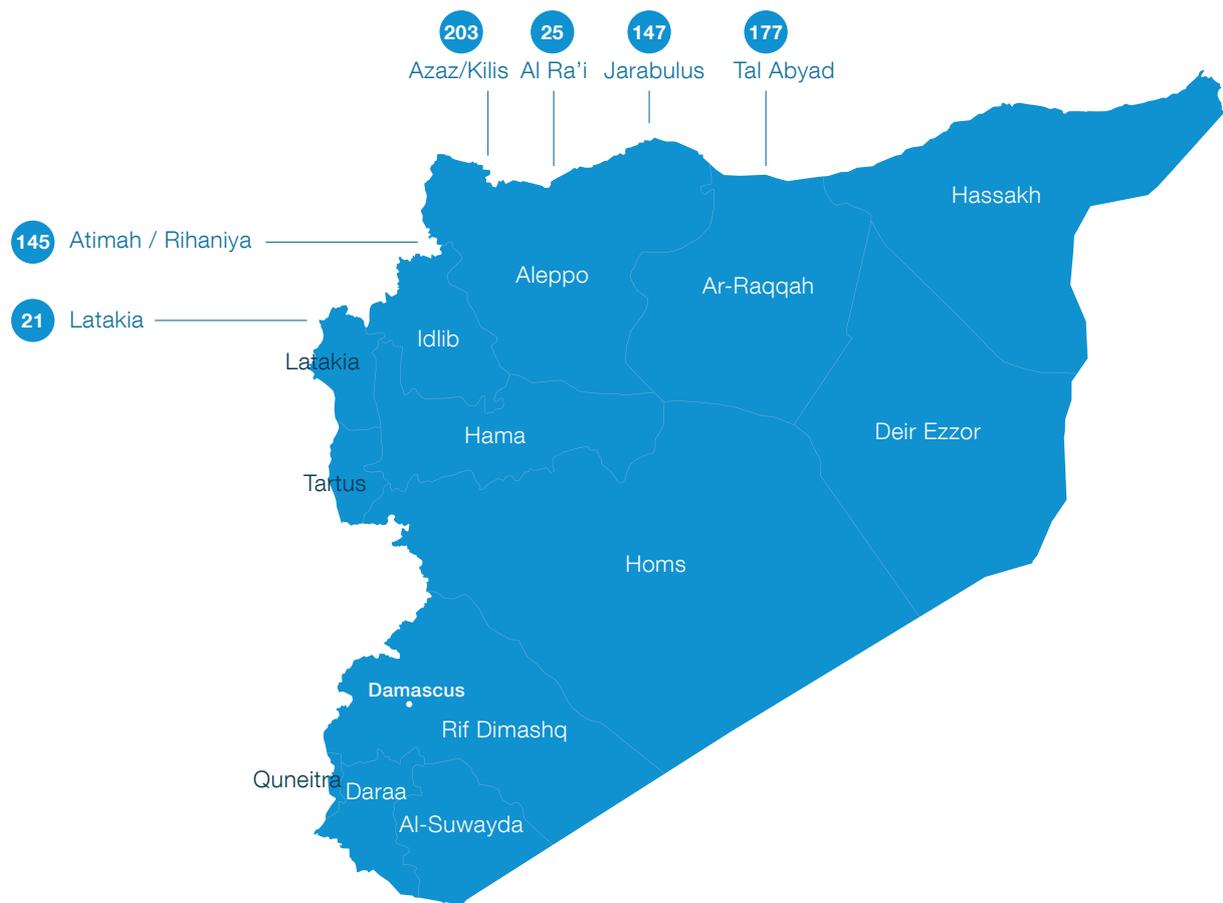
54 Dodwell, *Then and Now*, p. 18.  
 55 According to official Saudi estimates, while the year 2013 saw nearly 1,500 Saudis travel to join various warring factions including but not limited to IS, that number subsequently dropped by more than half to 650 in the year 2014, 383 in 2015, and 56 in 2016.  
 56 Dodwell, *Then and Now*, pp. 29–30.  
 57 See the speech of the Secretary-General of Hizbullah, Hasan Nasrallah, on 'the anniversary of resistance and liberation', 25 May 2013, available on YouTube; A Zelin, 'The Saudi Foreign Fighter Presence in Syria', p. 11.

Most importantly, this all coincided with the Saudi government's more aggressive attempts to prevent the outflow of its citizens through, among other measures, its declaration of a penalty of imprisonment for all of those who participate in conflicts abroad and its designation, in both February and March 2014, of Jabhat al-Nusra and the al-Qaeda Organization in Iraq (now known as the Islamic State), among other groups, as terrorist organisations.<sup>58</sup>

**Points of Entry**

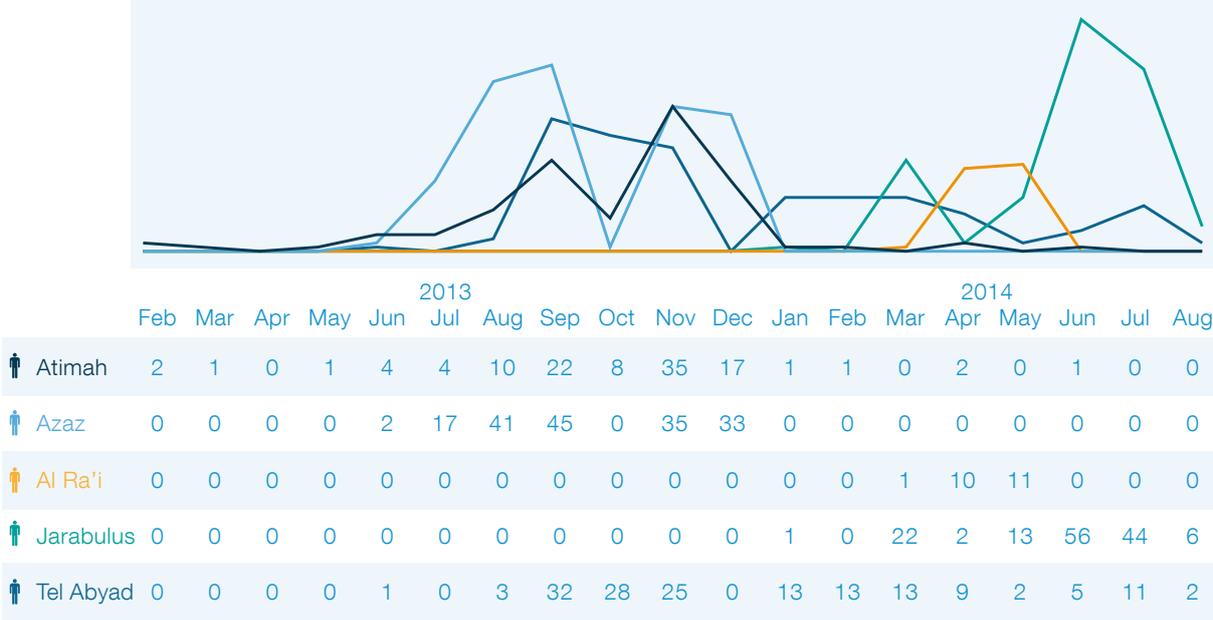
Regarding points of entry, respondents listed fifteen different places along the Syria–Turkey border, with four of them comprising more than eighty-four percent of the total crossings. These four are Azaz (182 individuals), Tel Abyad (177), Jarabulus (147), and Atimah (123). If we also assume that those who listed Kilis (21) had actually entered through Azaz, which sits just across the border in Syria, and similarly those who listed Rihaniya (22) entered through Atimah, then the main entry routes appear to be even more limited. Figure 16 maps each of the six main entry points.

Figure 16. Main entry points into Syria.



58 'A Royal Order to Imprison any Saudi who Fights Abroad' (Ar.), *Al-Jazeera*, 3 Feb 2014, <http://bit.ly/2k55D1v>; 'Full Text of the Saudi Interior Ministry Statement Designating Terrorist Organizations', *al-Sharq al-Awast*, 8 March 2014, <http://english.aawsat.com/2014/03/article55329804/full-text-of-saudi-interior-ministry-statement-announcing-terrorist-list>.

Figure 17. Saudi entries at main points over time.



An analysis of monthly flow rates into Syria points towards the shifting nature of IS’s mobilisation infrastructure in the north of the country. As can be seen from Figure 17 below, the flow of recruits change dramatically over time, reflecting on-ground tactical developments. By early 2014, IS had lost control of the north-western Syria–Turkey border area and started retreating from both Aleppo and Azaz, something that coincided with its consolidation of power around Raqqa to the east.<sup>59</sup> As its centre of gravity shifted eastwards, so too did its preferred points of entry for FTF.<sup>60</sup>

It follows that loss of its key Turkish gateways in 2015 and 2016 was a significant factor as to why the flow of FTF to IS decreased so dramatically during those two years.<sup>61</sup>

**Facilitators/Smugglers**

Five hundred and eighty-three Saudi fighters provided the *kunyahs* (nom de guerre) of their smugglers. There were sixty individuals named in total, with four of them responsible for smuggling as much as seventy-six percent of the contingent. Table 4 details their names, the entry points where they operated, and the time frames of their smuggling operations.

59 Tyler Rogoway, 'This Animated Map of ISIS Expansion in Syria, Iraq and Beyond is Unsettling', *Foxtrof Alpha*, 2 Feb 2016; Liz Sly, 'Renegade al-Qaida Faction Withdraws from Syrian Border Town of Azaz', *Guardian*, 4 March 2014.  
 60 Dodwell, *Then and Now*.  
 61 Martin Chulov, 'Losing Ground, Fighters and Morale – Is it All Over for ISIS?', *Guardian*, 7 Sep 2016.

Table 4. Major smuggling activities.

Top four smugglers/facilitators	Number of FTF smuggled	His main entry point(s)	Timeframe of activity
Abu Mohammad Al-Shamali	301	Azaz / Jarabulus	July–Dec 2013 / March & May–July 2014
Abu Al Bara' Al-Shamali	86	Tel Abyad	Aug–Nov 2013
Abu Mansour Al-Maghrebi	40	Atimah	End of Oct–end of Dec 2013
Abu Ilyas Al-Maghribi	16	Latakia /al-Ra'i	Sep–Dec 2013 / Apr 2014

As Table 4 shows, Abu Mohammad al-Shamali, an Iraqi by birth and a Saudi by nationalisation,<sup>62</sup> was by far the most prolific smuggler of Saudi, as well as non-Saudi, fighters into Syria. In August 2015, reports circulated that he was married to Rima al-Jurayyish, a notorious Saudi woman who played a central role in the *Fukko al-A'ni* ('Set the captive free') campaign before first joining AQAP in Yemen and then IS in Syria.<sup>63</sup> In any case, he was a senior IS Border Chief and a key leader in the IS Immigration and Logistics Committee, something that prompted the US Department of State to offer a reward of five million dollars for information leading to his capture.<sup>64</sup> Unconfirmed reports from September 2016 claim that al-Shamali was promoted to the position of IS Administrative and Financial Chief, as al-Baghdadi's Deputy in Syria.<sup>65</sup>

It is noteworthy that al-Shamali and another prolific smuggler, Abu Ilyas al-Maghribi both shifted their smuggling activities eastwards from Azaz and Latakia in 2013 to Jarabulus and al-Ra'i in 2014. This, as mentioned earlier, reflects in-theatre developments, likely coming as a result of IS's loss of its gateways on the north-western border areas by early 2014.

62 Huda al-Salih, 'Saudi Ministry of Interior: al-Jarba is Saudi by Nationalization and Wanted by its Security Agencies' (Ar.), *Al-Arabiya*, 20 Nov 2015, <http://bit.ly/2k5VdPn>.

63 For al-Jurayyish's full story see: 'The Story of Rima Al Jurayyish from "Fukko al-A'ni" Until her Joining Daesh', (Ar.), *Al-Arabiya*, 9 Feb 2016, <http://bit.ly/2ec3Xih>. For more analysis on the *Fukko al-A'ni* campaign and its potential role in the radicalisation of Saudi IS recruits from the city of Buraydah in al-Qassim province see: Al-Saud, *The ISIL Jihadists of Saudi Arabia*.

64 Abu Mohammad al-Shamali's page on the Rewards for Justice website is available at: [https://www.rewardsforjustice.net/english/abu\\_al\\_shimali.html](https://www.rewardsforjustice.net/english/abu_al_shimali.html).

65 'A New Restructure for Daesh' (Ar.), *al-Qabas*, 19 Sep 2016, <http://alqabas.com/259289/>.



## Conclusion

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The sheer volume of novice jihadists joining IS in the recent period is intriguing because it shows that the radicalisation process of the vast majority of those FTF has been the result of current and new events and circumstances, rather than old experiences. In addition, this demonstrates that, despite nearly two decades of the ‘War on Terror’ and countless diverse initiatives and programmes by most countries to combat the extremist virulent ideology, radicals and terrorists were still able to get their messages across, even perhaps more effectively by electronic means, and appeal to some Muslim youngsters from a broad variety of countries and backgrounds.

The appeal of radicalisation was not limited to Saudis by any means, as thousands of FTF flocked into Syria from around the world to join IS as well as other terrorist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra (JN), which later evolved into Jabhat Fath al-Sham (JFS) and now Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). This clearly indicates how wars, violence, instability, and insecurity in one region can create an environment in which radical ideas, thoughts, and beliefs fester and grow – and start to attract new followers. Furthermore, the role of the Internet, in particular social media, in making foreign opportunities for *jihad* more strongly vivid to young people cannot be overstated. It has enabled interaction, communication, and mobilisation in a way that was not previously possible.

FTF in Syria constitute the third generation of modern jihadists, yet are distinguished as more extreme and coming from a more diversified pool than their predecessors. Moreover, in comparison to earlier episodes of jihadist mobilisations, this cohort has been larger in numbers over a shorter time. Indeed, the total number of FTF in Syria/Iraq had, as early as 2014, already exceeded the number of those who mobilised in the Afghani *jihad* of the 1980s.<sup>66</sup> Such a large number of Saudi FTF in the Syrian conflict, representing a distinctly new generation of Saudi jihadists, could pose grave security concerns for the future, especially when we recollect that large-scale mobilisations in the past have led to dire consequences.<sup>67</sup>

We know of a few Saudis, listed in the IS entry documents, who have already returned home to Saudi Arabia. Some are disillusioned by their experiences, such as the PhD-holder Mani’ al-Mani’. Others returned with the intent to carry out major attacks inside the Kingdom, such as Ahmad Mohammad Asiri and Sultan bin Bakheit al-Otaibi, whose capture along with fifteen others – constituting a terrorist network made up of three cluster cells linked to IS – was announced by the Saudi Ministry of Interior on 19 September 2016.<sup>68</sup> Moreover, it was already reported, as early as March 2014, that some

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66 Peter Neumann, *Foreign Fighter Total in Syria/Iraq Exceeds 20,000; Surpasses Afghanistan Conflict in the 1980s* (London: International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR), 2015).

67 Zelin, ‘The Saudi Foreign Fighter Presence in Syria’, p. 13. See also: Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower* (New York, NY: Knopf, 2006); Hegghammer, *The Failure of Jihad in Saudi Arabia* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2010); Gregory D. Johnson, *The Last Refuge: Yemen, al-Qaeda, and America’s War in Arabia* (New York, NY: Norton, 2013).

68 ‘Saudi ... Dismantling a Daesh Network of 3 Terrorist Cells’, (Ar.), *Al Arabiya*, 19 Sep 2016, <http://bit.ly/2hvh9ms>.

Saudis had travelled on from Syria/Iraq to join al-Qaeda in Yemen.<sup>69</sup> Therefore, although it sadly remains unclear how severely they will manifest themselves, it already seems likely that the negative security consequences of this large mobilisation into the Syrian conflict will outlive the duration of the conflict itself.

An important point that needs to be mentioned here is related to the role of religious ideology in the radicalisation process. As the self-reported IS registration documents confirm, radicals are rarely very religious individuals, much less experts in religion, prior to joining terrorist groups, indicating that their turn towards religion came at a later stage in their radicalisation process. It seems that most extremists arrive at a certain radical belief or conclusion and, only subsequently, start searching for evidence in religion to support it. The religious rules and principles chosen to anchor the initial radical ideas transform the latter from the shakable realm of emotions and sentiments to the firm and definite realm of creed, giving them a higher purpose. The use of religious language does not mean that religion is always and in all cases the prime mover or driver behind the process of radicalisation. It only means that religion is the best medium through which radical ideas and thoughts can travel, gain momentum, and attract followers.

As the report has shown, our IS Saudi FTF were not, in the main, educational underachievers. They also did not come from a particularly disadvantaged segment of society. In fact, the main province they disproportionately hail from, namely al-Qassim, is the province with the lowest number of families living in absolute poverty in the whole Kingdom. Therefore, a wide approach that moves beyond mere socioeconomic factors or pure religious ideology is key to understanding a complex process such as that of radicalisation. In such an intricate and multifaceted process, what might be true or influential for an individual, or even across one region or country, might prove inaccurate or lack any explanatory ability for another. This is why country-specific studies on the origins and manifestations of radicalism and terrorism are vital if we are to correctly fathom the phenomenon and attempt to effectively counter it.

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<sup>69</sup> Rania El Gamal, 'Saudis Hardened by Wars in Syria, Iraq Join al Qaeda in Yemen,' *Reuters*, 14 March 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-qaeda-idUSBREA2D0XO20140314>.





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