

## CRS Insights

# American Foreign Fighters and the Islamic State: Broad Challenges for Federal Law Enforcement

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The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has assessed that the terrorist group known as the [Islamic State](#) (IS, previously referred to as ISIS or ISIL) currently poses [no specific or credible threat to the homeland](#). The Director of the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), Matthew G. Olsen, has [also noted](#) that, "any threat to the U.S. homeland from these types of extremists is likely to be limited in scope and scale," perhaps involving *individuals* acting without specific IS direction. In this vein, [policy makers continue](#) to voice concerns about American IS fighters who may leave Syria or Iraq, return to the United States, and strike targets on their own at home. This CRS Insight offers a framework for considering the challenges to domestic security posed by American IS fighters and outlines some of the ways that U.S. law enforcement responds to such challenges.

### Foreign Fighters

are American citizens, legal permanent residents, or aliens who radicalized in the United States and plotted to or traveled abroad to join a foreign terrorist group.

## The Challenges

There is scant publicly available information on Americans fighting for the Islamic State. However, the Islamic State and its American acolytes may conceivably present at least three broad challenges for domestic law enforcement. These challenges involve handling:

- **The Departed.** A few Americans, often described as foreign fighters, have left the United States to fight for the Islamic State. About [100 people from the United States](#) have joined factions—not just the Islamic State—fighting in the Syrian civil war.
- **The Returned.** These are American foreign fighters with terrorist training and/or battlefield experience who may come back to the United States, where they can potentially plan and execute attacks at home. There have been no public reports of Americans (or others) who fought with the Islamic State coming back to the United States and conspiring to commit acts of terrorism. This challenge for U.S. law enforcement also potentially includes fighters *who radicalized in and originated from other countries*—particularly Western nations—and may enter the United States when done fighting abroad.

- **The Inspired.** The fighting in Syria and Iraq has spawned propaganda that may [stir some Americans to plot attacks at home](#) without ever leaving to fight abroad. Promoting the cause—propaganda—is central to terrorism. IS members appear [adept at harnessing social media](#) to spread their message, among other means. There have been reports that [the Islamic State has an American](#) helping to organize its social media output. The group has been described as "[extremely tech- and media savvy](#)," dispersing [varied propaganda materials](#); and while much of this work has been geared at drawing recruits into the fight in Syria and Iraq, it may also inspire people in the United States to [radicalize and strike at home](#) without venturing abroad.

## Responding to the Challenges

It seems that the domestic threat potentially presented by IS—the departed, the returned, and the inspired—largely requires *identifying* individuals who pose a danger and *preempting* their attempts to harm the homeland. A number of important federal identification and preemption efforts in the counterterrorism arena are described below.

### Identifying Potential Terrorists

The federal government's [terrorist watchlisting process](#) plays a key role in tracking people suspected of having ties to IS. When federal law enforcement or intelligence agencies identify someone known or reasonably suspected of terrorism, they are required to share that information to create a federal consolidated watchlist of known or suspected terrorists. [The watchlist supports](#) "the ability of front line screening agencies to positively identify known or suspected terrorists trying to obtain visas, enter the country, board aircraft.... "

### Preempting Potential Terrorists

Preemption of possible IS terrorist activity by U.S. law enforcement can be broadly described in terms of:

- **Interdiction.** This involves—among other things—stopping a suspected terrorist from entering the United States. For example, within DHS, components such as Customs and Border Protection draw on information from the federal government's consolidated terrorist watchlist in intelligence-driven, layered screening geared toward [mitigating the risk posed by travelers destined](#) for the United States. DHS Secretary Jeh Johnson has broadly alluded to U.S. coordination with allies on foreign fighters. In an August 29, 2014 [press release](#), he noted:

This government, in close collaboration with our international partners, has ... taken a series of steps to track foreign fighters who travel in and out of Syria, and we are contemplating additional security measures concerning foreign fighters. Some of the security measures will be visible to the public and some understandably will be unseen.

Johnson has also mentioned [enhanced screening](#) at select overseas airports.

- **Investigation** largely focuses on [Joint Terrorism Task Forces](#) (JTTFs) led by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). They play the chief role in coordinating federal counterterrorism cases across the United States, bringing together federal, state, and local participants in the process. JTTFs have been involved in stopping individuals trying

to leave the United States to fight with the Islamic State. NCTC Director Olsen [has noted](#) that the FBI has arrested "more than a half a dozen" such individuals.

- **Countering Violent Extremism.** Thwarting terrorist plotters also involves the intricacies of radicalization—especially determining when individuals move from radical activity involving First Amendment-protected behavior to violent extremism. Much of the federal work in this area includes outreach to local communities. Regarding the Islamic State, the FBI, DHS, and NCTC [are striving to understand](#) the motivations driving people to radicalize and join terrorist groups in Syria. Also, DHS and NCTC [provide information](#) to U.S. community groups about the recruitment efforts of violent extremist groups based in Syria and Iraq. Finally, largely in response to the Islamic State, DOJ announced a [pilot program](#) "in cities across the country to bring together community representatives, public safety officials and religious leaders to counter violent extremism." DOJ (and presumably the FBI) will partner with the White House, DHS, and NCTC in the program.