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## American Civilians And Veterans Are Fighting ISIS In Syria And Iraq

Many fighters have joined anti-Islamic State militias out of a sense of moral duty.

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World Reporter, The Huffington Post

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CREDIT: MURSEL COBAN/ASSOCIATED PRESS

A Syrian Kurdish militia member of YPG patrols in Aleppo province, Syria, Sunday, Feb. 22, 2015.

*Every week, we bring you one overlooked aspect of the stories that made news in recent days. You noticed the media forgot all about another story's basic facts? Tweet @TheWorldPost or let us know on our Facebook page.*

Tens of thousands of foreign fighters have **streamed** into Syria and Iraq in recent years to add even more numbers to the prolonged and brutal conflict. Many of these people are thought to have joined up with Islamic State militants or other extremist groups, such as the al Qaeda-linked Jabhat al-Nusra. But some of them have gone to the Middle East to fight *against* those

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groups.

Last month, the U.K.-based citizen investigative journalist organization Bellingcat released a [report](#) examining this phenomenon, focusing on Americans who have gone abroad to combat the Islamic State. Using open-source information, including news reports, social media profiles and photographic and video evidence, the study offers insight into who is making this journey and why.

The report finds that an estimated 108 Americans from 31 states have joined militant groups that include the YPG, a Syrian Kurdish militia, and Iraqi peshmerga forces, as well as various Christian militias in Iraq and Syria. Texas, Ohio and Colorado are the most represented states relative to their populations.



CREDIT: MICHAEL DWYER/ASSOCIATED PRESS

People from the New England Kurdish Association hold pictures of Keith Broomfield in Hudson, Massachusetts, on Wednesday, June 17, 2015.

About two-thirds of the American fighters have some background in the U.S. armed forces. Others, however, are ordinary civilians, and found groups like the YPG that are willing to accept inexperienced volunteers. Of the 108 fighters included in the report, only one is a woman.

The report attempts to explain what motivates Americans to go fight in Syria and Iraq. It finds that there is no single common reason, although some patterns emerged. Some of the fighters went out of a sense of moral outrage or dismay, the report states, with a few saying they felt compelled to help after seeing video footage of fleeing Yazidi women and children trapped on Iraq's Mount Sinjar after an Islamic State advance.

The Bellingcat investigators also found that some fighters join anti-Islamic State efforts because of their religious beliefs, or because they're looking for adventure.

Some military veterans who go into these conflict zones have already returned from war to the U.S. once and found it difficult to readjust to civilian life.

"I may not be enlisted anymore, but I'm still a warrior," former sergeant turned anti-IS militia member Patrick Maxwell [told The New York Times](#) in March after returning to Iraq to fight.

While the Bellingcat report focuses on fighters from the U.S., this isn't just an American issue. Anti-Islamic State fighters from Canada and from countries across Europe have also joined militias, posing unique legal problems for the home countries that have laws against joining certain foreign armed groups.



CREDIT: LIOR MIZRAHI/GETTY IMAGES

Gill Rosenberg is seen during a press conference at the Israeli Knesset on July 14, 2015, in Jerusalem.

Canada's government, which has proposed travel bans to certain areas in Syria and Iraq to stop people joining extremist groups, has said there [will be an exemption](#) for citizens fighting against Islamic State. Likewise, the Netherlands' public prosecutor has said that members of biker gangs who join Kurdish militias [will not face any charges](#) if they return, unlike those who have joined designated terrorist groups. It's not clear what legal consequences, if any, might await U.S. citizens who go overseas to fight the Islamic State and then return home.

Americans and Europeans who join anti-Islamic State groups [are particularly high-profile targets](#) for kidnapping or killing for propaganda purposes. This was highlighted last year amid reports, which turned out to be false, that Islamic State militants had [kidnapped a Canadian-Israeli woman, Gill Rosenberg](#), while she was fighting with the YPG.

So far, just one American combating the Islamic State group has been confirmed killed. Thirty-six-year-old [Keith Broomfield from Massachusetts](#) died in June during a battle in the Syrian border town of Kobani. Broomfield reportedly believed that a divine message had told him to go to fight alongside the Kurds against the Islamic State.

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