

Scholars seek to stop ISIS by knowing where fighters come from

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*(The Christian Science Monitor)* Al-Qaeda has fallen to second place for popularity in the United States, as the self-described Islamic State militant group has skillfully employed social media to appeal to a diverse group of sympathizers across all 50 states, according to a new report published Tuesday by the George Washington University's Program on Extremism.

The reach of IS into the United States is as misunderstood as it is feared. But in the report, authors Lorenzo Vidino and Seamus Hughes compile what is known about all 71 suspects who have already been identified with hope of informing efforts to combat the terrorist group's reach in America.

One major challenge to this effort is how diverse in background the confirmed radicals are. Mostly male, they range in age from 15 to 47 and are usually U.S. citizens. Converts to Islam are overrepresented among those radicalized.

"Defying any cookie-cutter profile of the American ISIS supporter, these 71 individuals constitute an incredibly heterogeneous group," according to the report. "In fact, they come from an array of ethnic groups and a range of socio-economic and educational statuses."

Only 27 percent of these Americans were involved in plots for domestic terror attacks, and over half tried or succeeded in traveling abroad, according to a statement. This year has seen 56 people arrested for terrorism, the most arrested in a single year since 2001.

In an effort to understand the American radicals and better identify them going forward, the authors also analyzed the broader strategies employed for IS mobilization in America.

"In a democracy like ours, the expression of radical views is protected by the Constitution," wrote former California representative Jane Harman in the report.

“Violent action—inspired by those beliefs—is not. Our challenge is to identify the triggers for violence and intervene at just the right moment to prevent it.”

The authors suggested law enforcement begin using the stories of disillusioned former radicals against IS and prevent radicalization by partnering with those whose strategies could include more than arrests. It could mean moving from a strictly law enforcement-based model to something more academic or social, something that mirrors Islamic State strategy but with the opposite goal.

Yasir Qadhi, a leading Islamic scholar in the U.S. and professor at Rhodes College, wants the U.S. government to let him engage in counter-terrorism with at-risk Americans, using Islam to stop radicals before they engage in terrorism.

“The way things are heading, people are simply not open to the idea of creating some type of free space where people like myself would be allowed to engage with those who are flirting or sympathizing with radical Islam,” Qadhi said.