Dying to Fight: The Individual and Social Processes of the Foreign Fighter Phenomenon

Michael James Schumacher

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AFL</td>
<td>American Federation of Labor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALBA</td>
<td>Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AQI</td>
<td>al-Qaeda in Iraq</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BCE</td>
<td>Before Common Era</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCC</td>
<td>Civilian Conservation Corps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CE</td>
<td>Common Era</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COW</td>
<td>Correlates of War</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPUSA</td>
<td>Communist Party, USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FALB</td>
<td>Friends of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FBI</td>
<td>Federal Bureau of Investigation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FF</td>
<td>Foreign Fighter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDP</td>
<td>Gross Domestic Product</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GNI</td>
<td>Gross National Income</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GR</td>
<td>General Report on 1,745 People from the United States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HDI</td>
<td>Human Development Index</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IB</td>
<td>International Brigades</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IBT</td>
<td>International Brotherhood of Teamsters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICSR</td>
<td>International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ILA</td>
<td>International Longshoreman’s Association</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
YCL Youth Communist League
ABSTRACT

Why do individuals take the extraordinary risk of traveling abroad to fight, and potentially die, in another country’s conflict? This dissertation compares the motivations behind the U.S. citizens who fought on behalf of the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War (1936 – 1939) and the Tunisian citizens who fought on behalf of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in the Syrian Civil War (2011 – present). The study relies on personal narratives of individual foreign fighters collected through twelve weeks of archival research at the Tamiment Library in New York City and the Ernest Hemingway Archives in Boston dedicated to U.S. foreign fighters and fifteen weeks of field research in Tunisia conducting interviews and examining interview and focus group data on Tunisian foreign fighters to understand the competing motivations driving individual decisions to travel and fight for a foreign cause.

This dissertation’s findings suggest that a robust understanding of the foreign fighter phenomenon must, by necessity, draw on multiple theories and scholarly literatures. Three factors, social networks, collective identity, and sacred values, are significant across both cases, suggesting that they are necessary factors driving the foreign fighter phenomenon. A fourth factor, structural grievances, was significant in explaining the case of Tunisian foreign fighters to ISIS but not U.S. foreign fighters to the International Brigades, suggesting that the finding is not robust, but is nevertheless one that is ripe for future research. Personal grievances and economic incentives were not significant factors in either case. These results potentially establish foreign
fighting as an act that is distinct among different types of collective action, with implications for both academics and policymakers.
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

In September 1937, Carl Orton, a 30-year-old bank teller born in St. Paul, Minnesota, left behind his family and traveled to Spain to volunteer for the International Brigades fighting on behalf of the Spanish Republic in the Spanish Civil War (1936 – 1939). Orton would be reported “missing in action” (MIA) on March 10, 1938 near Gandesa, Spain during the retreat of the XV International Brigade after a failed offensive. Seventy-eight years later, in December 2015, a 27-year-old bank teller from Alexandria, Virginia, named Mohamed Khweis, also left behind his family, and traveled to Syria to fight for the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in the Syrian Civil War (2011 – present). He was captured by Kurdish forces in the town of Sinjar in neighboring Iraq and turned over to U.S. authorities who extradited him to the U.S. to be prosecuted by the Justice Department for giving aid to a terrorist organization. Both of these seemingly ordinary bankers, despite hailing from different centuries (1930s and 2010s) and taking part in civil wars in two different regions (Europe and the Middle East), made the extraordinary decision to become “foreign fighters” in another country’s conflict. In so doing, they also demonstrated the puzzle that is central to this dissertation: “Why do individuals take the extraordinary risk of traveling abroad to fight, and potentially die, in another country’s conflict?
This dissertation explores the foreign fighter phenomenon in comparative perspective. It does so by relying on the personal narratives (i.e., personal experiences as told in the first person) of the foreign fighters themselves from two different mobilization contexts: the U.S. citizens who fought for the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War and the Tunisian citizens who fought for ISIS in the Syrian Civil War. The primary goal of this comparison is to explore the motivational factors driving these two foreign fighter groups across time and cultural context. The study will therefore contribute to the nascent literature on foreign fighting as well as the more developed literature on contentious collective action. It also has practical implications for policymakers interested in better understanding and especially preventing this type of extreme behavior.

This introductory chapter is divided into four sections. The first introduces the concept of a foreign fighter and details the historical evolution of the foreign fighter phenomenon. Section two explains the case selection process and introduces the methodology for exploring the cases in comparative perspective. The third section introduces existing theories for understanding and explaining the foreign fighter phenomenon. A fourth and final section discusses the contributions to be made by this dissertation and provides an overview of subsequent chapters.

The Historical Evolution of the Foreign Fighter Phenomenon

Acclaimed U.S. foreign correspondent and novelist Ernest Hemingway gained international fame for his participation in and coverage of the Spanish Civil War. Hemingway went to Spain on four separate occasions to cover the war as a journalist. His novel, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940), made famous the story of the foreign fighters who fought against the
fascist regime of Francisco Franco, most notably the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, made up of approximately 3,000 U.S. citizens. Hemingway put to paper what he saw as an unwavering solidarity between many U.S. citizens and those fighting for democracy in Spain. The book became a model of military fiction with its emphasis on the themes of camaraderie and self-sacrifice, which were based on Hemingway’s close observations of the men and women who served as members of the International Brigades (Hochschild 2016). As Hemingway detailed it, Spain had become the theatre of a “good versus evil” struggle where love of place and love of life were meant to triumph over threats from a political ideology that threatened the democratic way. As Hemingway had his protagonist, Robert Jordan proclaim, as he is left behind to die at the end of the novel: “I have fought for what I believed in…If we win here we will win everywhere. The world is a fine place and worth the fighting for and I hate very much to leave it” (Hemingway 1940, 485).

The fictional stories and true accounts of foreign fighters in the Spanish Civil War are very similar to the accounts of men and women who fought for ISIS in the Syrian Civil War. One Tunisian office worker, for example, who was interviewed by The New York Times, applauded ISIS as the divine vehicle that would finally undo the arbitrary borders and divisions that were created by Britain and France at the end of World War I. “The division of the countries is European,” said Bilal (a pseudonym), 27. “We want to make the region a proper Islamic state, and Syria is where it will start.” Another man who was interviewed, 28-year-old Mourad (pseudonym), who holds a master’s degree in technology, called ISIS the only hope for “social justice,” as “it is the only way to give the people back their true rights, by giving the natural
resources back to the people.” He continued, “It is an obligation for every Muslim.” These stories of obligation to fellow Muslims, as well as redeeming the independence and unity of a region that has long been plagued by a legacy of European colonialism echo the very “good versus evil” struggles that Hemingway detailed nearly eighty years ago.

For the purposes of this dissertation, a “foreign fighter” is defined as a noncitizen of a conflict state who travels voluntarily to that country to join an insurgency during a civil conflict (Malet 2013; 2015). An “insurgency” is an active revolt led by rebels, or individuals who do not hold the status of lawful combatants under international law and who are seeking to wrest political and territorial control from a state (North 2008). A “civil conflict,” which is often used interchangeably with “civil war” or “intrastate war,” is an armed conflict between organized groups who both belong to the same sovereign state (Sambanis 2004).

Many civil conflicts throughout history have “gone transnational,” where rebels find recruits and resources from outlets outside of the country (Gleditsch 2007). Although such “transnational insurgencies” have existed for centuries, the fact that they have not been perceived as a singular type of phenomenon by scholars is evident by the lack of any existing term used to describe the concept. It is only recently that there has been recognition of the particular type of actor who participates in this type of civil conflict despite the fact that transnational insurgents have long attempted to legitimize their activities (Malet 2009). Therefore, according to Malet (2013, 215), the term foreign fighter can be used interchangeably with the term “transnational insurgent.” But it is the term foreign fighter that has gained increased scholarly importance in the post-9/11 era, entrenching the concept in both the academic and public consciousness.
Foreign fighters must be distinguished from mercenaries, or professional soldiers hired to serve in foreign armies. They must also be distinguished from private security companies (a term often used interchangeably with private military contractors), which are private companies that hire personnel from diverse countries and are paid to conduct military and security operations on behalf of a state (Avant 1994). The reason that mercenaries and private security companies are not considered foreign fighters is that members of these types of organizations are, for the most part, always contracted and paid by state governments and are not rebel volunteers (Malet 2013). And even though some contractors are hired by rebel organizations and nonstate actors, the actors are still generally operating with the sanction of the state (i.e., the contractors are not engaged in open rebellion against the state).

Given this conceptualization, it is difficult to distinguish a combatant as “foreign” prior to the establishment of the Westphalian international system of sovereign states. A foreign combatant cannot join another country’s civil conflict if the concept of an independent, sovereign country does not exist. Historically, foreign fighters were rare in that the sanctioning of foreign military units was much more common. One of the earliest recorded uses of a foreign auxiliary dates to Ancient Egypt. During the thirteenth century B.C.E., Pharaoh Ramesses II (also known as Ozymandias in Greek sources) used a standing foreign army during his battles to rescue the political kingdom of Ancient Egypt from the Nubians and Hittites, which were conquered during major upheavals that led to the birth of the Egyptian Empire (1600 B.C.E. – 1100 B.C.E.) (Faulkner 1953). By modern accounts, the foreign army of Ramesses II was a mercenary army in
that its soldiers were compensated by the state to perform military service on behalf of the Pharaoh.

The pattern of utilizing foreign resources to fill military roles remained common for centuries. From the tenth to the fourteenth centuries C.E., the Byzantine Empire recruited Norsemen from Scandinavia and Anglo-Saxons from England to defend the Byzantine Emperors and to occasionally help wage war against rival monarchs (Cook 2001; Dawkins 1947). And during the crusades by the Roman Catholic Church to reclaim the Holy Land (1095 – 1492), several military monastic orders rose to power during the medieval period by broadly recruiting Catholic warrior monks from around the world. The most famous Catholic military order, the Pauperes commilitones Christi Templique Salomonici, literally translated as “The Poor Fellow-Soldiers of Christ and of the Temple of Solomon,” or better known as The Knights Templar, consisted of a large, multinational contingent of “brothers” who came from parts of what is now Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa, to don the order’s red cross and fight to restore Catholic influence over Jerusalem (Howarth 1991).

By the end of the Thirty Years War in 1648 C.E., not only had the Westphalian state system emerged but its new attendant economies of scale could support large standing militaries, which proved to be far more effective for new states than an ad hoc collection of mercenaries (Huntington 1964, 20-21). By the time of the next major global conflict, the Napoleonic Wars (1803 – 1815), France and the coalition of European countries that fought against Napoleon were primarily fighting with conventional military forces and not mercenaries (Avant 2000). The
Napoleonic Wars were therefore significant in reducing transnational military forces, inaugurating a new age of powerful national militaries (Cohen 1984).

There are numerous additional historical examples of transnational military activity that can be mentioned, but the problem with detailing any of its history is that it is difficult to empirically analyze historic cases due to a lack of data. An initial attempt by Malet (2009) combined two well established conflict datasets; the Correlates of War (COW) Intrastate War (1816 – 1997) dataset and the Uppsala-PRIO Intrastate Conflict (1946 – 2005) dataset. As illustrated by the inclusive dates, 1816 is the earliest year for which systematic conflict data are available. Therefore, the observation set begins with the Greek War of Independence in 1821, the earliest recorded case of a civil conflict with foreign fighters. In the most up-to-date version of Malet’s dataset (Malet 2016), there exist 92 total instances of foreign fighting in civil conflicts, including the Syrian (2011-present), Libyan (2014-present), and Ukrainian (2014-present) civil wars.

Malet’s (2009; 2013) work remains one of the most comprehensive scholarly treatments of the foreign fighter phenomenon. His primary theoretical contribution was to demonstrate that foreign fighters typically join insurgencies “to defend some transnational identity community,” which is either ethnically or ideologically based, or both. He presents a typology (Table 1) that delineates between type of insurgency (ethnic or non-ethnic) and the relationship of foreign fighters to the local fighters (co-ethnic or non-co-ethnic). This results in four types of foreign fighter involvement: “diasporans” (co-ethnics fighting in an ethnic conflict), such as those who traveled to fight in the Israeli War of Independence (1947 – 1949); “encroachers” (co-ethnics
facing in a non-ethnic conflict), such as those who traveled to fight in the Texas Revolution (1835 – 1836); “liberationists” (non-co-ethnics fighting in an ethnic conflict), such as those who traveled to fight in the Afghanistan War (1979 – 1992); and “true believers” (non-co-ethnics fighting in a non-ethnic conflict), such as those who traveled to fight in the Spanish Civil War and those who fought for ISIS in the Syrian Civil War.

Table 1. Typology of Foreign Fighters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic Conflict</th>
<th>Non-ethnic Conflict</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Type 1</strong> Diasporans</td>
<td><strong>Type 3</strong> Encroachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Join with nationalist rebels to preserve shared nationalist goals</td>
<td>Join with secessionist rebels in adjacent state to expand political control to neighboring territory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Type 2</strong> Liberationists</td>
<td><strong>Type 4</strong> True Believers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defend anti-colonial rebels to preserve perceived shared ideological goals</td>
<td>Join ideological rebels to preserve institutions of shared identity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Malet, 2013

Malet created this typology of foreign fighters and then used it to pick four comparative case studies, one from each foreign fighter type, to analyze how recruiters from civil conflicts appealed to foreigners. He found that in each of the different conflict types, recruiters framed their recruitment messaging to appeal to the transnational identity affiliated with each foreign fighter type. For example, in the Israeli War of Independence, Israeli recruiters framed the fight for Israeli independence as one that affected all the Jewish diaspora, and Jews must therefore travel to fight to defend the nationalist objective of the Jewish cause (Type 1: diasporans). This was the case in each of his four case studies: local communities inside of what would soon be the Republic of Texas directed local recruitment efforts to networks of local individuals who wanted liberation from Mexico (Type 2: liberationists), Afghan recruiters framed the conflict as an
encroachment by Russia into Arab lands (Type 3: encroachers), and the Communist International (Comintern) helped target and recruit foreign fighters to the cause of the Spanish Republic in the Spanish Civil War (Type 4: true believers).

Malet’s findings are understandably parsimonious; recruiters strategically deploy recruitment propaganda based on the type of conflict being waged. However, Malet’s methods and data only focused on the demand-side of recruitment rather than the supply-side where individual decision-making actually occurs. That is, in trying to find the theoretical link between individual feeling and action, Malet does not explain how and why the individuals who received the recruitment propaganda actually responded to the recruitment stimuli. This gap in Malet’s work is symptomatic of the nascent literature on the foreign fighter phenomenon as access to the data required to make inferences about individual motivation is lacking.

To fill that gap in the literature, this dissertation relies on the personal narratives of foreign fighters to understand their motivations. Rather than examine a single case from each of the four quadrants of Malet’s typology, the study analyzes two cases of foreign fighting from a single quadrant as a means of conducting a more focused, in-depth comparison of individual motivations. Two cases with different mobilization contexts that ultimately had a similar type of foreign fighter mobilization are selected for comparison. The goal is therefore to see if, regardless of time or cultural context, individuals were motivated to become foreign fighters by similar factors.
Case Selection and Summary of Methodology

Of the ninety-two recorded cases of foreign fighting, forty-eight of the civil conflicts that involved foreign fighters involved Type 4 (true believer) foreign fighters, or roughly 52%. Six of the ninety-two (6.5%) involved Type 3 (encroacher) foreign fighters, nineteen of the ninety-two (21%) involved Type 2 (liberationist) foreign fighters, and nineteen of ninety-two (21%) involved Type 1 (diasporan) foreign fighters. Not only are the majority of foreign fighter mobilizations attributed to the true believer category, but conflicts that attract true believers also attract the greatest number of foreign fighters (Table 2). By just analyzing the fifteen civil conflicts that have attracted more than 1,000 total foreign fighters each, ten of the fifteen (66%) included true believers, one of the fifteen (7%) included encroachers, one of the fifteen (7%) included liberationists, and three of the fifteen (20%) included diasporans. Moreover, half of the top-10 conflicts that are coded as true believers have an Islamist dimension (Syrian Civil War, Iraq vs. the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (SCIRI), Iraq US coalition vs. Islamists, Iran vs. People’s Mujahedin of Iran, and Somali civil war). The new totals of foreign fighters likewise demonstrate that more individuals have historically mobilized in the name of Marx rather than Muhammed.
Table 2. Largest Foreign Fighter Mobilizations (1,000+)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conflict</th>
<th>Dates</th>
<th>FF Type</th>
<th>Number of Fighters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spanish Civil War</td>
<td>1936-1939</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>60,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russian civil war</td>
<td>1917-1921</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>50,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syrian Civil War</td>
<td>2011-present</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>40,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese civil war</td>
<td>1930-1949</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>40,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq vs. Kurds</td>
<td>1961-1996</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>35,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soviet-Afghan war</td>
<td>1978-1992</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>25,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Israel vs. Palestinians</td>
<td>1948-1948</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq vs. Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq</td>
<td>1982-2003</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq US coalition vs. Islamists</td>
<td>2003-2011</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rwanda vs. Tutsi</td>
<td>1990-1993</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iran vs. People’s Mujahedin of Iran</td>
<td>1981-1982</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Texas War of Independence</td>
<td>1835-1836</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somali civil war</td>
<td>1991-present</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portuguese Liberal Wars</td>
<td>1828-1834</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1,100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angolan civil war</td>
<td>1975-1991</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Malet (2016)

I draw two cases from the true believer quadrant that are ideal case studies for comparison. The Spanish Civil War had the largest recorded foreign fighter mobilization, and the Syrian Civil War had the third largest foreign fighter mobilization. Approximately 60,000 volunteers from fifty-two countries joined the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War, making it by far the most significant foreign fighter mobilization in terms of numbers in the twentieth century (Beevor 2006). The size, national diversity, and speed of recruitment in the Syrian Civil War came to rival that of the Spanish Civil War as the number of foreign volunteers for ISIS peaked at 40,000 in 2017, with volunteers coming from more than seventy different countries, making it the most significant foreign fighter mobilization in terms of numbers in the twenty-first century (Soufan Group 2015; 2017). As will be analyzed in more detail in later chapters, the two cases occurred in two different regional and temporal contexts, i.e., the Spanish
Civil War was a conflict associated with Western Europe in the 1930s while the Syrian Civil War is in the contemporary Middle East, or nearly 80 years apart. The Spanish Civil War would begin after an attempted fascist coup d'état against the elected, leftist government of the Spanish Republic (Beevor 2006). The Syrian Civil War came on the heels of new calls for political and economic change in the Middle East and North Africa in what became known as the Arab Spring. The protest movements against the regime in Syria were violently quelled by Syrian president Bashar al-Assad (Jones 2013).

The dissertation compares the motivations of the U.S. foreign fighters who fought for the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War and the Tunisian foreign fighters who fought for ISIS in the Syrian Civil War. The U.S. and Tunisia are both the third highest contributors of foreign fighters to their respective conflicts, have relatively similar foreign fighter totals, and the two cases have the greatest wealth of primary source data available (Table 3).

To collect the data necessary to compare the motivations of U.S. and Tunisian foreign fighters, the study utilized a mixed-methods approach. First, a dataset of demographic information was created on U.S. and Tunisian foreign fighters. Second, data was collected from the personal narratives of U.S. foreign fighters who fought for the International Brigades by undertaking the content analysis of archival documents, specifically the diaries, letters, speeches, public statements, and autobiographies written by the U.S. citizens who fought in the Spanish Civil War. This archival data was collected over the course of twelve weeks of field research at two different archives: the Tamiment Library at New York University (June 18, 2018 – July 27, 2018; October 29, 2018 – November 16, 2018) and the Ernest Hemingway Archives at the John
F. Kennedy Presidential Library (January 7, 2019 – January 25, 2019). Third, data was collected from personal narratives of Tunisian citizens who fought for ISIS. Data for the Tunisian case study was gathered through a content analysis of interview and focus group data collected by scholars at the Institut Tunisien des Études Stratégiques (Tunisian Institute for Strategic Studies) (ITES) who conducted interviews and focus group meetings with Tunisian foreign fighter returnees (individuals who joined ISIS who have returned from battle). Further information on Tunisian foreign fighters was gathered from original interviews with key actors in the Tunisian security sector who work with foreign fighter returnees and from friends and family members who knew fellow Tunisians who left to fight. Field research was conducted over the course of fifteen weeks, divided between three research stays in Tunisia: May 11, 2015 – May 29, 2015, January 28, 2019 – March 8, 2019, and July 26, 2019 – August 23, 2019.

Table 3. Number of Foreign Fighters by Country (Top 10)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Spanish Civil War</th>
<th>Syrian Civil War</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>8,778-9,000</td>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>3,034-5,411</td>
<td>Russia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States*</td>
<td>2,000-5,390</td>
<td>Tunisia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>2,908-5,108</td>
<td>Jordon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany**</td>
<td>3,026-5,000</td>
<td>Morocco</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>1,806-3,504</td>
<td>France</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>1,500-3,000</td>
<td>Turkey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balkan***</td>
<td>2,056-4,000</td>
<td>Uzbekistan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scandinavian****</td>
<td>1,177-2,500</td>
<td>Azerbaijan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>510-847</td>
<td>Lebanon</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Estimates of foreign fighters in the Spanish Civil War vary widely. Comprehensive accounts, such as the one above, are set out in a variety of sources while other treatments of individual mobilizations have their own accounting. Ranges for the above estimates for the Spanish Civil War are set out in Castells (1974); Beevor 2006); Delperrie de Bayac (1968); and Jackson (1994); Estimates of foreign fighters in the Syrian Civil War are set out in Barrett (2014); Neumann (2015); The Soufan Group (2015; 2018); Zelin (2014).  
*: Includes Puerto Ricans  
**: Some counts include Austrians while others do not. It is estimated that roughly 1,500 Austrians fought for the Brigades  
***: Nationalities included in this total include Albanians, Bulgarians, Greeks, and Yugoslavs  
****: Nationalities included in this total include Danes, Norwegians, and Swedes
Competing Theories in the Study of the Foreign Fighter Phenomenon

Trying to interpret the logic of participation in contentious political action such as mass movements, rebellions, and violent conflict is one of the most pervasive endeavors in the political conflict literature (Stern and Berger 2015). As will be detailed in Chapter Two, analyses of how groups can overcome the “collective action problem” have persisted since Mancur Olson famously documented the issue in his 1965 book *The Logic of Collective Action*. New explanations have followed Olson’s lead by arguing that participation in these types of conflicts is motivated by economic incentives (Collier and Hoeffler 2004; Kalyvas and Sambanis 2005; Lichbach 1994) and grievances (Fearon and Laitin 2003; Gurr 1993; Sambanis 2001). These classic theories of collection action suggest that economic incentives, personal victimization, and structural grievances are the dominant paradigms for understanding why contentious collective action, especially violent political action, occurs. However, these studies have not moved beyond such accounts to focus on value-driven explanations like duty and obligation and social explanations like solidarity, camaraderie, and social networks. Not only that, these theories cannot provide answers to the puzzle posed by the prevalence of foreign fighting, where the risk of participating is higher and reward much lower, if known at all, and where the political context of where they fought is equally as important as the political context in which they fled to fight (Malet 2013; see also Tilly 1978).

This dissertation tests both classic theories of collective action, social movements, and organizational behavior and new individual and social theories to understand and explain the foreign fighter phenomenon. Six different theories are tested: (1) economic incentives: the theory
that jobs, monetary rewards, and access to resources play a key role in motivating individuals to participate in collective action; (2) personal victimization: the theory that individuals engage in collective action as a response to a perceived, personal injustice; (3) structural grievances: the theory that individuals engage in collective action as a response to perceived injustices at the country-level; (4) sacred values: the theory that an individual’s commitment to higher moral or ideological values ultimately lead them to make extreme sacrifices; (5) collective identity: the theory that individuals are motivated when they hold a shared orientation with others and act on that basis; and (6) social networks: the theory that the structures and interconnectedness of a group or network determines the rate and extent to which values and beliefs inspire individual action.

This dissertation finds that the dominant explanations of the collective action and civil conflict literatures, namely, economic incentives, personal victimization, and structural grievances, do not provide an adequate theoretical explanation for the act of foreign fighting. It instead finds that three factors, social networks, collective identity, and sacred values, are significant across both cases, suggesting that they are necessary factors driving the foreign fighter phenomenon. A fourth factor, structural grievances, was significant in explaining the case of Tunisian foreign fighters to ISIS but not U.S. foreign fighters to the International Brigades, suggesting that the finding is not robust, but is nevertheless one that is ripe for future research. Personal grievances and economic incentives were not significant factors in either case. These results potentially establish foreign fighting as an act that is distinct among different types of collective action. Ultimately, one of the key contributions of this dissertation is that it takes a
holistic approach to understanding the foreign fighter phenomenon and understands the act of foreign fighting as a dynamic process with individual and social logics.

**Contributions, Implications, and Overview of Subsequent Chapters**

This dissertation contributes to a growing literature on the foreign fighter phenomenon by testing existing theories that seek to explain individual participation in collective action such as foreign fighting. Each empirical step in this dissertation contributes to the broader literature related to collective action, political violence, and international conflict and security. For example, the archival research on U.S. foreign fighters in the International Brigades of the Spanish Civil War contributes to an already sizeable literature on that conflict by collating, for the first time, details about every U.S. fighter from that conflict into a demographic dataset that will be useful for qualitative and quantitative analysis. In addition, the content analysis of the interview and focus group data on Tunisian foreign fighters who have returned from Iraq and Syria represents some of the first reported personal accounts of individual experiences in ISIS, which has both academic and political implications. Not only will the collection of biographical data on these foreign fighters provide the potential for novel comparative analyses, but the personal narratives drawn from both archival data and the interview and focus group data will provide a deeper, firsthand account of exactly what mechanisms drove each individual to travel and fight.

The study will also have broad national security implications by providing a better understanding of the precise mechanisms that drive individuals to travel and fight for a foreign cause. For example, the conclusions could shape policy away from strictly focusing on political
and economic incentives as a means of preventing the onset of extreme behavior and toward more viable counter-radicalization strategies that also consider cultural context and are more sensitive to issues of identity, beliefs, and values. As will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Six, the dissertation is timely in that the recent dilemma posed by thousands of foreign fighter returnees from Iraq and Syria are invoking a global policy debate regarding how to treat these individuals who potentially threaten the peace and security of disparate countries across the globe. Understanding their motivations for leaving can help inform policies for confronting their inevitable return and can provide avenues for future reintegration policies. Finally, this dissertation’s theory and methodology could be expanded and applied to other cultural contexts to help explain participation in a wide variety of conflicts both foreign and domestic and helps get at the answer to that all-important puzzle of individual involvement in contentious collective action.

The remainder of this dissertation proceeds in five chapters. **Chapter Two** introduces the diverse bodies of literature relating to collective action, social movements, and organizational behavior and details the strengths and weaknesses of these literatures considering the foreign fighter phenomenon. **Chapter Three** details the research design including the hypotheses, operationalization of variables, methodology, and data sources. **Chapter Four** explores the case of U.S. foreign fighters who fought for the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War. **Chapter Five** focuses on the case of Tunisian foreign fighters who fought for ISIS in the Syrian Civil War. Finally, **Chapter Six** concludes by revisiting the primary findings of this study, detailing the potential policy implications, and discussing the potential for future research.
CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

History is full of famous foreign fighters. George Gordon Byron, colloquially known as Lord Byron, was famous for his efforts to recruit volunteers and swell support in his native Great Britain for the cause of the Greeks in the Greek War of Independence (1821 – 1829) against the Ottoman Empire. Lord Byron eventually gave his life fighting for the foreign cause of Greek independence and is immortalized with his own statue near the Acropolis in Athens, Greece.

Famed U.S. frontiersman Davy Crockett, known by the famous childhood song as the “King of the Wild Frontier,” was also a foreign fighter who fought in the Texas Revolution (1835 – 1836) against Mexico. He gave his life at the Battle of the Alamo, fighting for the independence of the people of Texas, which would result in the formation of the Republic of Texas and the immortalization of Crockett in U.S. folklore.

Both Lord Byron and Davy Crockett are today hailed as folk heroes, noted for their romantic sacrifices for a great cause. Though theoretical explanations for collective action and war volunteerism abound, very rarely do these explanations contend with the ideas of heroism and self-sacrifice. Explanations instead often lean toward explaining the need for material incentives, money, and other resource provisions to motivate individuals to overcome collective action problems and join a collective pursuit. In the civil conflict literature, for example, many of the most widely accepted explanations for recruitment and mobilization in civil conflicts rely on
appeals for material gain rather than on self-sacrifice or commitment to the cause. Because of this theoretical shortcoming, few of these studies provide explanations to the puzzle posed by the prevalence of foreign fighting, where the risk of participating is higher and potential for reward much lower (Malet 2013).

As highlighted in Chapter One, the foreign fighter phenomenon is still a nascent topic in the academic literature. Little has been written about it that is theoretically based. Therefore, to understand plausible explanations for foreign fighting, this chapter explores the extant literature on collective action as it relates to the act of foreign fighting. The literature provides the basis for understanding why individuals seek out groups to further a common goal, how groups form strategies to achieve that goal, and how groups of individuals react to the social, political, cultural, and economic milieu in which they find themselves on the route to achieving their common goal. Foreign fighting is a collective act precisely because it brings together a group of people who have a common interest and fight for a common goal. Therefore, the literature on collective action provides the background by which any theoretical framework on foreign fighting must be based.

The remainder of this chapter is divided into two sections. The first section introduces collective action as a concept and explores six competing theories of collective action; (1) economic incentives; (2) personal victimization; (3) structural grievances; (4) sacred values; (5) collective identity; and (6) social networks. These six bodies of theory represent the most dominant explanations in the literature, each of which will be empirically tested to see if it explains the foreign fighter phenomenon. The final section concludes by underscoring the
importance of taking a holistic approach to understanding the foreign fighter phenomenon, emphasizing the idea that multiple explanations are required to understand the phenomenon completely. This final section also highlights the theoretical implications of this study and introduces the next chapter.

Theories of Collective Action

Every social movement, protest, rebellion, riot, strike, and revolution is a different type of collective action. Such diverse forms of collective action can therefore harbor diverse characteristics. One form of collective action might be brief while another sustained, one institutionalized while another disruptive to institutions, one routine while another histrionic. Most collective action is benign, occurring routinely within institutions, on the part of constituted groups acting in the name of goals that are hardly noteworthy. It is when collective action is used by groups who lack regular access to institutions, seek to challenge asymmetric power relations, and act in the name of new or previously unaccepted claims to authority that collective action becomes contentious (Tarrow 2011). How and why collective groups rise to challenge these relationships is one of the most discussed and analyzed topics in the behavioral social sciences, past and present. How collective groups recruit, strategize, build organizations, respond to opportunities, elaborate goals and ideologies, and socialize and mobilize constituents are all part of the empirical endeavor of understanding collective action (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2008).

“Contentious collective action” is not an abstract category that exists outside of politics. But contentious collective action is different from routine collective actions of representative politics and market relations because it brings ordinary people into confrontation with opponents,
elites, and authorities (Tarrow 2011). Contentious collective action is also not a category that is new, or something that exists separate from history. Collective groups have learned to exploit political opportunities, respond to threats, create collective identities, and bring people together to mobilize against more powerful opponents throughout recorded history (Tilly 1986).

The background of what would become collective action theory began with early psychological work on crowd behavior. This literature dates to the late-nineteenth century and has roots in early psychological studies of “crowds.” Gustav Le Bon’s (1895) seminal work is often cited as the most important study of crowds because it put forth a theory explaining how crowd behavior affected both individual and group psychology. For Le Bon (1895), a crowd was not a mere collection or gathering of individuals but was rather a distinctive psychological entity. According to his theory of crowds, individuals in a crowd lose their ability to think rationally and instead begin to behave in what Le Bon described as a “collective hypnosis.” In an oft-cited passage (Le Bon 1895, 19), he wrote that,

…by the mere fact that he forms part of an organized crowd, a man descends several rungs in the ladder of civilization. Isolated, he may be a cultivated individual; in a crowd, he is a barbarian — that is, a creature acting by instinct. He possesses the spontaneity, the violence, the ferocity, and also the enthusiasm and heroism of primitive beings, whom he further tends to resemble by the facility with which he allows himself to be impressed by words and images — which would be entirely without action on each of the isolated individuals composing the crowd — and to be induced to commit acts contrary to his most obvious interests and his best-known habits.

Despite the focus on crowd behavior in late-nineteenth century social theory, the semantics of “crowds” lost much of its initial fascination and distinctiveness during the twentieth century as scholars moved away from explaining the “psychology of crowds” to the “logics of collective action” (Borch 2006). According to these new theories, psychological studies had
overemphasized behavior within a crowd rather than emphasizing why crowds formed in the first place. As a result, scholars became more interested in explaining why collective action occurs, providing new information on why collective action is something that needs to be explained and challenging the assumption that collective action occurs spontaneously.

**Economic Incentives**

As introduced in the previous chapter, arguably the most significant divergence from crowd psychology was the challenge, made by Mancur Olson in his 1965 book *The Logic of Collective Action*, that individuals in groups behaved rationally. According to Olson, individuals respond to economic incentives, which must be offered to facilitate individual involvement in any type of collective action, especially action among large groups. Where crowd theorists like Le Bon had assumed individuals lost all sense of rationality in crowds, Olson argued just the opposite; individuals in groups are rationally driven to maximize group and by extension, individual benefits, while minimizing individual costs. The theoretical reasoning behind this proposition was that if a group was not able to offer economic incentives to individuals to participate then individuals will become more inclined to “free-ride,” enjoying the benefits of collective action while contributing nothing to achieve its benefits (Olson 1965, 2).

Olson’s theory was based on classic “rational choice theory.” The simplest version of rational choice theory for understanding collective action can be set out as follows:

\[ A_i = P_i \times B - C_i \]

where \( A \) is the level of activism of individual \( i \), \( P \) is the probability that individual \( i \)’s participation will bring about the collective good, \( B \) is the collective benefits or public goods
expected to result from collective action, and C is the costs to individual i of their involvement in collective action (Whiteley 1995). This is the simple, mathematical way of understanding what is known as the “utility function,” a function that ranks alternatives according to their utility (worth or value) to an individual. The utility function owes to classic theories of utilitarianism, such as those forwarded by moral philosophers, Jeremy Bentham (1789) and John Stuart Mill (1863).

Utilitarianism is a consequentialist theory that values outcomes; any action that maximizes individual well-being, pleasure, or happiness while minimizing pain and evil is the best option (Bentham 1789). The utility function, as adapted for understanding and explaining neoclassical economics, is a theory that tries to understand and predict individual preference ordering over a choice set. In the economic sense, the utility function is less concerned with explaining pleasure as it is concerned with ordering individual choice (Harsanyi 1969).

Olson’s contribution to collective action theory was not just to diagram collective action as a function of economic utility but to understand why individuals in large groups participate when they could, in reality, achieve the collective benefit or public good, B, while bringing individual cost, C, down to 0 (zero) by free-riding. This is where Olson’s idea of “individual incentives” comes into play. Because of the free-rider problem, even under a situation of “perfect consensus,” individuals will not mobilize for collective action (Olson 1965, 60). Incentives are motivational and Olson argued that they are necessary to mobilize individuals in latent groups. And while Olson acknowledged that social and moral incentives exist, he argued that only economic incentives can provide the motivational impetus for participation. This is because latent groups are unable to achieve the peer-to-peer contact that would make social incentives
feasible for motivation and because moral incentives are functions of individual psychology and he therefore argues they cannot be generalized to distinguish between those who participate and those who do not (Olson 1965, 61). The modified utility function equation that is based on the “Olsonian” theory of collective action would be modeled as follows:

\[ A_i = (P_i \ast B) - C_i + E_i \]

where \( A_i \) is the level of activism of individual \( i \), \( P \) is the probability that individual \( i \’s \) participation will bring about the collective good, \( B \) is the collective benefits or public goods expected to result from collective action, \( C \) is the costs to individual \( i \) of their involvement in collective action (which, based on the free-rider problem, could be brought to 0), and \( E \) is the economic incentive, or “private return,” provided to an individual to facilitate participation.

The singular importance of economic incentives as elucidated by Olson gave rise to extensive theoretical discussions and numerous new empirical examinations on the role of individuals in collective action (McCarthy and Zald 1977; Popkin 1979; Jenkins 1983; Marwell and Oliver 1993; Kuran 1995; Ostrom 1997; Collier and Hoeffler 2004; Kalyvas and Sambanis 2005). Two of his findings are particularly important for the study of collective action in conflict settings. First, individuals are instrumentally rational (i.e., they contribute to collective endeavors only when it furthers their economic self-interest). For Olson, who was approaching the study of collective action from an economic perspective, economic incentives were the best way to appeal to individuals. As a result, according to his theory, appeals to morals and emotion are insufficient. This is true at all levels of social aggregation; even the state needs to harness economic incentives to compel individuals to comply with collective decision-making because
without incentives, the state would have to rely simply on coercion, a point of delineation, for Olson, between democracy from dictatorship (Olson 1965, 60). Second, collective action naturally harbors a free-rider problem. This is especially true when large organizations are seeking to provide a public good to their members, as the loss of support on the part of any one member will not noticeably increase the burden on other members. As a result, the rational individual can safely assume that their choice to free-ride will not impact the organization’s prospects for the successful provision of the sought after public good. Hence all individuals have an incentive to free-ride.

Economic incentives are remunerative motivations. In terms of organized conflict, such remunerative motivations take the form of a direct, monetary payment to participate in conflict or other financial motivations such as the chance for entrepreneurship or employment. The armed forces in most countries offer such incentives to individuals to volunteer. For example, French citizens receive a salary, accommodations, food, clothing, and future support in France with mortgages, health care, and loans if they enlist in the French military. This is true of most of the advanced militaries of the world, especially those that exist in democracies. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, for example, was established to assist, for life, those who enlist in the U.S. armed forces. Again, this is common in most developed countries. One notable exception is Israel, which conscripts its entire adult population to compulsory military service for two years and eight months for men and two years for women. Israel has remained a notable exception since its founding in 1948 led to successive wars with its Arab neighbors, and with a
population in flux for many years, conscription ensured it was able to staff its military (Hanson and Lin-Greenberg 2019).

Offering economic incentives to foreigners to join a country’s armed forces is far less common but not unheard of. Returning to the example of France, the country offers the same incentives to foreign volunteers who wish to join the French Foreign Legion, which has a standing army of around 8,000, as it offers to its own citizens who joined the armed forces (Porch 2010). It is not surprising that these types of incentives have persuaded thousands of foreign individuals from 120 different countries to join the Legion since its inception in 1831 (Porch 2010). Only a small number of countries allow foreign volunteers to join the armed forces and usually recruitment is limited to close allies. For example, Australia allows New Zealanders to join their armed forces and Denmark allows Icelandic citizens to join. The U.S. allows green card holders to join the services (see Hanson and Lin-Greenberg 2019). In all these situations, foreign volunteers are guaranteed the same incentives as citizens for joining.

Mercenary groups have also adopted this type of incentive structure, paying volunteers a salary, or promising a share of whatever profit they stand to receive for their service (Burmester 1978). Conflict scholars have also identified salaries, family aid, and other economic incentives as driving recruitment in a vast array of conflict contexts (Moyar 2009). Economic reasons for participation in these settings makes sense; these scholars, mostly economists and game theorists borrowing from Olson, have posited that individuals who choose to become terrorists, participate in civil wars, and even strap on suicide vests are “rational actors,” deploying cost-benefit
calculations that propel themselves and their groups to some strategic, logical goal (Crenshaw 1985; Pape 2005).

The centrality of economic incentives to collective action has continued to expand over the years to include explanations for individual participation in a variety of collective activity; from social movements (Tarrow 1998; Traugott 2010) to rebellions (Mueller and Opp 1986; Weede and Muller 1998; Collier 2000), and revolutions (Skocpol 1979; Kuran 1995; Kurzman 1996). And even though economic incentives are not as readily available in these types of conflicts, where smaller groups, which are often the weaker side in a conflict, cannot make any firm promises for payment, profit, or goods, such theories still represent the dominant explanatory paradigm. Recently, in what now falls under the theoretical moniker “greed,” the approach of examining economic incentives as an explanation for collective behavior has been used to model individual participation in all manner of civil conflicts (Lichbach 1994; Collier and Hoeffler 2000; Kalyvas and Sambanis 2005; Regan and Norton 2005). Greed theory postulates that a strong resource incentive, such as oil, diamonds, timber, and other primary commodities, forms the basis over which rebels fight.

In the nascent literature on foreign fighting, the record on economic incentives is mixed. Early findings suggest remunerative incentives play a role in foreign fighter recruitment but whether such economic incentives are offered to all potential recruits or only to a select few is unclear. Recent evidence from the Philippines suggests that ISIS affiliates have utilized financial renumeration as a recruitment strategy. Since the Philippine military regained strategic control of the city of Marawi, on the Philippine island of Mindanao, in 2017, ISIS affiliate groups like The
Maute Group have begun undertaking financial remuneration strategies in a mass recruitment campaign to attract new foreign fighters (UNODC 2018). In a more isolated example from Tunisia that will be discussed in great detail in Chapter Five, a reporter found that a young Tunisian, who had quit school in 2011 at the age of fourteen to help financially support his family, had joined ISIS in Syria three years later, on the promise that the organization would “transfer $1,500 by Western Union to his family back in Tunisia” if he joined (Masi 2015; 2016). Whether or not the offer of economic incentives was a broadly organized strategy used on the part of ISIS to recruit new members or whether some offers were targeted toward individuals more likely to be motivated by such an incentive, these examples nonetheless demonstrate that economic incentives potentially play a role in an individual’s decision to become a foreign fighter.

Scholars have criticized the singular focus on economic incentives in rational choice models and have argued that other types of selective incentives can factor into the utility function (e.g., see Perry and Hasisi 2015; Wiktorowicz and Kaltenthaler 2016; Opp 2019). Critics of the restrictive version of rational choice theory favor models that incorporate all kinds of preferences and constraints on individuals. One recent alternative that is relevant for emerging theories of foreign fighting posits that “spiritual incentives” act as a strong motivator for collective action by helping groups overcome the free-rider problem. For example, spiritual incentives have been shown to be a strong motivator for Islamist radicals who engage in high cost/risk activism by increasing an individual’s perceived prospects of salvation (Wiktorowicz and Kaltenthaler 2016). But spiritual incentives are not just available and important for Islamist radicals, but for any
ideology that promises material rewards in the afterlife for a certain behavior. In an example from Wiktorowicz and Kaltenthaler (2016), even Mother Teresa’s seemingly altruistic behavior can be explained as rational self-interest guided by spiritual incentives. The authors write,

> While empathetic and self-sacrificial, Mother Teresa’s charity…was not altruistic, that is, motivated strictly by the desire to benefit the recipient without expectation of external reward. “Works of love,” she laid down, “are always a means of becoming closer to God” (Mother Teresa 1985, 25)...Closeness to God, not the alleviation of human pain itself, was the preferred religious product. Indeed in Mother Teresa’s assessment, poverty, suffering, and death were positive occasions of divine contact and imitation.

Otherworldly incentives, or the promise of spiritual rewards in the afterlife, can be strong motivators much like traditional economic incentives. The problem with spiritual incentives is that there is no secular equivalent. The promise of rewards after death can help individuals overcome collective action problems because these individuals evaluate, as a function of utility, rewards for dying. Secular causes and ideologies simply cannot offer such rewards, meaning death remains the ultimate cost and therefore no benefit can be guaranteed to the individual after death. It is for this reason that Olson (1965) singled out economic incentives as the only incentive that can be thought to motivate all people regardless of religious, political, or ideological affiliation.

The general critique of rational choice theory stems from the simple proposition that valuation is subjective; not everyone values monetary rewards equally, for example, and therefore economic incentives will be a stronger motivator for some and not others. If every individual has a different preference, it is difficult to investigate variation over a specific choice set because the investigator is required to first determine whether an individual’s decision to act is based on their distinct preferences. Such an investigation can foster teleological inferences
(i.e., relating to or involving the explanation of phenomena in terms of the purpose they serve rather than of the cause by which they arise). Furthermore, when economic incentives are not on offer to recruits, how do you reconcile their decision to still participate? In both cases analyzed for this dissertation, foreign fighters made the decision to join the weaker side of the conflict, where promises of rewards were not guaranteed. As will be detailed in later chapters, rational choice models that emphasize economic incentives have serious deficiencies as models for diagramming human reasoning and predicting human behavior, including the decision made by individuals to become foreign fighters (Atran and Axelrod 2008).

**Personal Victimization**

Theories that emphasize personal victimization have been foundational for understanding collective action. To say that collective action is motivated by personal victimization is familiar because it is easily recognized in our own experience. Quite simply stated, when someone wrongs us, we want revenge for the injustice (McCauley and Moskalenko 2016). Feelings of victimization can be exploited when an individual develops a sense of being personally harmed and develops a hostility toward a perpetrator. Perceived injustice from a specific perpetrator is met with anger. More abstract perceptions of injustice such as whites oppressing blacks, landowners oppressing serfs, or Westerners oppressing Muslims, results in anger against an entire class of people. Recent psychological research (e.g., see McCauley and Moskalenko 2017) into the relationship between victimization and violence has shown that any punishing experience toward an individual or group can lead to anger and an increased propensity for aggression (see also Sabini 1995). Therefore, an individual can feel victimized, and therefore
motivated to retaliate, as the result of harm to another person or group even though there was no direct harm against the individual undertaking the aggression or violence (McCauley and Moskalenko 2017).

Theories that link personal victimization to action now intersect different research paradigms, including theories of peasant rebellion (Paige 1975; Scott 1977), civil war (Humphreys and Weinstein 2008; Regan and Norton 2005), and terrorism (Crenshaw 1986; Newman 2006; Ross 1993). According to these theories, discontent over personal victimization is necessary to explain any account of collective action because feelings of victimization provide the primary motivational impetus for collective organization and violence (Snow 2013). New theoretical models of civil conflict include personal victimization as part of more complex cost-benefit analyses that explain participation. The most cited of these models is the Collier-Hoeffler model (2004). While the model does assume economic rationality by recruits, it differentiates between the demand side of recruitment and the supply side. Feelings of victimization work on the demand side, creating a need for rebel labor with the absolute supply coming from the expected net positive utility of individual rebellion (Collier and Hoeffler 2004, 504). While innovative in trying to identify a more robust way of explaining collective violence, the authors nonetheless conclude that economic incentives are a more powerful motivator than personal victimization (Collier and Hoeffler 2004, 504).

In the nascent literature on foreign fighting, recruits are shown to link their sense of personal victimization to a broader cause that motivates them to become a foreign fighter. For example, recent research on the mobilization of French foreign fighters for ISIS found that first
generation, French citizens of North African descent linked feelings of victimization to France’s “oppressive domestic policy” against them as Muslims. This resulted in a desire to radically alter global international relations by establishing an Islamic Caliphate (Bindner 2018). Studies on U.S. foreign fighters to the Spanish Civil War found similar feelings of victimization as a motivating factor for Abraham Lincoln Brigade recruits. A popular conclusion in the literature on U.S. foreign fighters to the Spanish Civil War is that individuals linked their personal suffering (e.g., losing their job or life savings) during the Great Depression as stemming from the failures of global “capitalist tyranny” for which new fascist political movements (such as the one in Spain) were propagating (Carroll 1994).

Theories linking personal victimization to collective action are parsimonious but suffer in terms of generalizability. The degree to which personal victimization affects collective action is difficult to discern because an individual’s reaction to being a victim is based on individual psychology; the depth of victimization as measured by severity and length of time held is based on the human capacity to care about abstract categories and perpetrators (McCauley and Moskalenko 2017). If several individuals from a particular group feel personally victimized, it is possible that this mass victimization can facilitate contentious collective action. However, as will be shown by this dissertation, foreign fighters do not link local victimization to a broader, transnational movement.

**Structural Grievances**

When deprivation is conceived as being directly attributed to structural problems and conflicts in society, it is considered a structural grievance. In the literature, structural grievances
are also known as “push factors.” For example, the United Nations differentiates between “push” and “pull” factors in its publications on radicalization (UNDP 2016; see also Borum 2012). They are called push factors because they are factors thought to be “pushing” individuals toward a certain violent path. Structural grievances have played an important role in illustrating why individuals seek out forms of contentious collective action in the first place.

Scholars of civil conflict have long linked the depth of structural grievances with rebellion. Since Davies (1962) and Gurr (1970) developed models of rebellion and revolution, “relative deprivation,” or the tension between an individual’s expectations and capabilities, has been said to translate into political violence (e.g., see Bergstrand 2014; Brush 1996; Regan and Norton 2005). Much like Olson’s (1965) *The Logic of Collective Action* is to rational choice theory, Gurr’s (1970) *Why Men Rebel* is the foundational text of this theory. Drawing from literature on social psychology, specifically theories of cognitive dissonance, Gurr (1970, 23) argued that “relative deprivation,” or the “tension that develops from a discrepancy between the ‘ought’ and the ‘is’ of collective value satisfaction” disposes individuals to violence. Gurr argued that deprivation provoked a psychological mechanism that converted feelings into violent action. Known as the “frustration-aggression relationship,” the greater the intensity of feeling deprived, the greater the potential for violence, and the more widespread that feeling, the more widespread the violence (Gurr 1970).

Gurr’s approach to understanding and explaining relative deprivation was not monolithic. The complex interplay between what someone has, expects, and needs develops on different levels of the individual psyche and manifests at different levels of society. It is for this reason
that Gurr extrapolated three structural patterns of relative deprivation that help to explain aggression and violence in many different social, political, cultural, and economic contexts. The first, “decremental deprivation,” describes a situation in which value expectations remain constant but value capabilities decrease with time. This pattern of deprivation fosters aggression because an individual is not capable of achieving what they once were. The second, “aspirational deprivation,” describes a situation in which value expectations rise with time, but value capabilities remain constant. This pattern of deprivation fosters aggression because an individual is hoping to achieve new levels of success or a new provision of goods, but the hope is not being realized. And finally, “progressive deprivation,” describes a situation in which value expectations and value capabilities initially both increase monotonically, but whereas value expectations continue to rise, value capabilities eventually level off and may even decrease causing individuals to feel a sudden loss in capabilities, causing aggression.

When it was acknowledged that feelings of personal victimization, detailed above, were a difficult to measure at the individual-level, one of the common variants that emerged posited that “economic inequality,” measured at the country-level, was a logical alternative that could explain how grievance or deprivation impacts collective violence and was a variable that was easier to operationalize (Midlarsky 1988; Muller and Seligson 1987). Economic inequality is based on an empirical evaluation of a country’s distribution of economic resources between groups and individuals (Regan and Norton 2005). Using economic inequality as a measure of structural grievance garnered broad support in the academic literature (e.g., see Muller and Opp 1986; Muller and Seligson 1987; Weede 1981; Shadmehr 2014) for two important reasons. First, it
appealed to those scholars working with formal modeling to explore and explain the causes of violence, protest, revolution, and democratization (e.g., see Acemoglu and Robinson 2001; 2006; Boix 2003; Leventoğlu 2005). In formal models, economic inequality became one of the main sources of discontent under dictatorships, which ultimately informed the demand for democratization. Second, there have been numerous, publicly available datasets on economic inequality that allow researchers to investigate the empirical implications of these theories quantitatively, across time and space. Beyond just economic inequality, there are now several measurement variations to quantitatively analyze the role of structural grievance. The most common measurements continue to look at different variables that could measure economic grievances (Gurr 1970; Muller and Seligson 1987; Regan and Norton 2005) in different ways. The United Nations Development Programme cites economic grievances, as measured by gross national income (GNI) per capita and education (mean years of schooling), as key to the organization’s cross-national measure of relative standard of living and relative economic capabilities of countries known as the “Human Development Index” (UNDP 2020). Many scholars in the political violence and civil conflict field (e.g., see Humphreys and Weinstein 2008) use variations of this index as a predictor of collective violence.

There is a second structural variant of grievance theory that links a lack of civil and political rights to collective violence. Beginning with Durkheim’s (1951) theory of anomie, or the social and/or political break between individuals and their communities, the idea that lacking access to “normal” channels for airing grievances will create violence has become a popular explanation in the literature. Merton (1949) acknowledged anomie as a source of deviant
behavior when he developed “strain theory” in the late-1940s, arguing that this type of behavior resulted from a lack of legitimate opportunities. More recently, scholars have adopted variations of strain theory to explain conflict in developing countries in the Middle East (Chalcraft 2016; Wiktorowicz 2002) and Sub-Saharan Africa (Kaplan 1994; Richards 1996), arguing that violence and conflict can be explained by the isolation of citizens within authoritarian countries, who are unable to gain access to the loci of political decision-making.

Political grievances can involve the suspension of civil liberties, censorship, banning of political parties, police surveillance, police brutality, or a general disregard to opposition (see Hamilton 1978; Ross 1993). Political grievances can therefore be directed against a variety of different individuals, groups, institutions, or classes including the government, individual politicians, political parties, the police, or the military. The specific implication for collective action, and therefore foreign fighting, is that structural grievances, whether economic (poverty, unemployment, or lack of education) or political (lack of civil or political rights), will lead (i.e., push) individuals to seek out opportunities to join contentious collective pursuits. It is important to note that an individual does not have to feel personally victimized by a structural grievance, like theories of personal victimization stipulate, for it to motivate collective behavior. For example, an individual can be gainfully employed and yet be aggrieved by the mass unemployment that plagues their country. The fact that they perceive a structural grievance is theoretically enough to mobilize that individual to act.

Structural grievances have been shown to be insufficient for explaining organized conflict because such accounts cannot fully explicate the mechanisms that influence individuals
to take action nor identify the methods leaders use to mobilize people, both of which ultimately determine the extent to which conflict proliferates (Ostrom 1997). Grievance approaches that examine structural factors are important for identifying contextual variables, such as poverty (Fearon and Laitin 2003; Gurr 1993), level of democracy (Sambanis and Milanovic 2011), or ethnic fractionalization (Esteban and Ray 2008), which can create conditions under which certain groups become more susceptible to rebel, but they cannot explain the actual mechanism that drives an individual to action.

In the nascent literature on foreign fighting, structural grievances have been tested in recent quantitative studies of foreign fighting (Benmelech and Klor 2018; Pokalova 2019). These studies test for many factors emblematic of structural grievance including measures of a country’s economic wellbeing such as GDP per capita and the Human Development Index (HDI), a country’s political status including level of freedom as measured by Freedom House or a country’s level of democracy as measured by Polity IV, among other variables that measure a country’s demographic profile including percentage of youth population, population size, percentage of Muslim population, emigration levels, internet penetration, and the presence of al-Qaida cells. Not surprisingly, these studies have led to competing conclusions and have so far not been able to confirm findings at the individual-level. They do, however, provide the foundation for testing certain hypotheses at the individual-level.

Recent scholarship on structural grievances has evolved to try to explain the phenomenon of collective action by theorizing on the strategic micro-foundations of dissent and action rather than adopting “structural” explanations (Regan and Norton 2005; Dixon 2014). However, even
measured at the individual-level, structural grievances themselves may not be sufficient for explaining foreign fighting because they do not explain why an individual chose to travel and fight in a particular foreign conflict over another or why they did not choose another type of collective action in which to participate. Such theories also do not account for the fact that foreign recruits are unlikely to benefit from improved structural conditions in the country where the conflict is taking place. A further shortcoming of such arguments is illustrated by research that has shown that foreign fighters have historically demobilized and returned home after a conflict’s conclusion, illustrating a potential disconnect between local, structural grievances and their decisions to fight for a foreign cause (Malet 2015). Nevertheless, findings from this dissertation remain inclusive in this regarding, suggesting that additional theories and explanations are required to explain the foreign fighter phenomenon.

**Sacred Values**

There is a growing body of research (Baron and Spranca 1997; Fiske and Tetlock 1997; Tetlock 2003; Atran and Axelrod 2008; Ginges and Atran 2009; Berns et al. 2012; Atran 2016) that suggests that individuals often resist attempts to compromise values they hold as sacred, regardless of the cost to themselves or to others. These types of “sacred values” are described as “nonnegotiable preferences whose defense compels actions beyond evident reason, that is regardless of calculable costs and consequences” (Atran 2016, 193; see also Ginges et al. 2007). While sacred values often take the form of abstract concepts and objects, such as sacred cows in Hindu culture (Harris 1966), the sacred status of Jerusalem in the three monotheistic faiths (Atran and Axelrod 2008), or even sacred forests in India (Chandrakanth and Romm 1991), they
nonetheless provide one of the driving reasons for human action. The concept of “sacred” in this context does not have to carry religious connotations; rather, sacred denotes a preference for objects, beliefs, or practices that an individual will treat as non-fungible.

Sacred values have the power to influence high cost/risk behavior as such values, when threatened, lessen the societal costs of acting in defense of the value. Therefore, the theory of sacred values does not say that instrumental logic does not play a role in human decision-making; instead, it simply states that behavior, where risk is clearly out of proportion to the reward, must be driven by something other than instrumental reasons. A devotion to a sacred value is the intervening mechanism that leads to value-driven (e.g., duty and obligation) decisions that disregard self-interest (Atran et al. 2014).

The sacred implies far more than religious values but also secularized values embodied in ideals like human rights (Spickard 1999), sovereignty (Kahn 2009), or democracy (Marietta 2008). Sacred value can also be found in transcendent ideological “isms” from the political movements of fascism and communism to the ideological lenses of liberalism, socialism, and anarchism (Atran 2016). Therefore, such values are also referred to in the literature as “moral,” “ideological,” or “parochial” values because they are derived from the narrow value-systems of a given individual or ideology. As demonstrated by the evidence suggested by classic rational choice theory, it seems that the conventional wisdom regards these types of values as relatively unimportant. But the link between value and commitment to a cause has been illustrated before. U.S. servicemembers in the Vietnam War is an excellent example: Why did U.S. support for the Vietnam War fall and why did battlefield morale of U.S. soldiers collapse and desertion rates
rise? U.S. soldiers felt that “Vietnamization” was a “lost cause” and the potential for democracy in Vietnam was “a joke” (Spector 1993, 71; see also Moskos 1975). But while U.S. service members did not have a commitment to the cause of Vietnam, there is documented admiration by U.S. soldiers of the selfless bravery of the North Vietnamese who were fighting for their cause; as one U.S. soldier claimed, “they believed in something” (Spector 1993, 71). U.S. soldiers in the Vietnam War were not defending a sacred value and they therefore had no cause to fight but they did recognize the perilous efforts of the North Vietnamese to defend one.

The opposite could be said of U.S. servicemembers who volunteered to fight in the U.S. civil war. As prominent civil war scholar James McPherson (1997) noted, “[U.S. servicemembers] needed no indoctrination lectures to explain what they were fighting for…When they enlisted, many of them did so for patriotic and ideological reasons” (McPherson 1997, 91-2). Clearly, devotion to a cause or value is instrumental in motivating individual action. Especially in a volunteer unit, which the Vietnam War was notably not, it may seem that devotion be a prerequisite for participation.

Many of the issues integral to modern conflicts are based on sacred values. New experimental evidence shows that when material incentives are proposed to promote compromise, such as compromises to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, violent opposition follows. In a series of experiments with Palestinian students (see Atran, Axelrod, and Davis 2007; Ginges et al. 2007), offering material incentives predicted to be taboo, such as Israel offering billions of U.S. dollars to Palestinians if Palestinians recognize the sacred and historic right of the Jewish people to a state, or having Israel pay Palestinian families $1,000 dollars to
leave and relinquish control of East Jerusalem, did in fact generate responses associated with violent opposition. The same occurred when researchers proposed that Israelis receive material incentives from the U.S. to give up the majority of Judea and Samaria. The response to such a suggestion was perceived as insulting and thus resulted in a negative response that not only defied the suggestion but caused anger. The conclusions of this research are that sacred values are not easily compromised and when not addressed properly in a negotiation setting, can lead to more animosity.

Early evidence from research on ISIS foreign fighters suggests that sacred values play a key role in motivating the decision of individuals to become foreign fighters. According to findings published in 2014, “volunteers from Europe and North Africa believe that they are part of a great historical movement that has reestablished the Islamic Caliphate, and now must fight to the death if necessary to secure and expand it against Alawite and Shi’ite apostates in Damascus and Baghdad, then over to take Medina and Mecca, Jerusalem and Cairo” (Atran et al. 2014). In addition, recent interviews with one ISIS widow, who became trapped in a concentration camp following the collapse of ISIS held strongholds in Syria, told The Sunday Times (Loyd 2017) that she had “came to Syria as a woman wanting to be empowered by Islamic principles” (emphasis added).

The significance of the sacred values framework has been supported by a series of other empirical studies in different conflict contexts (Ginges and Atran 2009; Berns et al. 2012; Atran, Sheikh, and Gómez 2014a; 2014b; Sheikh, Gómez, and Atran 2016). Comparable findings have led scholars to postulate a new framework for understanding behavior that seems to defy the
utility function (i.e., the “rational actor”) that is known as the “devoted actor” framework. The devoted actor framework is one that integrates two research programs: sacred values and collective identity (Atran 2016). Evidence from repeated tests of the framework show that “people will become willing to protect nonnegotiable sacred values through costly sacrifice and extreme actions when such values are associated with groups whose individual members fuse into a unique collective identity” (Sheikh, Gómez, and Atran 2016, S204).

Devoted actors are those that are prone to extreme behavior and costly sacrifice, much like those who choose to fight in someone else’s war when no offer for payment or goods is available. Could the devoted actor be synonymous with Malet’s (2016) true believer, as was detailed in Chapter One? Evidence from this dissertation suggest that an individual’s commitment to sacred values plays a central role in the processes through which individuals go to participate in foreign fighting. But many individuals can hold an identical value as sacred and yet only a subset of those individuals might mobilize in defense of that value. Furthermore, only a subset of individuals might perceive a threat to said value while another subset might not. For that matter, different subsets of individuals might disagree over how to respond to a threat to a sacred value. Therefore, this dissertation argues that theoretical explanations are required to understand how sacred values become motivational and how they are triggered to influence extreme behavior.

Collective Identity

Collective identity can be understood as the shared perception of belonging to a specific social group. It provides that shared sense of “we” that defines individual and collective agency
(Snow 2001). Scholars have generally examined the temporal and spatial aspects of collective identity as such identities are often linked to a certain generation or period (e.g., the Baby Boom generation, Woodstock generation) or to a certain space or territory (e.g., a “European” from the European Union). Considering the internationalization of identity groups, however, it is increasingly rare that collective identity is tied to time and place alone. There has, for example, been shown to be an advent of certain “cosmopolitan collective identities” that are influenced by a sort of global humanism (Pries 2013). On the other hand, recent global trends, especially in the West, have shown that rather than an increase and overlap in collective identity across the world, more local and micro-regional identities are also rising in reaction to the culture of globalization (Inglehart and Norris 2016).

The psychology of identification is wide and deep in human behavior (Moskalenko, McCauley, and Rozin 2006). Collective identities can be formed in such a way that they could help overcome collective action problems, realized by helping decision making and social continuity become much easier. The importance of group identity and cohesion to collective action has been prevalent since the 1980s when Snow, Zurcher, and Ekland-Olson’s (1980) seminal article illustrated the important relationship between social ties, as will be discussed below, and organizational recruitment. As their argument stipulated, recruitment is not limited to dispositional susceptibility, it instead can be influenced by three different stimuli: structural proximity, availability, and affective interaction among members of a movement or group (Snow, Zurcher, and Ekland-Olson 1980, 787). Collective identities form around such movements when personal and group identities fuse into one, unique identity to generate a
“collective” identity (Melucci 1995; Polletta and Jasper 2001; Snow 2001; Atran 2016; Trumpy 2016). Many scholars who study group dynamics emphasize the web of relationships that make the “collective” more than the sum of its individual parts (e.g., see Dunbar, Knight, and Powers 1999). These relationships are expressed through aspects like sharing a common language or sharing cultural symbols, rituals, and practices.

A group’s commitment to idiosyncratic beliefs and their associated values can deepen trust by both identifying cooperators (Moya and Boyd 2016) and galvanizing group solidarity (Atran and Henrich 2010; Atran 2016). An individual’s bond to a group’s shared values only applies when the individual in question conceives of themselves as part of some grouping, whether it be an ethnic, religious, or ideological grouping that organizes comprehensive meaning (Florini and Simmons 2000; see also Geertz 1973). Stemming primarily from extant theories of collective identity and what is known as “identity fusion” theory, when an individual’s personal self-concept is fused with that of a collective, they will be more willing to engage in extreme, pro-group behavior (Swann et al. 2012). Even when a group is quite large, when its members share core physical attributes and values, individuals are more likely to project familial ties, which enhance a willingness to fight and die for that group (Swann et al. 2012). For example, recent evidence of this theory (Whitehouse et al. 2014) shows that “comrades in arms” have formed such familial bonds and may explain the willingness of Islamic combatants, including foreign fighters, in Libya to continue to fight for independence in the country’s ongoing civil war. Other historical examples point to the significance of “comrades in arms” such as John McManus’ The Deadly Brotherhood (2003, 279), which argued that U.S. combat soldiers in
World War II fought for their “devoted fraternity” where men shared both dangers and hardships on the front lines.

Collective identity is one of the theoretical strands that links self-interested individualism with group norms of glory, self-sacrifice, and heroism (Lois 1999). As stated by theories of self-interested individualism, no individual will want to make sacrifices for a group when those sacrifices are ultimately costly to the individual. Therefore, scholars (Adams 1987; Edelstein 1996) have argued that the very definition of a “hero” is one who performs acts that are independent of material rewards. However, others (Degenne and Forsé, 1994) argue that it is only through socialization and feelings of collective identification that individuals are driven toward such acts. Identity groups create symbolic meaning through attendant norms of behavior and therefore create group rewards for acts of individual heroism and self-sacrifice for the group. Heroic status, or “glory,” is therefore a symbolic reward for an act that benefits a collective group. The theory therefore explains everything from routine volunteer behavior such as donating blood or giving to charity all the way to sacrificing your life in an act of suicide; the acts are performed because they perceived as communal activities and are expected by other members of an identity group.

A founder of social psychology, George Herbert Mead (1934) argued that individuals developed a sense of who they are, a sense of self-identity, through the reflected appraisals and expectations of others. It is in these relations with others that identities are fostered, and attendant norms of behavior are established. Individuals define their very identities by their “fit” with a broader collective identity (Stets and Burke 2000, 226). For example, according to
Charles Tilly (2002), ethnic, religious, and nationalist values and solidarity are only meaningful when they are shared by a broader identity group rather than as individual attributes. So, to what extent were individuals that mobilized in Spain and Syria motivated by a collective identity group that shared a specific value as sacred? Did Tunisians mobilize for their purely sectarian collective identity that adheres to the sacred value of Islam such as the wider Muslim community (Ummah)? Did U.S. citizens join the International Brigades to fight on behalf of the communist collective identity and the dream of a global communist revolution? This dissertation will show that, in these scenarios, it is not only the value that is important (Islam and communism), but the feeling that the value transcends the individual and pervades a broader identity group that makes mobilization more likely.

Foreign fighter mobilizations have shown to make up only small proportions of larger fighting forces. What potentially explains the discrepancy between high numbers of individuals who likely identify with the collective group and the collective cause of the conflict and the smaller number who actually choose to go fight to defend it is collective identity. However, as described by McCauley and Moskalenko (2017, 31) “identification is cheap, and action is expensive.” Many who do identify with a group or cause are not inclined to extend any support beyond sympathy. It is only a few who extend resources and even fewer choose to sacrifice their life for the group or cause. Therefore, while sacred values and collective identity are both instrumental in explaining the foreign fighter phenomenon, there is one missing condition. It is the tangible connections to other likeminded individuals, especially close family and friends, that ultimately transforms individual desire into collective action.
**Social Networks**

Social network analysis as it relates to social movement theory and theories of militant mobilization emphasize the importance of preexisting social ties (Diani and McAdam 2003; Reynolds and Hafez 2017). Social network analysis, and its emphasis on microstructural relationships, has been influential in the social sciences (Granovetter 1973; 1983). Doug McAdam (1986; 1988) might be the most notable scholar of social network theory. McAdam (1986) designed a unique study that counted “ties” between participants and movement activists in the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer project thus establishing one of the first studies using network data to explain collective action (see also Polletta and Jasper 2001; Gould 1991). In the civil conflict literature, preexisting ties are important for militant mobilization because these networks bring like-minded individuals together and facilitate feelings of duty, pressure, and groupthink (Diani and McAdam 2003; della Porta 2013). In fact, recent scholarship has already begun to show that, at least regarding the recruitment trajectory of ISIS members from Europe, mobilizations are occurring in “networked” communities where individuals have strong ideological ties to other individuals who are either already fighting or planning on going to fight in Iraq and Syria (see Reynolds and Hafez 2017 on German foreign fighters to ISIS).

Arguably the most important social network factors studied have been the role of “linkages”; linkages between individuals and organizations, between organizations and other organizations, and between movements and settings (Zurcher and Curtis 1973; Rosenthal et al. 1985; McAdam 1988; McAdam and Su 2002). The most obvious, albeit significant, factor associated with social network theory that contributes to individual involvement in collective
action has been that recruits to a movement often already know others who are involved in the movement. Preexisting ties to a movement network provide prospective recruits with reliable information about the movement and provide solidarity incentives (McAdam and Su 2002). The second insight associated with social network theory that contributes to individual involvement is that collective action does not exist in a vacuum; that is, movements develop within established social settings. For example, social networks are often connected to other movement organizations in what are known as “multiorganization fields” (Curtis and Zurcher 1973). When an individual has ties to multiple organizational fields, they are more likely to become recruited for collective action. Therefore, recruits are often exposed and forced to respond to a variety of different stimuli before joining a movement and often many recruits are in similar situations that bring them together for collective action. The final factor associated with social network theory that contributes to individual involvement in collective action is that movements also have interactions with already established movements (McAdam 1986). Overlapping membership in different collective pursuits is common; such multiorganizational fields share personnel, information, and other resources that allow each movement to be individually successful.

Aside from having a feeling of collective association with a broader identity group, which is important for theories of collective identity, for social network theory, it is the tangible social ties in a conflict context that make these mobilizations possible. If networks are a primary force for mobilizing foreign fighters, then there should be evidence of preexisting social ties prior to a fighter’s mobilization. A good recent example of network recruitment was illustrated with biographical records from the Iraq War (2003 – 2011). From analyses of this information, from
what are known as the Sinjar records, more than half of the 200+ foreign recruits examined traveled with someone else from their hometown (Felter and Fishman 2007). Furthermore, in an examination of European foreign fighters to Iraq, it was Belgian and French foreign fighters that made up the largest proportion of European recruits and in both cases, “two networks, the 19th and the Kari, were responsible for sending the majority (57 percent) of these individuals to Iraq” (Holman 2015, 604). The conclusion of Holman’s (2015) analysis of these European foreign fighters was that not only did these networks help foster the ideological motivation that led foreign individuals to participate in combat operations in Iraq, but these networks were necessary in providing the logistical aid that ultimately allowed for a successful foreign fighter mobilization.

A key shortcoming of social network theory comes from scholars who have claimed that it is not a theory at all but a descriptive method (Granovetter 1979). Social network analysis, as a method of distinguishing the density of links between individuals within a predefined space, was said to be nothing more than a means of determining the structure of a network, not its content (Borgatti, Brass, and Halgin 2014). As a theory of describing militant mobilization, it could be said that it is difficult to discern the extent to which a network connection impacted the motivation of a foreign fighter. It is one thing to say that an individual knew another individual who may have been involved in a conflict, but did knowing the individual help motivate them to act? Social network connections are an important variable when constructing networks of foreign fighters, but further contextualization is required to fully explain why such connections were so pervasive in influencing individual decisions. This dissertation utilizes the personal narratives of
foreign fighters from two different cases, which allows for not only the discovery of social network links, but the analysis of the content of those links. The data ultimately suggest that social networks were a necessary condition for explaining the foreign fighter phenomenon.

**Conclusion**

Francois-Rene de Chateaubriand famously argued that individuals “don’t allow themselves to be killed for their interests; they allow themselves to be killed for their passions” (quoted from Anderson 1998, 212). Based on the background on theoretical antecedents and given the lack of satisfying answers from classic theories to the question of why an individual would travel to fight in someone else’s conflict, it is necessary to move beyond such explanations to explain foreign fighting. At best, such theories provide but one step in a broader process that can theoretically explain foreign fighting. Explanations, such as personal victimization or structural grievances, provide the ground by which individuals come to feel that action is necessary, but they do not provide the primary motivational impetus for their chosen action. And when economic incentives cannot alone account for patterns of recruitment to foreign conflicts, social theories, such as collective identity and social network theory, are shown to better explain the patterns.

This dissertation looks at the supply-side of recruitment by analyzing personal narratives of foreign fighters. It argues that classic theories of collective action are inadequate for explaining the prevalence of foreign fighting. One of the key contributions of this dissertation is that it takes a holistic approach to understanding the foreign fighter phenomenon and understands the act of foreign fighting as a dynamic process. Ultimately, this dissertation argues
that a combination of individual processes, such as an individual’s commitment to sacred values, and social processes, namely social networks and collective identity, best explain the foreign fighter phenomenon. By using personal narratives to test the six dominant theories of collective action, this dissertation will provide a comprehensive explanation for the foreign fighter phenomenon that will be both practically and scholastically relevant. The framework will have implications for explaining foreign fighting; past, present, and future, and will contribute to broader theoretical discussions about collective action. The next chapter sets out the study’s research design, including the hypotheses, operationalization of variables, and specific method of inquiry.
CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH DESIGN

More than 335,000 foreign fighters have participated in ninety-three conflicts during the last two centuries, from the Greek War of Independence to the present Syrian Civil War (Malet 2013). This dissertation compares two of the largest and most significant foreign fighter mobilizations in history by comparing the motivations of the U.S. citizens who traveled to fight for the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War and the Tunisian citizens who traveled to fight for ISIS in the Syrian Civil War. As detailed in Chapter One, foreign fighters that traveled to both Spain and Syria are categorized as “true believers” (one of the four ideal types of foreign fighters) because they fought to preserve institutions of shared ideology. This dissertation utilizes a comparative analysis of these two cases to test extant theories of collective action and help better understand the foreign fighter phenomenon and test Malet’s original categorization.

This chapter presents the research design for the dissertation and is divided into three sections. The first section explains the hypotheses being tested and the operationalization of variables under study. The second section details the methodology for choosing and analyzing the cases so that systematic comparisons can be made, and plausible explanations developed. It also introduces the data and sources used to analyze each case. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the importance of a comparative analysis of these two cases and explains how the research design will inform the empirical chapters that analyze each of the cases in greater detail.
Hypotheses and Variable Operationalization

This dissertation compares two of the most prominent foreign fighter cases of the past 100 years: the roughly 3,000 U.S. citizens who fought for the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War and the roughly 3,000 Tunisians who fought for ISIS in the Syrian Civil War. The dissertation develops six hypotheses from the literature on contentious collective action and tests these hypotheses using a mixed-method approach that stems from a comparative analysis of the two cases. Specifically, the study draws from the literatures on collective action, social movements, and organizational behavior that can be qualitatively tested and compared.

Economic Incentives

As discussed in the previous chapter, theories of collective action have been dominated by the assumption that economic incentives are necessary to facilitate individual action in collective pursuits. Such theories stipulate that any decision to participate in collective action is motivated by methodological individualism, i.e., based on an individual’s own commitment to maximizing benefits while minimizing costs.

According to Olson (1965), economic incentives are the only way to motivate individuals in large groups. Especially in an instance like foreign fighting, where the cost of participation is high and the chance to enforce social incentives is low, the offer of private economic gain is what would be theorized as motivating foreign fighters. Based on this theoretical background, the following hypothesis is developed:

**H1:** An individual will join a foreign conflict if they have a private economic incentive to do so.
Economic incentives are operationalized as remunerative motivations in the form of a direct, monetary payment to participate or other financial motivations such as the chance for entrepreneurship or employment. Simply stated, if an individual cites payment, chance for profit, chance to obtain goods, or chance for employment opportunities as a reason for joining a foreign conflict, it could be said that they are doing it for economic reasons.

Some scholars have argued that social incentives and moral incentives play into the standard utility function and therefore belong in the rational choice framework (e.g., see Harsanyi 1977). This is not something that is broadly accepted (for an overview see Kraus and Coleman 1987). This analysis follows the mainstream and considers social and moral incentives as outside of the Olsonian framework of economic rationality, which stipulates that only economic incentives are enough to overcome the free-rider problem (Olson 1965, 61). Moral and social theories are also tested and are operationalized as sacred values and collective identity below.

**Personal Victimization**

Individuals are often driven to participate in collective movements, especially those that harbor reactionary objectives, because of a perception of unjustified harm against them. However, scholars indicate that feelings of personal victimization seldom act as sufficient motivators for contentious collective action (McCauley and Moskalenko 2010). For example, many individuals who feel victimized do not know or cannot reach the perpetrator who victimized them. Instead, their target potentially becomes the larger group that the perpetrators are seen to represent. In this sense, personal victimization does not always lead to contentious
collective action unless it is interpreted as part of a larger struggle (McCauley and Moskalenko 2008).

Many individuals, especially in areas where violence and repression are high, are likely to have some direct experience, a sense of personal victimization, brought on by an enemy. For example, McCauley and Moskalenko (2010) cite the case of Chechen Black Widows who were driven to use suicide terrorism because they had been widowed or otherwise brutalized by the Russian Army and were seeking revenge (see also Granville-Chapman 2004; Parfitt 2004). In this example, there is a direct link between the abuse suffered by the widows and the Russian Army that they sought revenge against, but as mentioned in the previous chapter, perceived injustices can result in anger against an entire class of people, such as the case of several foreign fighters to the Spanish Civil War, who linked the feelings of victimization they developed because of the Great Depression to the rise of fascism abroad. The following hypothesis is drawn from this theoretical background:

**H2:** An individual will join a foreign conflict if they develop a feeling of personal victimization that motivates them to action.

Personal victimization is in some cases easy to operationalize and in other cases quite difficult. A victim is a person who suffers direct or threatened emotional or physical harm as a result of someone else. So, for example, the loss of a loved one because of trauma associated with a perpetrator is easy to identify. However, feeling humiliated is more difficult because humiliation is personally felt, though some causes of humiliation are obvious to identify. Victimization is often subjective, and therefore a feeling of victimization or of humiliation is
personal. In all cases, whether foreign fighter identifies a physical attack that causes a feeling of victimization or identifies an action that leads them to express feelings of victimization, both will be operationalized as personal victimization.

**Structural Grievances**

Explanations for collective action are understood to be structural grievances when they deal with grievances with the social, political, economic, or cultural environment in which individuals live. These factors often take the form of long-term conditions such as poverty and unemployment and act as a primary motivational impetus for collective action because they contribute to the objective grievances of any individual or group. In the literature described in Chapter Two, structural grievances are commonly referred to as push factors, which are described as the negative social, cultural, and political features of one’s societal environment that push vulnerable individuals onto the path of violence.

Structural grievances such as poverty and inequality have been frequently examined in the cross-national literature on collective violence. Other structural grievances can be found in the political structures of society including political and legal inequality and state repression, and in the social structures of society including religious and ethnic inequality. All are forms of structural grievances that can motivate collective action (Collier and Hoeffler 2004; Fearon and Laitin 2003; Stewart 2011). From this theoretical background, the following hypothesis is proposed:

**H3**: An individual will join a foreign conflict if they perceive a structural grievance that motivates them to action.
Typically operationalized as cross-national variables, structural grievances in this study are operationalized as micro-foundations of dissent that are conducive to collective violence by enabling, motivating, and by supplying triggers that lead to the commission of violence by an individual. For example, persistent economic, political, or social inequality, unemployment, poverty, authoritarianism, a lack of access to education, or a lack of other meaningful opportunities can provide a motivational impetus for action. In the context of foreign fighting, the existence of structural grievances in the fighter’s home country may not provide the reason to join a particular insurgency but instead provide the fighter with the sense that there is nothing keeping them in their home country, pushing them toward a new avenue abroad, such as a foreign conflict. Furthermore, a foreign fighter can perceive of a local structural grievance as being caused by a foreign entity for which they are going to fight against. Finally, an individual may identify with structural grievances expressed by a group with which that individual associates with. In all cases, the individual does not necessarily have to be directly affected by the structural grievance, as is necessary for explaining theories of personal victimization, to mobilize on behalf of that grievance. As in the example used in the previous chapter, an individual does not need to be unemployed for them to be aggrieved by persistent, mass unemployment in their country.

*Sacred Values*

Individuals have been shown to join collective pursuits, including foreign fighting, for more parochial reasons, or reasons found in the moral or ideological psyche of the individual.
Those committed to sacred values, or non-negotiable values or preferences, are said to join collective pursuits even when the cost of such an action outweighs any potential benefit.

Sacred values have the power to influence high-risk behavior as such values, when threatened, lessen the societal costs of acting in defense of the value. Therefore, the theory does not stipulate that instrumental logic does not play a role in human decision-making; instead, it simply states that behavior where risk is clearly out of proportion to the reward, such as foreign fighting, must be driven by something other than instrumental reasons. This dissertation hypothesizes that a devotion to a sacred value is a mechanism that leads to value-driven decisions (Atran et al. 2014). The hypothesis is as follows:

**H4:** An individual will join a foreign conflict to support or defend a value they hold as sacred.

As stated in the previous chapter, the “sacred” implies far more than religious values but can also be found in transcendent ideological “isms” including the ideological lenses of communism, fascism, liberalism, socialism, anarchism, and religious movements as found in the crusades or modern jihadism (Atran 2016). Values are general beliefs about desirable ends and represent motivational goals. If one was to think of values as being operationalized in opposition to economic incentives, one could instead think of values as parochial incentives, in that they are based on an individual’s narrow value system, moral incentives, in that they are based a commitment to do what is perceived to be “just” or “right,” or ideological incentives, in that they are based on a collective belief system that offers meaning to action (see Ginges and Atran 2009). Parochial, moral, and ideological incentives are subjective and not universal. For
example, if one was to say that a positive relationship could be found between individual desires to defend the communist dream in Spain and their willingness to fight for the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War and a positive relationship between individual desire to institute global *Sharia* law in Syria and their willingness to fight for the ISIS in the Syrian Civil War then one could say that both sets of individuals are fighting for these types of incentives. Both represent parochial, moral, and/or ideological incentives in that the incentive is internal to that individual or that cause.

**Collective Identity**

Collective identity groups are defined by their shared boundaries, interconnectedness, and interdependence (McCauley and Moskalenko 2017). Some groups have discreet interactions and a hierarchical organization of members while some groups have little to no interaction and no hierarchy. Some individuals feel congeniality towards members of an identity group even when those individuals have never met. When an individual’s personal self-concept is merged with that of a collective, they will be more willing to engage in extreme, pro-group behavior. Individuals derive meaning from groups; whether an action is deemed acceptable, expected, or even heroic is derived from group preferences (Lois 1999).

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, according to theories of collective identity, a visceral feeling of oneness with a group can encourage strong pro-group behavior even if that group is part of an “extended” collective where strong relational ties exist without any personal relation (Swann et al. 2012). Collective identity can be understood as the shared perception of belonging to a specific social group and implies a cognitive, moral, and emotional connection.
with a broader community (Polletta and Jasper 2001). It provides the shared sense of “we” that defines individual and collective agency (Snow 2001). Even when a group is quite large, when its members share core physical attributes and values, individuals are more likely to project familial ties which enhance a willingness to fight and die for that group (Swann et al. 2012).

From the theoretical tradition of collective identity, a testable hypothesis can be articulated:

**H5**: An individual will join a foreign conflict when that individual’s self-identity is merged with a collective identity that they mobilize to defend.

Collective identity is different from other related terms in the discipline such as other social identity, personal identity, relational identity, or social role. Collective identification is a statement about categorical membership. A collective identity is one that is shared with a group of others who have (or are believed to have) some characteristic(s) in common such as gender, race, ethnicity, or shared profession like doctor or lawyer, or shared ideological preference such as with a political party or organization (Ashmore, Deaux, and McLaughlin-Volpe 2004).

Regardless of the identity in question, the goal is to identify the way in which identification fosters a sense of either obligation, altruism, or loyalty to a collective group.

The perceived shared commonality felt by individuals for an identity group does not require direct contact or interchange with all others who share category membership; rather, the positioning is psychological in nature. Furthermore, individuals can have multiple, and sometimes even overlapping, collective identities. The goal of this study is to identify the salience of a collective identification given the conflict in question and then identify whether an individual is committed to a foreign conflict based on that identification. In the same sense that a
commitment to an ideological value can motivate individuals to participate in a foreign conflict so too can a commitment to fellow individuals who share similar values or commitments to a cause. One example that will be discussed in Chapter Five is when a Tunisian foreign fighter cites his commitment to his fellow Muslims and the global Muslim community (*Ummah*) as a motivation for joining ISIS. Several individuals cite the defense of fellow Muslims in Iraq and Syria as a key motivation in joining ISIS, citing a sense of collective duty (*far al-kifaya*) that is borne from a collective responsibility to defend the Muslim community.

**Social Networks**

The concrete interconnectedness of a group is also one of the primary mechanisms that help turn feelings into action. According to theories of social networks, when multiple individuals share tangible ties to a network of like-minded individuals, they are more likely to band together to achieve common goals, even when the action can be quite extreme. Social network analysis as it relates to social movement theory and theories of militant mobilization emphasize the importance of preexisting social ties (Diani and McAdam 2003; Reynolds and Hafez 2017). According to the theory, if networks are a primary force for mobilizing foreign fighters, then there should be evidence of preexisting social or kinship ties prior to a fighter’s mobilization. Therefore, aside from having a feeling of collective association with a broader identity group, which is important for theories of collective identity, for social network theory, it is the tangible social ties in a conflict context that make these mobilizations possible. Thus, the following hypothesis can be articulated;
**H6:** An individual will join a foreign conflict if they have preexisting social ties and linkages to other foreign fighters in a network.

Evidence for this hypothesis will be garnered from basic network data: Did an individual join with a friend, family member, or colleague? Did the individual coordinate their activity with other network members who are already active in the conflict zone? Is there evidence of networked mobilization occurring in a specific neighborhood, organization, or social/religious institution? Did an individual mention recruitment networks such as a mosque or local religious gathering, in the case of Tunisian foreign fighters, that helped facilitate their recruitment into ISIS? A “Yes” to any one of these questions could be evidence of social network playing a key role in foreign fighter mobilizations.

**Methodology**

Malet (2013) presented case studies of disparate transnational civil conflicts to explore the influence of the variables of ethnic conflict and co-ethnicity on recruitment propaganda. As described in Chapter One, Malet (2013) chose representative cases from each quadrant of his foreign fighter typology to perform structured comparisons. The basis of the comparative method comes from John Stuart Mill’s (1843) *Methods of Agreement and Difference*, which was updated and expanded for the contemporary social sciences by Henry Teune and Adam Przeworski’s (1970) *Most Different and Most Similar Systems Designs*. The strategies presented in both works have many parallels and can today be generally referred to as “Most Similar Systems – Different Outcomes” and “Most Different Systems – Similar Outcomes.”
Most Similar Systems – Different Outcome designs seek to identify independent variables that differ among otherwise similar systems, which can be isolated to account for the particular outcome, or dependent variable, under study. Most Different Systems – Similar Outcome designs seek to identify independent variables that are the same among otherwise dramatically different systems to account for similarities in a particular outcome, or dependent variable, under study. With both strategies, the systems are selected regarding the specific contextual conditions influencing the object under investigation (Landman and Robinson 2009).

This dissertation adopts a Most Different Systems – Similar Outcome approach and examines two dramatically different cases from within Malet’s (2013) true believer-type of foreign fighters. While not denying the rich results from comparing “like with like,” the price paid for the similar research design is a lack of empirically founded answers to the question of the effective differences and similarities in phenomena. As Tilly (2004, 8) reminded us with specific reference to political violence, in the social sciences the value of a concept is linked to its capacity to “point to detectable phenomena that exhibit some degree of causal coherence.”

To identify the process by which an individual makes the decision to become a foreign fighter, this dissertation analyzes two of the most significant foreign fighter mobilizations from the same ideal type: The U.S. citizens who fought for the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War and the Tunisians who fought for ISIS in the Syrian Civil War. Both cases have the same outcome, a foreign fighter mobilization, and due to significant differences between the two cases, several possible explanations for this outcome can be deemed unnecessary. The objective of this dissertation is to conduct qualitative content analysis of personal narratives and interviews
of foreign fighters from different mobilization contexts to test the six bodies of theory presented in Chapter Two. Due to data limitations, such as a small sample size and selection bias that are discussed in greater detail below, this dissertation’s findings cannot prove causality. Instead, if evidence linking one of the theories to becoming a foreign fighter is found and is similar across two otherwise very different mobilization contexts, then I conclude that there is reasonable evidence to support the related theoretical reason contributing to foreign fighting.

The two case studies require different methods for extrapolating the necessary data to make meaningful comparisons. Both methods have caveats that are detailed below. However, one consideration that applies to both cases is that neither case study includes a control group by which to compare significant differences between foreign fighters and members of the non-foreign fighter population. For both cases, I am examining the decision made by individuals to become foreign fighters after those decisions have been made. Therefore, I am limited in my ability to assign study conditions at random, such as would be common in experimental designs, and therefore cannot ensure that a control group would be equivalent to the foreign fighter group under investigation.

Appropriate steps to compare foreign fighters to the general population from which they came were taken. Because the case of U.S. foreign fighters is historical case, it was not possible to establish a control group by which to compare the decision-making process of individuals who become foreign fighters with those who did not. However, comparative demographic data was drawn from the 1930 U.S. Census as a means of comparing the demographic statistics on U.S. foreign fighters with that of the general population. In the case of Tunisian foreign fighters, I
attempted to overcome the lack of a control group by interviewing individuals with similar age ranges and backgrounds, mostly Tunisian students around the same age as the average Tunisian foreign fighter, and asked questions concerning why these individuals did not become foreign fighters. Then, using qualitative content analysis and interviews, I suggest some differences among the two groups. I also analyzed demographic data drawn from the 2014 Tunisian Census as a means of comparing the demographic statistics on Tunisian foreign fighters with that of the general population. Even without an assigned control group in either case, the results still yield reasonable evidence. Furthermore, the methods and data used for this dissertation provide an important benchmark to analyze comparative instances of foreign fighting across time and cultural context.

**Data on U.S. Foreign Fighters to the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War**

The study analyzes archival data, specifically correspondence, diaries, speeches and public statements, and autobiographies written by the U.S. foreign fighters who fought for the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War. Contrary to Malet’s (2013, 7) proposition that “even among well documented cases, self-reported explanations for joining exist from only dozens of recruits out of thousands in each instance,” vast documentation exists of the U.S. citizens who fought in the International Brigades.

There is a physical and digital archive for the Abraham Lincoln Brigade known as the Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives (ALBA), which includes a working database of every U.S. citizen who volunteered. The database includes “as much accurate information as is available on each of them” and can further “point users to related materials in the ALBA archives” (ALBA
This database not only includes extensive biographical information for each volunteer such as name, date and place of birth and death, ethnicity, education, marital status, vocation and job history, and service dates, which was used to collect basic information, but it also includes documentary information and special notes about each member (when applicable) and references to where more information can be obtained (Figure 1). In the ALBA archives alone, there are collections of personal narratives attributed to approximately 300 individuals that document the stories of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade volunteers in addition to yet uncategorized postcards and oral history interviews that were used to test the hypotheses.

As detailed in Chapter One, there were approximately 3,000 U.S. citizens that fought for the International Brigades. The cataloging of the most basic information of this population into a dataset serves a useful purpose in that preliminary inferences can be drawn just by looking at the descriptive statistics. However, it is not possible to draw a representative sample from the population of U.S. foreign fighters to analyze more deeply. The empirical social scientist defines sampling as “a procedure by which information of measurable reliability is obtained from only a part of the total population” and a representative sample is one drawn in such a way, usually randomly, that it accurately reflects the characteristics of the larger population (Lewinson 1957, 292). Archives are repositories of surviving records, made available to researchers selectively based on their value and conditions (Lewinson 1957). The available archival material on the roughly 300 U.S. foreign fighters include documents scattered across more than 400,000 individual paper categories between two different archives, with individual archival items numbering in the millions. It also includes hundreds of hours of oral history interviews. While
this material is extensive, and potentially illustrates many aspects of the U.S. foreign fighters who fought for the International Brigades, it is not representative.

Figure 1. Sample Online ALBA Entry

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Biography

Robert Hale Merriman (1908-1938) was a graduate student in economics at the University of California at Berkeley when he became interested in Russian economy. He had met his future wife Marion Stone when both were undergraduates at the University of Nevada; they married on their graduation day May 8, 1932. The Merrimans moved to Moscow in January 1936. An excursion to Vienna gave Robert and Marion a firsthand view of Nazism and motivated Robert who had received some basic military training in ROTC to volunteer for a commissar at the University of Nevada, to join the Abraham Lincoln Brigade in 1937.

In Spain, Robert served as a volunteer and eventually rose to the rank of chief of staff of the 18th International Brigade. At first, Marion remained in Moscow, working for a New York Times correspondent Walter Duranty. She came to Spain in March of 1937 to tend to Robert after he was wounded by a sniper at the Masnada front of the Battle of Jarama. After his recovery, Marion remained in Spain and served as a nurse with the International Brigades as a clerk. Marion also worked as a secretary, held various staff jobs, collected information for death certificates, and took tours for visiting celebrities. She was eventually promoted to the rank of corporal. Marion returned to the United States to raise money for the cause. She made numerous speeches and rallies across the country and returned to Spain in March 1938, where she worked as a secretary for a group raising medical aid for the Loyalists.

After Robert Merriman disappeared during an ambush at Corberas (Biera Valley), conflicting reports stated that he was being held by fascist forces or that he had been killed. Unsuccessful appeals were made urging the U.S. State Department to press for his release, including a petition from UC Berkeley professors and UC President Robert Gordon Sproul. Merriman’s body was never found but in 1938 he was presumed dead.

Marion was eventually remarried, to attorney Emil Wechtel. She had three sons with Wechtel, who died in 1977. She held various jobs throughout her life and continued for many years to be active in the Bay Area Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade (VALB). She took several trips to Spain after the death of Francisco Franco, and worked strenuously to keep Robert Merriman’s memory alive.

Later in her life, she co-wrote American Commander in Spain: Robert Hale Merriman and the Abraham Lincoln Brigade (University of Nevada Press, 1989) with journalist and University of Nevada faculty member William Lande. Robert Jordan, the main character in For Whom the Bell Tolls—Ernest Hemingway’s Spanish Civil War novel was apparently modeled after Robert Merriman.

- Biography courtesy of Tamiment Library, NYU.
This dissertation analyzed more deeply a subset of the archival material by taking a sixty-person sample from the 300 individuals where detailed information was available. A sample of sixty individuals was taken to both make comparisons consistent with the available sample size of Tunisian foreign fighters, which, as is mentioned below, was fifty-seven individuals, and for convenience. The sample of sixty individuals reduced documentation down to a more manageable subset of the archives and included more than 10,000 individual pieces of archival material and roughly 150 hours of oral history interviews. Before selecting the sample, I confirmed with archivists the scope of availability for all individual files, confirmed that the documentation available across all files were relatively homogenous, and the sample was then chosen randomly using a random number generator. This was the only way to connect the archival sampling technique with the assumptions of sampling theory, though there is still selection bias (Boles 1981).

The archival data available for the sixty-member sample included a mix of correspondence, diaries, autobiographies, oral history interviews, speeches, public statements, and biographies (Table 4). Some individuals only had a handful of surviving letters to examine. Others had a combination of the six types of archival material. Most of the archival data came from correspondence written by U.S. foreign fighters while fighting in Spain. Fifty-three of the sixty individuals in the sample had correspondence to examine. Of those fifty-three, thirty had exclusively correspondence to examine. Seven of the individuals in the sample kept diaries during their time in Spain. Eleven of the sixty wrote some form of autobiographical account about their time in Spain. Not all autobiographies were published. Seventeen of the individuals in
the sample were interviewed previously by scholars about their experiences during the war and the original, unedited audio files from those original interviews are available. Five of the individuals gave some form of lecture or public statement regarding their motivations and time in Spain, the transcript or original audio for which were available. Finally, two individuals in the sample, Robert Hale Merriman and John Victor Murra, had biographies written about them. Merriman’s was written by his wife and relied on autobiographical material kept by Merriman himself (such as his diary, which was also available for archival research) as well as firsthand accounts from her time with him (Merriman and Lerude 1986). Murra’s was published in a special issue in *Andean Past* (2009) and was written in a series of articles from friends (Barnes 2009), colleagues (Block and Barnes 2009), and mentees (Lechtman, Wolf de Romero, Netherly, et al. 2009) that captured Murra’s experiences both as a communist youth fighting in the Spanish Civil War and as Professor of Anthropology at Cornell University.

Table 4. Archival Material of U.S. Foreign Fighter Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Material</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Correspondence</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diary</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autobiography</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oral History Interview</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speech/Public Statement</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biography</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Archival data was collected as systematically as possible. A checklist was established to permit the systematic and objective collection of data (see Appendix B). Every piece of archival material potentially contained evidence of a foreign fighter’s motivation. The archival checklist denoted what type of archival material was being examined, e.g., letter, diary, speech, public
statement, autobiography, oral history interview, or biography and then the potential factors hypothesized as motivating the foreign fighter were spelled out in checklist format so that if any of the variables presented were mentioned, they could be simply checked off. What this means is that for any given piece of archival material, multiple potential explanations could be checked off. In the end, numerous pieces of archival material, all attributed to a single individual fighter, could be examined and a clear picture of their motivations could be established based on the propensity of their explicit mentions of certain motivations.

**Data on Tunisian Foreign Fighters to ISIS in the Syrian Civil War**

A dataset of Tunisian foreign fighters was created using recruit dossiers known as the “ISIS border documents.” The dossiers included biographical information on 650 Tunisians who joined ISIS between 2011 and 2014. Twenty-four fields were included in the ISIS border documents. They included: 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 obedience, level of religious knowledge, place of current work, prior employment, travel history, point of entry into Syria, name of recommenders, date of entry, past jihadi experience, envisioned role with IS, specialty, deposit items, date of death, place of death, address to communicate with, and notes (Figure 2). The information in these documents is not publicly available and while full names were given in the documents, for this dissertation and future publications, they will remain confidential. It is important to note that the dossiers of the 650 Tunisian citizens represent approximately 20% of the roughly 3,000 Tunisians who traveled to Iraq and Syria. Therefore, while the ISIS border documents provide the most comprehensive
This demographic information was supplemented with interview and focus group findings produced by ITES (Tunisian Institute for Strategic Studies), which interviewed eighty-three individuals convicted of terrorism-related offenses in Tunisian prisons, fifty-seven of whom were (attempted or successful) foreign fighters to ISIS. ITES sought answers to a battery of questions, including name, date and place of birth, ethnicity, education, prior military service, marital status, vocation, and service dates. More in-depth information collected from these interviews and focus groups measured an individual’s degree of religiosity, degree of ethnic solidarity (i.e., identification as Arab), and degree of religious identity (i.e., identification as Sunni) and whether the individual fought for these values. Data was also collected on relevant socio-economic information such as the foreign fighter’s level of poverty, employment, education, and literacy and political information such as the foreign fighter’s degree of disenchantment with political institutions, and degree of adherence to a radical political ideology. Identities of all individuals were kept strictly confidential in the ITES reports.
It is important to note that, as was the case with U.S. foreign fighters to Spain, neither the ISIS border documents nor the interview and focus group data on fifty-seven foreign fighters are meant to be representative of the Tunisian foreign fighter population. There does not exist a complete accounting of the Tunisian foreign fighters who fought for ISIS. As previously mentioned, the ISIS border documents provide the most comprehensive demographic picture of Tunisian foreign fighters to date. Furthermore, the sample of fifty-seven Tunisian foreign fighters analyzed for the prison study were chosen based on convenience. These were the
individuals who were made available to Tunisian researchers by the Tunisian government, had met the criteria of having already been convicted of terrorism-related offenses for traveling to fight with ISIS, and the data for which were then made available to me. However, as was mentioned in Chapter One, this is the first-time detailed information on Tunisian foreign fighters has been made available to a researcher. The analysis of this data therefore illustrates, if it does not completely represent, aspects these individual’s motivations for becoming foreign fighters.

In addition to being able to analyze summaries of the ITES findings, I was able to interview the scholars responsible for overseeing the interviews and focus groups and I was able to probe the researchers on a battery of questions that would provide comparable data to what was available in the archives relating to the U.S. foreign fighters. Additional interview data was independently collected from friends, family members, and acquaintances who knew foreign fighters who joined ISIS or had returned, and from key members of Tunisia’s security sector, including members of Tunisia’s government, to provide the fullest picture of why Tunisians joined ISIS. This was in addition to informal, ethnographic interviews conducted over the course of multiple visits to Tunisia. Where appropriate, the full name and title of the individual interviewed is given with reference to the dates in which interviews were conducted. Information on returnees was kept strictly confidential.

**Conclusion**

This chapter presented the hypotheses being tested for the dissertation and explained how variables are operationalized. The chapter also detailed how the case studies were chosen and explained the specific method of inquiry. As previously mentioned in Chapter One, the theories
tested, and methods used for this study, make an important contribution to the nascent literature on foreign fighting. For example, by collating, for the first time, details about every U.S. foreign fighter that participated in the Spanish Civil War into a unique dataset will be useful for future qualitative or quantitative analyses of foreign fighters. Furthermore, the content analysis of the interview and focus group data on Tunisian foreign fighters who have returned from Iraq and Syria represent some of the first reported personal accounts of individual experiences with fighting for ISIS in the Syrian Civil War, which will help contribute to further analyses of Tunisian foreign fighters in comparative and historical perspective.

The next two chapters analyze, in-depth, the two cases under study. Chapter Four analyzes the U.S. foreign fighter who fought for the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War. The chapter begins by contextualizing the conflict in Spain with current events happening around the world, including a U.S. population contending with the difficulties of the Great Depression. It then provides a demographic overview of the roughly 3,000 U.S. citizens that became foreign fighters in Spain before dissecting the specific motivations of a sample of sixty U.S. foreign fighters. Chapter Five does the same with Tunisian foreign fighters. It begins by contextualizing the conflicts in Iraq and Syria by analyzing more in-depth the effects of the Arab Spring on the world and on Tunisia in particular. The chapter then provides a general demographic profile of Tunisian foreign fighters before analyzing the motivations of fifty-seven Tunisian foreign fighters.
CHAPTER FOUR
UNITED STATES FOREIGN FIGHTERS FOR THE INTERNATIONAL BRIGADES IN THE
SPANISH CIVIL WAR (1936-39)

Harry Fisher was eighteen years old and working as a department store clerk for the women’s division of the Sears Roebuck company on October 29, 1929 when the U.S. stock market crashed. In his autobiography, Fisher described the contrasting impacts that then had on his life and work. He was asked by his boss to bring a note to the Bank of the U.S. for an immediate transfer of $50,000 (approximately $750,000 in 2020 U.S. dollars) to be deposited in another bank. Fisher expressed utter shock when the transaction was processed without delay. Next, on the evening of that same day, Fisher came home to his working-class family to find his mother in tears having lost the family’s $1,500 (approximately $25,000 in 2020 U.S. dollars) savings that was being kept in the same Bank of the U.S. This series of events had a major impact on Fisher. He cited this as a critical moment in his move toward leftist politics; Fisher would go on to join and work for the Department Store Employee’s Union, later joining the Youth Communist League (YCL) and the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA). He became a life-long activist of worker’s rights and progressive politics.

Robert Hale Merriman was 20 years old and working as a department store clerk, for J.C. Penny, when the stock market crashed in 1929. Merriman experienced the effects of this market change not through the actions of family or coworkers but through the lens of economic theory. Merriman was an economics student at the University of Nevada when the crash occurred. He
had received a full university scholarship as a member of the Reserve Officer Training Corp (ROTC), had worked various jobs, like the one at the department store, to help secure additional income while living away from his modest home in California, and was from a moderately successful family where his father worked as a mechanic and mother as a fiction writer. Merriman was fascinated by the impact the market crash had on politics and at the suggestion by a faculty member, took up doctoral studies at the University of California at Berkeley in economics. Unlike with Fisher, Merriman’s experience with the depression was academic rather than personal and in 1935, he applied for and received a fellowship from Berkeley to study the economics of collective farming in Moscow, Russia. Inspired by other left-wing academics and critics living in Moscow at the time, Merriman became a strong proponent of progressive economic policy.

While having come from two very different backgrounds both Fisher and Merriman, then young department store clerks, cited these experiences as influential in their decision to travel to Spain in 1937 to fight for the Spanish Republic in the Spanish Civil War. Fisher served as a runner for Commander Oliver Law, the first African American to command an integrated military unit. Merriman, with his ROTC background, rose to the rank of Chief of Staff of the XV International Brigade, making him one of the highest-ranking U.S. citizens in the war. Merriman gave his life fighting in the war, having disappeared behind enemy lines during the Great Retreats of the International Brigades in March 1938, while Fisher lived until 2003, when he died at the age of ninety-two while in New York City (NYC) protesting the Iraq War.
Over the course of the Spanish Civil War, 60,000 individuals from fifty-four different countries would volunteer to fight for the International Brigades. Fisher and Merriman, along with a contingent of approximately 3,000 other U.S. citizens, formed the Abraham Lincoln Brigade,¹ a unit of the International Brigades made up of primarily U.S. citizens.² These individuals faced many barriers to participation, including a commitment of neutrality by the U.S., a legal ban on travel to Spain, and a lack of financing and organization to make the journey. As described in Chapter Two, classic theories of collection action, social movements, and organizational behavior suggest that economic incentives, personal victimization, and structural grievances are the dominant paradigms for understanding why contentious collective action, especially violent political action, occurs. But data from this chapter suggest that the dominant paradigms have limited explanatory value in this case. So, why did these U.S. citizens take the extraordinary risk of participating as foreign fighters in the Spanish Civil War? This chapter argues that the U.S. foreign fighters to Spain were primarily driven by an interaction of three factors.

The first and most important factor was the connection of U.S. foreign fighters to close-knit social networks that helped link their local struggles to the plight of the Spanish Republic.

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¹ The Abraham Lincoln Brigade was the first American unit of the XV International Brigades and was also known as the Abraham Lincoln Battalion, or the Lincoln Battalion for short. The second contingent of fighters to arrive in Spain in 1937 formed the George Washington Battalion. The casualties of both were so heavy that in mid-1937 the two were merged to form the Lincoln-Washington Battalion. Today, the contingent of American foreign fighters to Spain is colloquially known as the Abraham Lincoln Brigade.

² In late-1937, the newly formed Canadian MacKenzie-Papineau Battalion (“Mac-Pacs”) was incorporated into the XV International Brigades. Prior to the formation of this Canadian battalion, several Canadian volunteers were members of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. Many Americans who joined at the same time as Canadian volunteers were also placed with the Mac-Pacs. Two-thirds of the nominally Canadian unit were American.
Every member except for one individual, or 98% of the sample analyzed for this study, was linked to a network that helped foster recruitment and mobilization. As foreign sponsors of International Brigades, the CPUSA and the Communist International (Comintern) tapped both local and global recruitment networks of motivated individuals to help them overcome the physical barriers to mobilization. As indicated by demographic data on U.S. foreign fighters, these organizations targeted existing social networks for recruitment, especially trade unions and immigrant networks in major urban centers. These associations worked together to help register would-be U.S. foreign fighters for passports, created transit plans that helped U.S. foreign fighters circumvent the U.S. and European travel bans, and provided the financial support necessary to transport U.S. foreign fighters to Spain. Social networks stand out as a necessary condition driving the mobilization of U.S. foreign fighters to Spain for without it, even the most ideologically motivated individuals would have been unable to organize and travel successfully.

Second, U.S. foreign fighters were driven by an ideological and moral commitment to the Republic’s cause in Spain, most notably the defense of Spanish democracy and the left-wing political values of the Republic. The U.S. foreign fighters, therefore, conform to the original categorization made by Malet (2016), and detailed in Chapter One, that foreign fighters to the Spanish Civil War were, in fact, “true believers.” The commitment of U.S. foreign fighters to sacred values was significant; 92% of the sample cited sacred values as motivating their decision to fight for the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. Specifically, the U.S. foreign fighters believed that if they could not put a stop to the rising tide of global fascism, then the cause of global progressivism, as embodied by values such as worker’s rights and communism, would falter.
This commitment fostered these foreign fighters’ “will to fight” and made them susceptible to targeted recruitment.

Third, and finally, U.S. foreign fighters associated their working-class identities to a wider transnational collective identity that favored progressive economic and political policies. According to the demographic data on U.S. foreign fighters, 69% where an occupation could be determined had “blue-collar” professions and roughly one-third were members of a trade or labor union. U.S. foreign fighters saw Spain as a battleground for worker’s rights and by defending those rights in Spain they were fighting for those rights everywhere. This collective identity, which was cited by 68% of the sample, ultimately helped foster collective beliefs about the war and helped groups of individuals overcome psychological barriers that led them to the fight in Spain.

The remainder of this chapter is divided into four parts. The first details the background to the Spanish Civil War, both in Spain and in the U.S., to help provide situational context for the mobilization of U.S. foreign fighters to Spain. Section two details the demographic profile of the average U.S. foreign fighter using data on roughly 2,800 U.S. citizens who joined the International Brigades. Section three builds on this demographic profile by analyzing available archival data from a sample of sixty U.S. foreign fighters to test the six hypotheses presented in Chapter Three. The final section concludes with a summary and analysis of the findings.
Background to the Conflict

Spain before the War

On July 17, 1936, a faction of the Spanish army, led by General Francisco Franco, revolted against the Second Spanish Republic in an attempted coup d’état. The initial attempt failed to unseat the democratically elected Spanish government as groups of loyalists rallied to the defense of Spain, maintaining control of the capital, Madrid, and other major strongholds including Barcelona and Valencia. The rebels had been planning the coup d’état since January 1936, and by that summer had secured the support of around half of Spain’s Peninsular army, about 66,000 men, as well as the 30,000-strong Army of Africa (Beevor 2006). Both parties scrambled to generate stopgap armed support from abroad. By November of that year, Franco returned to the capital with a faction of his forces newly accompanied by Moroccan mercenaries, Italian tank units, and German Junkers, in a march over the Bridge of Toledo that spans the Manzanares River in Madrid. Over 10,000 people died or were injured in what became the most concerted and deadly effort of the war to capture the Spanish capital from the democratically elected Spanish government. A stiff resistance, and additional counterattacks by the newly established XV International Brigade made up of the Republic’s first foreign fighters, helped beat back Franco and keep the capital under Republican control.

To understand why these first deadly clashes transpired, and why the subsequent three-year long civil war was waged, it is important to understand the underlying causes of unrest and turbulence in Spain prior to the war. At the center of this conflict was a war of ideologies. It was a war of feudalism against socialism, authoritarianism against democracy, regionalism against...
centralization, and ultimately fascism against communism. Such ideological animosities date back to the unification of Spain in the sixteenth century when the country was at the height of its power. But the Spain of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, facing persistent economic and political unrest and a ruling class that consistently resisted progressive change, became a hotbed for radical reform movements seeking to establish a new order. In the context of rising political extremism around the turn of the twentieth century, specifically the rise of fascism and communism, Spain became one of the first flashpoints of what would become a global struggle between these two political extremes.

The attempted 1936 coup d’état was a military response to new liberal and democratic reforms in Spain. The alliance of nationalist forces that attacked the republic clung to conservative traditions such as Catholic monarchism, a feudal economic system, and strong state control (Beevor 2006). These traditions are best associated with the Spanish Reconquista (Reconquest) (711-1492), when Spain was reconsolidated and unified under the Christian rule of Ferdinand and Isabella. Under their rule, the feudal-military order that helped reunify Spain was complemented by new Catholic political forces by way of the Spanish Inquisition, which was formed to help oversee the conversion of Muslims and Jews to Christianity after Christian military forces expelled Muslim governments from the Iberian Peninsula (Boase 2002). Land rights were maintained by traditionalist Spanish landlords, all of whom were backed by the army and the clergy, and a large peasantry received little if any help from the state, which favored large landowners and producers (Fernsworth 1936). The traditional order was therefore simultaneously feudal and authoritarian. In the context of modern Spanish politics, and with
fascist political parties gaining strength in Spain in the 1930s, these traditions became the basis of the new nationalist ideology.

Spain was an outlier among other western European countries in terms of political and economic development. During the eighteenth century, unlike much of the continent, Spain had rejected the Enlightenment agenda of rationalism, productivism, and meritocracy. When Spain was invaded by Napoleonic France in the early-nineteenth century during the Napoleonic Wars (1803 – 1815), Spaniards associated Enlightenment-era thinking with a new form of European despotism (Boase 2002). The continued rejection of such principles ultimately stunted Spain’s development. One extreme result of this was a series of political crises, including thirty-seven attempted coups d’état (and counter-coups d’état) between 1810 – 1878 (twelve of which were successful) and a series of civil wars known as the Carlist Wars fought between liberals and the traditional order (Beevor 2006). In the course of those sixty-eight years, Spain went from a series of provincial juntas that fought against French occupation (1810 – 1814), a traditional monarchy under Ferdinand VII (1813 – 1833) and Isabella II (1833 – 1868), a democratic First Republic after the Glorious Revolution overthrew the monarchy (1868 – 1874), back to monarchical order after the Bourbon Restoration (1874 – 1931) when Alfonso XII, Isabella II’s son, ruled, until finally the proclamation of the democratically elected Second Spanish Republic and the abdication of power by Alfonso XIII (1931 – 1936).

Amidst all the turmoil, Spain experienced little by way of political or economic consistency. According to historian Stanley Payne (1993, 34), by 1930 “Spain was at the level of England in the 1850s and 1860s or France in the 1870s and 1880s. Neither mid-nineteenth
century England nor even France at the beginning of the Third Republic had to face such severe political tests as Spain underwent in the 1930s.” By the time the Spanish Second Republic was established in 1931, it was against the backdrop of a period of worldwide economic depression. So, while the Second Republic was established to herald in a new era of liberalism, democratization, and mass politics, in an era of widespread economic turmoil, it was unable to generate the economic growth necessary to keep up with high expectations. As a reaction to the lack of major reform amid great expectations, the elections of November 1933 resulted in another major shift as the majority of seats were won by the nationalists who favored a return to the tradition of a strong clergy, strong military, and traditional feudal arrangements, supplemented with new desires to repress Spain’s left-wing politicians. But when three years of conservative rule again resulted in nothing but increased repression and violence, the newly formed Popular Front alliance of anarchists, communists, and socialists won the January 1936 elections. The continued inconsistency and unrest resulted in a new plot to unseat the tumultuous republic by force. A broad coalition of anti-Republican forces emerged, made up of Spanish fascists, ultraconservatives, Carlists who favored traditional monarchy, and the military, whose generals would lead the rebellion to conquer the peninsula. The 1936 coup d’état resulted in another all-out civil war.

**The United States in the 1920s and 1930s**

The U.S. foreign fighters who joined the Abraham Lincoln Brigade came of age in the 1930s during the most severe economic crisis of the modern industrialized world. The crisis began in the U.S. after two consecutive days of record financial losses. Between October 28 and
October 29, 1929, days which became known as Black Monday and Black Tuesday, respectively, the New York Stock Exchange (NYSE) saw a market drop of nearly 25% in what remains the greatest economic downturn in financial history, marking the beginning of the decades-long Great Depression.

Understanding the economic situation of the U.S. during the 1920s and 1930s is important for explaining the environment in which future U.S. foreign fighters came to volunteer in the Spanish Civil War. But the political values that ultimately inspired the older fighters had existed long before this economic crisis. Many future foreign fighters that joined at the age of thirty or older (twenty-nine being the average age of a U.S. foreign fighter to Spain) received their political educations during the Great War and the anti-war peace demonstrations that launched in response to U.S. intervention in World War I. The anti-war demonstrations were just a subset of a wider, radical political moment in the U.S. that was marked by popular protest and unrest (Carroll 1994). This was the era of American populism and labor protests, the rise of socialism and communism, the peak strength of the Industrial Workers of the World, and of the first mass movements against racial, religious, and sexual injustice. Not only did many of the older U.S. foreign fighters participate in these movements, but these movements informed many of the future political and economic struggles that were to greet the U.S. during the Great Depression.

One of the products of the Great Depression was a rise, or in some cases reemergence, of a radical political fervor revolving around communist ideals. Beginning in 1929, the year that marked the beginning of the Great Depression, CPUSA activists formed the first “Unemployed
Councils” (renamed “Unemployment Councils” in 1934) to protest mass unemployment and inadequate government relief programs (Valocchi 1993). The organizers in major urban centers worked bread lines, employment office lines, government relief offices, and flop houses to increase membership in the CPUSA, declaring those out of work to be “the tactical key to present the state of the class struggle” (Cox 2012). Party organizers concentrated on direct action including holding rallies to incite mass agitation and focused on a dual approach of community and trade union unity.

CPUSA organizers also incited the rural heartlands. In states such as Iowa and Nebraska, newly formed groups, such as the Farm Holiday Movement, organized protest movements and direct action such as when farmers built roadblocks on highways leading to the agricultural markets in Omaha, Sioux City, and Des Moines to protest rising agricultural prices and lower sales (Ganzel 2003). In Madison County, Nebraska, farmers organized into the Madison County Plan, whose members began listening to communist organizer, “Mother” Ella Reeve Bloor who had come to the Midwest to build alliances between urban workers and radical farmers. The CPUSA successfully recruited thousands of rural farmers during the 1930s and party organizers successfully provoked mass protests across the entire country, including mass demonstrations in both urban and rural cities where CPUSA banners were adorned with slogans like “Fight—Don’t Starve” (Cox 2012).

By 1936, the world had been ravaged by consecutive years of economic hardship and mass unemployment. While the U.S. saw a broad expansion of communist activity in response to economic hardships, in other countries, most notably Germany, Italy, and Japan, fascist political
parties were achieving victory. By the time the Spanish Civil War began in the summer of 1936, fascism and communism seemed to be on a collision course. In the Seventh (and final) World Congress of the Comintern in 1935, the Congress officially endorsed the “Popular Front” against fascism, which advocated for global communist political parties to align with any anti-fascist political party. The declaration of the Popular Front had a major and immediate impact in the U.S. It became a rallying point for millions of leftists who saw this as a chance to not only stop fascism but also to see the establishment of new leftist governments. The declaration facilitated the election in 1936 of Popular Front governments in France and Spain. That same year, Germany and Japan signed the Anti-Comintern Pact, aimed at countering the Soviet Union and its Communist allies. By the time Franco’s forces attempted to overthrow the government in Madrid, it was already clear that Spain was about to become the first confrontation between fascism and communism.

Demographic Data on U.S. Foreign Fighters

Researchers interested in the foreign fighters who participated in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade historically worked with data that was incomplete and limited to a small number of combatants. Because of the covert nature of the recruitment of foreign fighters for the Brigades, records were not thoroughly kept. Furthermore, many of the records that were likely kept were either lost or destroyed at the end of the war to prevent them falling into the hands of the victorious nationalist forces (Carroll 1994). One surviving document compiled in 1937 by the International Brigade Commanders entitled, “General Report on 1,745 People from the United States” (hereafter GR 1937) is the only surviving document with an accounting of U.S. foreign
fighters. The document provides the self-reported demographic information of U.S. foreign fighters including their ages, military experience, political affiliation, nationality (ethnic composition), domicile (states and cities), and profession. It nevertheless is a mere snapshot of the final population because it was compiled in the summer of 1937 before recruitment was complete.

As introduced in Chapter Three, I was able to create an original dataset of 2,800 foreign fighters by drawing on a new online database, the “ALBA database,” which is maintained by the non-profit Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives (ALBA), in partnership with New York University’s Tamiment Library. The ALBA database draws on previously published rosters of volunteers put together by the Passport Office of the U.S. Department of State (1986) and findings from independent genealogical researchers. The database includes a patchwork of biographical information on 2,800 volunteers, including not only foreign fighters but also volunteer medical staff and other personnel. However, the database is not meant to be a source for complete demographic data on the U.S. foreign fighters. It is instead primarily used as a reference database to help researchers find archival material on all U.S. volunteers that is housed in the Tamiment Library.

I used the ALBA database as a starting point. I eliminated irrelevant entries, ensured there were no duplicate entries, and then supplemented the database with estimates drawn from other scholars and my own original research uncovered from the personal records of U.S. foreign fighters. The result was a new, original dataset that allowed me to construct a more nuanced demographic picture of the U.S. foreign fighters for the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. It also
provided a more complete profile of foreign fighters according to the six sets of theoretical explanations set out in Chapter Two.

**Demographic Profile of U.S. Foreign Fighters**

During the Spanish Civil War, writers and propagandists who worked to bolster the image of the volunteer units in Spain often described the U.S. contingent as an eclectic mix of nationalities, religions, and political affiliations. In describing what type of U.S. citizen would join the war effort, Joseph North, a reporter working for the *Daily Worker*, wrote, “draw a cross-section of America and pick representatives from all strata (excluding Herbert Hoover’s friends) and you will have it.” One spokesman writing on behalf of the Friends of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade foundation wrote that, “From Missouri, Alabama, California, North Dakota, Pennsylvania and New York; from small hamlets and large cities; from cement foundries and universities, men left their work to fight for democracy – Americans, all of them.” Such descriptions were meant to paint these volunteers as “typical” or “everyday” U.S. citizens.

Propaganda cut both ways. In a pamphlet written by pro-Franco forces after the war, it described the Americans as “deplorable,” stating that the combatants from the U.S. were “Negroes from Broadway, Chinese from the ports of New York and Los Angeles, gangsters from Chicago and militants from the Communist sections of Philadelphia. This battalion also included American Indians. For enlisting, each man was given a large sum of money – some four hundred dollars at least.” While such nationalist propaganda was meant to smear the image of the volunteer units of the civil war, the fact of the matter was that there were grains of truth among
the more obvious falsehoods. The reality was that these foreign fighters were not typical U.S. citizens nor were they a mix of “deplorables.”

According to the 1930 U.S. Census, the typical U.S. citizen was likely young and married; 55% of the population was under the age of 30 and more than 60% of adults (both men and women) were married. Selecting a U.S. citizen at random and one would be equally as likely to select someone from a major city or rural hamlet; approximately 55% of the U.S. population resided in urban areas and 45% resided in rural areas. Unemployment was at an unprecedented high in the 1930s because of the Great Depression but of the 40% of the population that was employed, roughly 52% were employed in blue-collar jobs and 48% were employed in white-collar ones. The vast majority, roughly 89%, of the U.S. population was categorized by the 1930 Census as “native white” or “foreign white” (i.e., of European descent) though only 21% of the population had at least one parent that was foreign-born. To what extent do the U.S. foreign fighters conform to the classifications of the typical U.S. citizen in the 1930s and how could the data potentially illuminate their reasons for joining the Abraham Lincoln Brigade?

First, while foreign fighters did come from every U.S. state as well as Hawaii and Puerto Rico (Table 5), these individuals did not come from small towns or hamlets. The overwhelming majority of U.S. foreign fighters came from urban environments with a disproportionate number of them coming from NYC (Table 6). Almost 40% of the fighters where a location could be determined came from NYC and its environs. Factoring in the next three leading residential areas, Chicago, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, and it is revealed that 50% of the entire foreign

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3 There were only 48 states in the union in 1936. Hawaii and Alaska would join the Union in 1959. Table 5 includes 49 entries: the 48 states in the Union and Washington D.C.
fighter contingent came from just those four geographic locations. Further analyzing the 
distribution of foreign fighters by population of the residential area from which they came 
reveals that roughly 70% of the foreign fighters where the location could be determined came 
from the largest U.S. cities, those with a population of greater than 1 million residents.

Propaganda from Spain directed against the International Brigades used racist overtones 
in its description of the U.S. foreign fighters while International Brigade propaganda praised 
their diversity. Many foreign fighters acknowledged this diversity, referring to the Brigade as 
“the first fully integrated American fighting unit.” In 1937, U.S. foreign fighters were asked to 
self-identify their ethnicity when demographic information was being collected for GR 1937. 
Many of these fighters identified their ethnicity as simply “American” but a large number also 
identified their ethnicity as “Jewish.” According to Spanish Civil War historian Christopher 
Brooks (2017), “it is unusual to the modern eye to see ‘Jewish’ as an ethnic group,” but 
according to scholars (e.g., see Karpov, Lisovskaya, and Barry 2012), Jews consistently report 
fusing their Judaism (religion) with their ethnic identities, choosing to identify as much with the 
religious traditions as with the common national and cultural traditions (both markers of ethnic 
identity). As recorded by GR 1937, the largest defined ethnic groupings were “American” (403 
foreign fighters) and then “Jewish” (235 foreign fighters). In my dataset, “American” is not one 
of the coded nationalities since every member of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade was a U.S. 
citizen but because U.S. foreign fighters chose to self-identify their ethnicities as Jewish in 
previous records, “Jewish” has been retained as an ethnic identifier.
### Table 5. State Data of U.S. Foreign Fighters
(in order of intensity as measured per 100,000 state population)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Raw Total</th>
<th>Rate per 100,000 population</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Raw Total</th>
<th>Rate per 100,000 population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New York</td>
<td>934</td>
<td>7.419726</td>
<td>Nebraska</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0.5079962</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>California</td>
<td>273</td>
<td>4.808665</td>
<td>New Mexico</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.4724592</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>3.390056</td>
<td>Arizona</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.4591653</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington DC</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3.080911</td>
<td>Wyoming</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.4432919</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Massachusetts DC</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>2.870849</td>
<td>Delaware</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.4194983</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wisconsin</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>2.041507</td>
<td>Utah</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.3938194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>2.031281</td>
<td>Iowa</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0.364234</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michigan</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>1.858611</td>
<td>North Dakota</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.2937526</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maryland</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>1.838769</td>
<td>Indiana</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0.2470277</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Hampshire</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1.648489</td>
<td>Idaho</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.2247029</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minnesota</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>1.638096</td>
<td>Kansas</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.212653</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ohio</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>1.504507</td>
<td>Mississippi</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.1990227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pennsylvania</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>1.287462</td>
<td>Montana</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.1860098</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhode Island</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1.163641</td>
<td>Alabama</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.1511574</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nevada</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.098201</td>
<td>South Dakota</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.1443316</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Jersey</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>1.039261</td>
<td>West Virginia</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.1156601</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecticut</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>0.995704</td>
<td>Tennessee</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.114567</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Florida</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0.885431</td>
<td>Arkansas</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.1078468</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oregon</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0.838763</td>
<td>Texas</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.1030093</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maine</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.752424</td>
<td>Louisiana</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.0951659</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colorado</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0.675812</td>
<td>North Carolina</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.094629</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oklahoma</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>0.667768</td>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.0825815</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missouri</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>0.661272</td>
<td>South Carolina</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.0575121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kentucky</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0.595655</td>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.0343819</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vermont</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.556157</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Total foreign fighters = 2,323. Population totals are broken down by state and are based on the United States 1930 census.

### Table 6. Leading Residential Data of U.S. Foreign Fighter

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>Raw Total</th>
<th>City</th>
<th>Raw Total</th>
<th>City</th>
<th>Raw Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New York City</td>
<td>876</td>
<td>Philadelphia</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>Pittsburgh</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chicago</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>Boston</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>Baltimore</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Los Angeles</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>Cleveland</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>Minneapolis</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Francisco (Bay Area)</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>Milwaukee</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Long Island</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detroit</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>Seattle</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Essex/Hudson Counties, New Jersey</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total: 1,717
According to the dataset, 1,250 Jews from the U.S. served in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade beside nearly 6,000 Jews from fifty-four different countries (Prago 1979). According to population data on Jewish communities collected in 1937, Jews comprised less than 4% of the total U.S. population in the 1930s. While a comparatively small percentage of the total population, Jews resided overwhelmingly in urban U.S. cities with approximately 88% of the 4.6 million U.S. Jews residing in cities with a population of greater than 1 million residents. The urban environ where the most Jews resided, measured by both total numbers and as a percent of the total local population, was NYC, where, in 1937, 4 million Jews lived, comprising roughly 30% of the entire population of NYC (Linfield 1938).

Table 7. Ethnic Composition of U.S. Foreign Fighters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>1,250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norwegian</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danish</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slavic</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romanian</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexican</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Croatian</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovak</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swiss</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greek/Cypriot</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Puerto Rican</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latvian</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armenian</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ukrainian</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovenian</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irish</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungarian</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armenian</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finnish</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serbian</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dutch</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russian</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lithuanian</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portuguese</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polish</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scottish</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canadian</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austrian</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulgarian</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgian</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filipino</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Czechoslovakian</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hawaiian</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Total entries = 2,440. Some individuals have two ethnicities coded. This occurs when individuals report having parents from two different ethnic groups.

Of the race-based propaganda that was deployed by the nationalist forces in Spain, as well as the fascist propaganda used in Hitler’s Germany and Mussolini’s Italy, the most abundant target of propaganda was Jews. For example, in a radio broadcast that aired on October 10, 1936, Spanish General Queipo de Llano, who was working alongside Franco to overthrow the Spanish
Republic, declared that “Our war is not a Spanish civil war, it is a war of Western civilization against the Jews of the entire world. The Jews want to destroy the Christians who, according to them, ‘came from the devil.’” Anti-Semitic demagogy was integral to the Nazi-fascist takeover of parts of Europe, which was clearly influential in the lead-up to the Spanish Civil War. This was a significant factor in influencing Jews to join the war effort, and a topic that is picked up in greater detail below.

Roughly 80% of U.S. foreign fighters had at least one parent who was foreign-born compared to roughly 21% of the total U.S. population that had at least one parent who was foreign-born. This finding explains why immigrant organizations in the U.S. played such a visible role in garnering support for the Spanish Republic, likely motivating many U.S. foreign fighters to join the war effort. Immigrant groups were especially vocal in major urban areas like NYC, which according to the 1930 census, had the largest density of immigrants in the country. For example, in 1937 a group of ethnic Basques, dressed in traditional clothing, protested outside of the German consulate in NYC after the bombing of Guernica by the Nazi German Luftwaffe’s Condor Legion on April 26, 1937 (Ottanelli 2007). In another series of events that occurred in NYC, groups of Italian immigrants from rival left-wing political organizations worked together to organize regular protests outside of Italy’s consular offices, located in Rockefeller Center, where participants chanted anti-fascist slogans and shouted messages of support for both Ethiopia, which Italy invaded in 1935, and Spain (Ottanelli 2007). Being surrounded by this type of political activism helped foster collective beliefs about fascism and the wars in Europe, and likely had a strong influence on would-be U.S. foreign fighters.
Most U.S. foreign fighters were members of a communist or socialist organization, many of them members of either the CPUSA or the YCL. Estimates collated from various data sources put CPUSA affiliation among the U.S. foreign fighters at 1,400 with YCL membership at 400 (Table 8). The finding corresponds to global statistics of Communist Party membership among foreign fighters to the Spanish Civil War, where scholars have estimated that well over half of all foreign fighters were members of their local Communist Party (see e.g., McLellan 2006; Baxell 2004; Pavlakovic 2010). While communists made up a majority of members in the International Brigades, in the U.S., the CPUSA was a minority political organization.

In 1937, membership in the CPUSA was at 38,000. This is based on CPUSA records of “dues collections,” or regular fees paid for active membership. The difficulty in comparing CPUSA membership with that of other major parties in the U.S. is that the major parties (Democrats and Republicans) never developed systems to collect dues from members, instead relying on voluntary contributions. Furthermore, in the 1930s, “party enrollment” data was not kept at the national-level and not every locale kept such data. Therefore, one cannot adequately compare “active” party membership. One way to highlight the membership differences between major parties and CPUSA membership is to examine campaign finance data from the 1936 presidential election, when incumbent Democratic Franklin D. Roosevelt carried forty-six states to Republican challenger Alf Landon’s two. The data reveals that Landon received voluntary individual contributions from more than 100,000 U.S. citizens while Roosevelt received contributions from over 600,000 citizens (Berdahl 1942). However, this data still does not capture the scope of individual enrollment with major parties. For example, looking at party
enrollment data for the 1936 Gubernatorial vote in NYC alone reveals that Democrats had 3.2 million members enrolled while Republicans had 2 million (Berdahl 1942). Regardless of which metric is examined, these findings suggest that while CPUSA membership was growing in the 1930s, it had limited support compared to that of the dominant political parties.

While the CPUSA remained a minority organization in U.S. politics, CPUSA district membership data can reveal U.S. foreign fighter recruitment trends. According to 1934 data on CPUSA membership by district (no district level data was reported for 1935-36), there were twenty-four district headquarters all located in major cities across the U.S. The three largest headquarters were District 2 (NYC), District 8 (Chicago), and District 13 (Los Angeles), which together accounted for 46% of all CPUSA membership in 1934. By 1937, the CPUSA had expanded to thirty-five district offices across the U.S. However, even with broader geographic coverage and a roughly 66% increase in membership over the three-year period, Districts 2, 8, and 13 increased membership by an even greater degree to account for more than 60% of CPUSA’s total membership (see Gregory 2020).

Further analyzing CPUSA membership data alongside the recruitment rate by state of U.S. foreign fighters (refer back to Table 5) reveals that, by looking at the top ten states by rate of recruitment (New York, California, Washington, Washington DC, Massachusetts, Wisconsin, Illinois, Michigan, Maryland, and New Hampshire), six of those ten states (New York, California, Washington, Massachusetts, Illinois, and Michigan) were home to the six largest CPUSA district offices in the U.S. However, the four states without major district offices, Washington DC, Wisconsin, Maryland, and New Hampshire, all had close, multi-regional offices
housed in nearby major cities: Philadelphia covered Maryland, Delaware, and Washington DC, Boston covered all of New England (including New Hampshire), and Minneapolis was categorized as covering Wisconsin (though Chicago acted as an additional regional office as it was closer to Wisconsin’s urban center of Milwaukee). This data suggests the CPUSA and Comintern targeted their own backyards for recruitment, strategically tapping networks of willing, communist participants for war. This finding is further bolstered by data on the overall trend in CPUSA membership throughout the 1930s, which was seeing an expansion in the late-1930s, providing a larger recruitment pool for Spanish Civil War recruiters (Figure 3).

Table 8. Official Political Party Affiliation of U.S. Foreign Fighters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CPUSA</td>
<td>1,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YCL</td>
<td>400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anarchist</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socialist</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labor</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Party</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>880</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total: 2,124
Figure 3. Communist Party, USA Membership by Year (1922-1943)

Note: Data is based on “dues collections per year.” There was a limited collection of dues collected in 1935 and 1936 because of the Great Depression. Data was also not collected between 1940-42 because of World War II (see Gregory 2020).

The average age of a U.S. foreign fighter to the Spanish Civil War was nearly thirty years old (Table 9), approximately three years older than the average U.S. male citizen in 1930. What skews this average is the fact that so few volunteers under the age of twenty-one became foreign fighters. This is surprising considering that individuals usually volunteer for the armed forces, at least in the U.S., at the age of eighteen, and usually only serve on tours lasting for approximately four years, at which point the volunteer would be twenty-two. Most of the U.S. foreign fighters were single when they joined the war effort. Best estimates from available data indicate that at least 1,260 (75%) foreign fighters where a marital status could be determined were single, another fifty-two (3%) were divorced, eight (<1%) widowed, and only 364 (22%) were married when they joined. This is significantly different from the 60% of U.S. adult men that were married in 1930.
Table 9. U.S. Foreign Fighter Age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>17-20</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-25</td>
<td>539</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26-30</td>
<td>577</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-35</td>
<td>292</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36-40</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41-45</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46-50</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51-55</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56-59</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60+</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>29.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entries</td>
<td>1758</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most of the foreign fighters, approximately 69% where occupation could be determined, would be considered “blue-collar” or “working-class.” Though unemployment in the 1930s was at an all-time high in the U.S., based on census data from 1930, those who were employed were almost equally as likely to be employed in blue-collar professions as white-collar ones (53% and 47% respectively). It is difficult to discern how many of the U.S. foreign fighters were members of labor unions prior to joining. According to Rosenstone (1965, 330), who analyzed newspaper data relating to Abraham Lincoln Brigade activity prior to the war, event data suggests that “more than one third of them [U.S. foreign fighters] had witnessed violence and often death on the picket lines,” suggesting that at least one third of U.S. foreign fighters were not only union members, but active ones. Comparatively, U.S. union membership was historically low in the 1930s. U.S. Department of Labor (2020) statistics reveal that union membership was only at about 7% of the total labor force in 1935 and was below 5% in 1930 (data is reported every five years). However, U.S. union membership was increasing in two trade unions during this same
period; the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) and the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT), both of which represented transport workers. The two most prominent occupations in the demographic data on U.S. foreign fighters were maritime worker/seaman and truck driver (Table 10), which are both transport professions that saw high union membership. Both unions also have a history of being described as “militant” and “radical” (see Nelson 1990), an issue that will be discussed in greater detail below.

Table 10. U.S. Foreign Fighter Occupation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maritime Workers/Seaman</td>
<td>228</td>
<td>Cook</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Printer</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Truck Driver</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>Packing House Worker</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Civilian Conservation Corps</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unskilled Worker</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>Electrical Worker</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Carpenter</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerks</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>Miner</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Office Worker</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steel/Metal Worker</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>Lumber Worker</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Social Worker</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Automobile Worker</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>Fur Worker</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Tailor</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Machinist</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>Day Laborer</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Oil Worker</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Actor/Director</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Public Employee</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Construction Worker</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Taxi Driver</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food/Restaurant Employee</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Newspaper Employee</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Garment Worker</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Union Organizer</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Communist Party Organizer</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Attorney</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher/Professor</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Fireman</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Statistician</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mechanic</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Accountant</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Painter</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Dentist/Technician</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total: 1,313</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One of the more difficult demographic characteristics to establish is the level of educational attainment of the U.S. foreign fighters. There are several answers to why this might be the case. The first is that most of the foreign fighters were drawn from the working class and did not have a need for formal education outside of high school. Another explanation is that many individuals who were enrolled in higher education during the Great Depression were forced to discontinue their education in favor of employment. Finally, many individuals at this
time attended specialty schools such as a local trade school or a “workers school” sponsored by the CPUSA. However, a cursory search of available records reveals that at least 200 of the volunteers attended at some college though it is nearly impossible to establish the percentage that graduated. Because of how occupational data has been previously collected, it is also difficult to ascertain which professions may have necessitated at least a college degree. Of the occupations listed in Table 10, it can be inferred that some jobs, for example “attorneys,” required a college degree. However other positions, for example “clerks” or “office workers,” may or may not have required college-level education.

The cross section of U.S. foreign fighters tells a fascinating story of the U.S. foreign fighters to Spain. The “average foreign fighter” was unlike the “average American” or “average American man” in the 1930s, which helps explain why this subset of individuals became foreign fighters. The average U.S. foreign fighter was in their late-twenties and lived in an urban/industrial environment where the CPUSA, trade unions, and large immigrant populations flourished. The average foreign fighter was more likely than the average U.S. citizen to be a member of the working class experiencing the perils of the Great Depression and struggling to unionize. The average foreign fighter was also a communist, though if not, was predisposed to left-leaning values, and he was likely swept up in the fervor of the large political and social causes of the day. It is not surprising that a large portion of recruits came from urban centers like NYC, with its high density of blue-collar union workers, communists, immigrants or first-generation U.S. citizens, and Jews, which were all common demographic traits of the U.S.
foreign fighters. The next section analyzes the specific motivations of a sample of U.S. foreign fighters to try to explain why this demographic went to Spain to fight in the Spanish Civil War.

**Why U.S. Citizens Fought in the Spanish Civil War**

As mentioned in the previous chapter, this study relies on a sample of sixty U.S. foreign fighters to test six theories that may explain why individuals take the extraordinary risk of joining a foreign conflict. Due to the patchwork of available information on U.S. foreign fighters and the fact that there exist surviving records for only a small subset of the fighters, it was not possible to draw a representative sample. It is therefore important to highlight the demographic differences between the sixty-member sample and the total population of foreign fighters analyzed in the previous section. The first difference is that fifty-seven of the sixty foreign fighters, or 95% of the sample, were dues paying members of either the CPUSA or YCL before their arrival in Spain. Roughly 65% of the total foreign fighter population where party affiliation could be established were members of either the CPUSA or YCL. Another difference is that forty-four of the sixty-person sample, or 73%, were Jewish whereas from the total foreign fighter population only one-third identified as Jewish. A final difference is that the average age of the sample is twenty-five. Data collected for this study and from the more conservative GR 1937 census both put the average age at twenty-nine.

Many of the other characteristics of the sample align with that of the foreign fighter population. In the sample, where marital status could be determined, forty-one, or roughly 68%, were single, two divorced, and nine married. In the U.S. foreign fighter population, 75% were single. Forty, or roughly 67%, were from NYC compared to 42% of the foreign fighter
population that came from NYC. Five members of the sample were from Boston and its surrounding suburbs, four came from San Francisco, three from Cleveland and its surrounding suburbs, three from Detroit and its surrounding suburbs, and one each from Chicago, New Jersey, Knoxville, Pittsburgh, and Superior, Wisconsin. The sample is like the U.S. foreign fighter population in that most of the foreign fighters came from urban environments though only eleven of the fifty states are represented. Finally, there are similarities between the sample and the population in terms of the occupations of the foreign fighters. Like the population, maritime workers/seamen are well represented in the sample. However, unlike the population, there is a predominance of students in the sample. Otherwise, there is a diverse mix of professions among the fighters with the majority of them also being employed in blue-collar professions.

**Overview of U.S. Foreign Fighter Motivations**

Historian of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, Peter Carroll (1994, 14), wrote that, to pose the question of why U.S. foreign fighters enlisted in the Spanish Civil War, “is to broach nearly 3,000 biographies, each linking a personal choice to a social background or an ideology.” While every foreign fighter has a distinctive story and background, general trends can be found in the archival data relating to the decision-making of the U.S. foreign fighters.

The general trend regarding U.S. foreign fighter motivations is presented in Table 11. In creating this tabulation, an individual can cite multiple motivations for becoming a foreign fighter, but each motivation can only be cited one time. Every hypothesis is represented at least once. While the general findings suggest that the U.S. foreign fighters to the Spanish Civil War joined primarily because they had concrete relationships with other fighters, recruiters, or
individuals that motivated them to join (98%), because they had a strong commitment to sacred
values (92%), and because they felt a shared orientation and connection to a collective group
fighting in Spain (68%), it is the interaction of these variables that tell the story of the U.S.
foreign fighters. Below, I further contextualize these findings, use qualitative content analysis to
analyze how these variables interact to create a more robust explanation for foreign fighting, and
discuss the relevance these trends have for the theories being tested.

Table 11. Motivations of Sixty U.S. Foreign Fighters
(in order of most to least significant)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypothesis</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>H6: Social Network</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>98.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H4: Sacred Values</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>91.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H5: Collective Identity</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>68.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H2: Personal Victimization</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H3: Structural Grievances</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H1: Economic Incentives</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unidentified Reasons</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Categories correspond to the hypotheses detailed in Chapter Three. Each category has an upper limit of 60 because each
foreign fighter from the sample can only fit into a category one time. It is possible for an individual to cite more than one
motivation for becoming a foreign fighter.

**Social Networks**

Max Schwartz believed he was the perfect candidate for the war in Spain because of his
lack of personal ties. In a diary entry dated December 12, 1937, Schwartz wrote, “Spain needed
men, and I was the sort of comrade who could go easily. I had no strong ties here – no wife –
father and mother dead” (Max Schwartz, Box 1, Folder 1, ALBA, Tamiment Library, New York
University). Schwartz’s feelings of alienation led him to believe that his life could be more easily expended for the cause. But while Schwartz may have cited alienation as a reason for joining in
this specific diary entry, in a later entry he writes that it was a speech given by Earl Browder,
General Secretary of the CPUSA, that he heard while at a meeting with fellow members and friends at the State Office of the YCL, that ultimately drove his decision to go to Spain. Six members from that branch would ultimately go on to become foreign fighters with Schwartz. In addition, Schwarz was supported by his sister Francis, “Francis is a comrade – levelheaded. She thought I was doing right,” and by his friends and fellow communists, Charlie, Lillie, and Johnny, “‘You are exceptional,’ they tell me. ‘You are better than the average communist,’” Schwartz wrote in a January 10, 1938 diary entry. What Schwartz’s diary reveals is that the decision to become a foreign fighter was far from being solely an internalized communion with ideology, alienation, and personal circumstances, but was made in a social context, alongside networks of friends, family, and colleagues.

The archival data on U.S. foreign fighters provides overwhelming evidence that social networks were a necessary condition for the U.S. foreign fighter mobilization to Spain thereby supporting the hypothesis laid out in Chapter Three (Hypothesis #6), that an individual will join a foreign conflict if they have preexisting social ties and linkages to other foreign fighters in a network. Evidence from the personal accounts of the sixty-member sample of U.S. foreign fighters reveals that fifty-nine, or 98%, of them had a personal connection to someone that was also involved in the Spanish Civil War.

While it was difficult to determine with certainty the type of relationship a foreign fighter had with a networked connection in Spain (e.g., was the connection a close friend or simply a colleague?), when a concrete relationship could be established between one or more individuals, a social network connection was coded in the dataset. Using this strategy, numerous connections
were made by analyzing the life histories and writings of U.S. foreign fighters. One example begins with the brothers, Joe and Leo Gordon. Born Joe and Leo Mendelowitz, the two were born a year apart in 1914 and 1915, respectively, and were raised in the Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York. The two brothers spent their youth traveling together on the west coast, working jobs in Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas until eventually finding work with the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), working jobs out of Tennessee, Idaho, and Wyoming. Together the two adopted the name “Gordan,” which Joe referred to as their “red name,” prior to sailing to Spain to become foreign fighters. Joe sailed to Spain first, in December 1936, at the age of 22 and Leo followed his brother seven months later in July 1937, also at the age of 22. Because of the difference in sail date, the two brothers ended up not serving together in the International Brigades, but they both kept in contact with the same cousin back home, Gus, and were able to keep regular tabs on each other via letters between themselves and other volunteers.

The fascinating thing about the Gordon brothers is not the connection to each other. It is the connections they also had to other members in the sample. Joe and Leo knew from their Williamsburg neighborhood four other foreign fighters from the sample: Elias Begelman, Jack Freeman, Jack Friedman, and Jacob Shafran. Leo was close with, and joined and served alongside, Hy Stone, a U.S. foreign fighter who was not in the sample, but happened to be close friends with Harry Fisher, who grew up in a different Brooklyn neighborhood with his other best friend, Butch Entin, another member of the sample. Fisher and Entin were both members of the Local 1250 of the Department Store Employees Union and took part in several militant protests.
that were organized by Jack Shafran, whose leading role in the protests would land him in Rikers Island for 90 days. Nine other individuals from Local 1250 also became foreign fighters. Fisher had also attended Commonwealth College, a labor college specifically aimed at the industrial worker, in Polk County, Arkansas in 1932. Forty-three alumni of Commonwealth College became foreign fighters, including two additional members of the sample, Marion Noble and Paul Sigel, who attended the college with Fisher. Paul Sigel was close friends with two other members of the sample, Ernest Arion and Harold Malofsky, all from NYC, who became foreign fighters together. Arion and Malofsky were both comedians who were involved in an International Workers Order theater group called the “Convulsionaries” in NYC and wanted to bring their talents to Spain to not only fight but to entertain the troops by writing songs and performing for them. All three men, Arion, Malofsky, and Sigel, joined the Abraham Lincoln Brigade together and wrote letters to Miriam “Mim” Sigel, Paul’s sister.

The web of interconnectedness established among these twelve members of the sample (Arion, Begelman, Entin, Fisher, Freeman, Friedman, Gordon, Gordon, Malofsky, Noble, Shafran, and Sigel) that were connected to no less than forty-four additional U.S. foreign fighters not in the sample, is emblematic of how networks influenced recruitment for the Spanish Civil War. Expanding the analysis to the rest of the sample reveals several trends that were common among the foreign fighters. First is the importance of geography. As previously mentioned, most of population of U.S. foreign fighters came from urban environments. In the sample, 65% of the foreign fighters came from NYC. One explanation for this trend is the density of CPUSA and union networks that were present in NYC at the time. The CPUSA and the Comintern were vital
in organizing the physical journey of foreign fighters to Spain and their networks of recruitment in urban areas, especially in NYC, were crucial in spreading the word about recruitment (Kirschenbaum 2015). While 95% of the sample were dues paying members of the CPUSA, 100% of the U.S. foreign fighters from NYC were dues paying members. In addition to involvement in the CPUSA, it can be determined that at least twenty of the sixty individuals in the sample were also members of a union and among the NYC residents in the sample, fourteen of the forty can be confirmed as being members of a union.

The importance of organizations like the CPUSA, Comintern, and labor unions cannot be understated. From an organizational perspective, the U.S. foreign fighters to Spain never would have been able to make the journey had it not been for the CPUSA and associated organizations like the Comintern. These organizations funded the trip of nearly every U.S. volunteer, helped U.S. foreign fighters obtain passports (both legally and illegally), and helped U.S. foreign fighters circumvent the U.S. and European travel bans by helping the fighters navigate first through France and then into Spain through the Pyrenees Mountains. Not only did the CPUSA and Comintern organize the technical aspects of U.S. foreign fighter recruitment, but these organizations also fostered an environment where foreign fighter recruitment networks flourished. An active strategy of recruitment was for members of the CPUSA and YCL to recruit their friends through word-of-mouth and have them sign up for the brigades at their local office to be later referred to CPUSA leadership. This process was described by numerous U.S. foreign fighters in oral history interviews conducted by both John Gerassi, who conducted oral history interviews in 1980, and Manny Herriman, who conducted oral history interviews in 1985-86, and
were themselves both veteran foreign fighters. In an interview with John Gerassi, veteran foreign fighter John Gates spoke about his friend, who he described as “the guy who indirectly was the cause of my becoming a communist,” as the reason he joined the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. After many discussions relating to Spain, Gates admits that “…of course, this is what he was waiting for, you know, waiting for me to volunteer.” After Gates had been contacted by the CPUSA, he was told he had to continue to recruit other potential fighters; “even then, before I could go, I had to try and recruit other people to go to Spain, which I did succeed getting a number of others from the area who went with me.” Ultimately, the strategy succeeded in linking many friends and acquaintances together as recruits, which can explain why so many recruits knew one-another and why recruitment nodes are so easily identified.

Union membership and union recruitment networks represent another important aspect in the story of U.S. foreign fighter recruitment. In the early years of the Great Depression, the future of organized labor was bleak. By 1933, labor union membership had fallen from five million members at the end of 1929 to approximately three million. The labor movement, which began at the end of the nineteenth century, had so far failed to organize the much larger number of laborers in the steel, textiles, mining, and automobiles industries, which are considered the “mass production” industries or “industrial unions,” instead organizing most of its membership from skilled “craft unions,” most of which were affiliated with the American Federation of Labor (AFL) such as carpenters and shoemakers (Nelson 1990). The lack of growth in industrial union membership would vastly change with the passage of the New Deal, a series of public works programs and financial reforms enacted by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1933. The
Roosevelt administration adopted a strong, pro-union stance. First, the National Industrial Recovery Act (1933) provided for collective bargaining and the National Labor Relations Act (also known as the Wagner Act, 1935) required businesses to bargain in good faith with any union supported by their employees. Union membership would grow exponentially in the mid to late-1930s.

One of the most militant and politically conscious sections of the new American labor class were maritime workers (Nelson 1990). This reputation, in large part, stems from the 1934 West Coast waterfront strike, also known as the “Big Strike,” which lasted eighty-three days and stopped all work out of the San Francisco port for four straight days. East Coast maritime workers have garnered a similar reputation, having been immortalized in Hollywood movies such as Bud Schulberg’s *On the Waterfront* (1954), which depicted the tale of violence and corruption amongst the International Longshoremen’s Association (ILA) in places like Boston, New Jersey, and New York. As previously mentioned in this chapter, maritime workers are the most represented occupation among the U.S. foreign fighters to the Spanish Civil War. Four members of the sample were maritime workers, including Bill Bailey, who happened to have been from Hoboken, New Jersey where the film *On the Waterfront* takes place.

There have been numerous studies on why maritime unions were some of the most militant unions in the U.S. (e.g., see Nelson 1990; Broeze 1991; Darlington 2009) and the reasons suggested by these studies also apply to their enlistment in the International Brigades. First, maritime workers endured arduous working conditions that kept them in superior physical condition, making them ideal recruits for military service. Second, due to the requirement that
they spend much of their time at sea, maritime workers often had few family responsibilities, most having never married or had children. Third, all maritime workers carried Seamen’s Protection Certificates that were notarized documents that acted as proof of citizenship and in the 1930s could be used in lieu of a passport. Finally, maritime workers and their associated unions were closely allied with the emerging CPUSA, especially in places like NYC and San Francisco. Therefore, many maritime union workers were also members of their local communist party, which fostered broad associational links with the different members and associations that encouraged recruitment to Spain (Nelson 1990).

The recruitment trend of U.S. foreign fighters to the Spanish Civil War illustrates the central role theories of collective action and social movements play in explaining this foreign fighter mobilization. “Dense networks,” or those networks characterized by pre-existing channels for recruitment and overlapping membership in like-minded organizations, were clearly tapped by organizers. This explains why urban areas such as NYC, Chicago, and Los Angeles had the highest rate of recruitment, even when controlling for their large populations. These urban areas had the highest levels of CPUSA membership, were home to the largest and most militant labor unions, the ILA and ILWU in NYC and Los Angeles, and the IBT in Chicago, and already had a legacy of activism, as illustrated, especially, in areas like NYC and San Francisco.

In addition to exploiting environments already conducive for recruitment, the CPUSA and Comintern also actively and strategically targeted certain groups for recruitment that could broaden the appeal of becoming a U.S. foreign fighter for the International Brigades in a strategy that is known in the collective action literature as “snowballing” (Chwe 1999). One example that
illustrates this network recruitment strategy of the CPUSA and Comintern is the case of Catholic foreign fighters. Two members of the sample, Bill Bailey and Stanley Postek, were raised Catholic. There had long been tension between the Catholic Church and the CPUSA but when the war broke out, and the Church appeared to show loyalty to Spanish nationalists, the CPUSA sought to convince Catholics that they had a “common bond” with communists. In an issue of *New Masses* dated March 3, 1938, Robert E. Kennedy wrote that, “true Catholics in Spain remain loyal to the Republic,” while only a few “reactionaries and fascist sympathizers” in Spain supported the nationalists. To help attract greater Catholic support, the CPUSA sought out recruits who could serve as clear examples of Catholic assistance for the Republic.

More than any other group, the CPUSA sought out Irish Catholics, like Bill Bailey, to fill this role and the propaganda efforts were on display in the communist magazines, the *Daily Worker* and *New Masses*. Each of the publications profiled Irish volunteers. One example from outside the sample was the profile of the Flaherty brothers, three communist brothers from Boston, who fought in Spain, and who returned to the U.S. from Spain together during the war to go on a speaking tour to help swell support for the Republic. Their tour became controversial when the former Governor of Massachusetts, James M. Curley, refused to speak with them on account of their CPUSA affiliations, a feud that drew the attention of *The New York Times*, leading to two successive back-to-back profiles of the brothers and the Boston ordeal in August 1937. The fact of the matter was that Irish volunteers like the Bill Bailey and the Flaherty brothers had long abandoned the Catholic church and were not fighting in Spain in defense of other Catholics. This, however, did not stop the CPUSA and the Comintern from exploiting their
involvement to bolster support and recruitment in diverse parts of the U.S., a strategy that increased recruitment throughout New England.

The predominance of network connections in the sample suggests that social networks played a critical role in the recruitment of U.S. foreign fighters to the Spanish Civil War. All but one individual in the sample had a networked connection and joined with fellow friends, colleagues, or comrades. Without the logistical support and targeted recruitment of individuals by the CPUSA and Comintern, it is possible that not only would there have been fewer, if any, U.S. foreign fighters to Spain, but the International Brigades may not have existed at all. With several barriers to participation enacted to prevent a mass mobilization of individuals, the recruitment of volunteers, especially from across the Atlantic Ocean, required a concerted strategy and networks of willing participants. The evidence provided above provides overwhelming support for the hypothesis (Hypothesis #6) that individuals will become foreign fighters when they have links to other members in the foreign fighter network.

**Sacred Values**

A commitment to sacred values was a central factor, the second strongest reason, for explaining why U.S. foreign fighters joined the Spanish Civil War. As hypothesized in Chapter Three (Hypothesis #4), an individual will join a foreign conflict to support or defend a value they hold as sacred. Fifty-five of the sixty individuals in the sample, or roughly 92%, explicitly cited a sacred value as influencing their decision to join the Spanish Civil War, thereby strongly supporting the hypothesis. The ideological congruence between anti-fascism and progressive values was a strong motivator for the U.S. foreign fighters who went to Spain. Forty-five of the
fifty-five individuals who cited sacred values cited anti-fascism while twenty-three of the fifty-five cited communism. A third type of sacred value, democracy, was also heavily represented among fighters, with fifteen of the fifty-five individuals citing it as a reason for joining.

Recall from Chapter One that, according to Malet (2013), foreign fighters to the Spanish Civil War were categorized in his typology as “true believers,” or foreign fighters that joined a civil conflict to preserve institutions of shared ideology. Other observers during and after the Spanish Civil War argued that the International Brigades were not made up of true believers but were instead made up of communist “dupes” who were co-opted by the Comintern to start a communist revolution in Spain (Baxell 2014). But according to the U.S. foreign fighters themselves, such as Robert Klonsky, the idea that “we were fighting the war under false pretenses and were all a bunch of communists who actually were not interested in defending democracy there – that we were just riding the coat-tails of the fight for freedom and democracy, and against fascism, in order to impose a communist dictatorship” was a complete “historical distortion” of the Spanish Civil War (Robert Klonsky, Box 1, Folder 1, ALBA, Tamiment Library, New York University). In an interview conducted in 1987, after the events of the Iran-Contra Affair (1985 – 1987) were made public, Klonsky stated that “the myth of Soviet domination, communist domination, and communist control over all of these events – from Spain to Cuba to Vietnam, to Nicaragua and El Salvador today” arguably begins with the historical distortion of Spain (Robert Klonsky, Box 1, Folder 1, ALBA, Tamiment Library, New York University).
The fact of the matter was that more of the U.S. foreign fighters, in their own words, conceived of themselves as crusaders of communism than as defenders of democracy. However, many of the U.S. foreign fighters who were communists, and were fighting to further communist values, firmly believed that a democratic form of government was the best way to achieve political equality for left-wing parties. For example, upon receiving his passport in the mail on January 20, 1938, Max Schwartz, a member of the YCL who wrote passionately about his commitment to communist values, also wrote a passage in his diary about his commitment to fighting and dying for democracy. Schwartz wrote,

> A memorandum had come with the book – a warning against enlisting in a foreign army. And stamped on one of the pages of my passport in English, Spanish, and French was the sentence, ‘Not valid for travel in Spain.’ I wondered if this was stamped in all passports nowadays, or were the gentlemen of the passport division paying me the compliment of suspecting that I looked like the sort of young man who would go to Spain?

Curious. In 1917 young fellows like me were sent across the Atlantic by the thousands to fight for democracy. Today we are told to mind our own business. Why? If democracy was worth defending with our lives in 1917, why shouldn’t it be worth defending in 1937. At least why shouldn’t those of us who believe democracy in Spain to be in serious danger, and who are willing to defend it with our lives, be given that privilege? (Max Schwartz, Box 1, Folder 1, ALBA, Tamiment Library, New York University)

Many U.S. foreign fighters echoed the sentiments of Schwartz in their writings, but U.S. foreign fighters may have conceived of the defense of democratic values in a different way. U.S. foreign fighters knew that the threat to democratic values came from the threat of global fascism. As detailed in Chapter Two, the theory of sacred values stipulates that the likelihood of mobilizing in defense of a sacred value is amplified by the perception of high threat to that value or to a group of like-minded individuals holding said value (Sheikh et al. 2012). More often than not, U.S. foreign fighters contextualized their motivations as being defenders of democracy.
against fascism; “I am…on the battlefield of international fascism and democracy; Spain,” wrote Sid Rosenstein to his wife Gertrude upon arriving in Spain in July, 1937 (Sid Rosenstein, Box 1, Folder 1, ALBA, Tamiment Library, New York University). Or as Joe Dallet described it in a May 31, 1937 letter to his Mother defending his decision to fight in Spain,

Unfortunately, there is no other way to beat Fascism than to beat it on the battlefield. To let them get away with Spain would only whet their appetites for attacks on other democratic countries. Mussolini’s Ethiopian adventure only encouraged him to attack Spain. A victory for him and Hitler here would mean next an attack on Czecko-Slovakia or France or both, prelude to an attack on the USSR. THAT, entirely aside from all questions of “idealism”, is why we must beat them here. And talking to them won’t do the trick. Only bullets can do it. (Joseph Dallet, Box 1, Folder 1, ALBA, Tamiment Library, New York University)

David Miller articulated his motivations in a similar way in a letter to his friend Dan on April 30, 1937,

We understand fully the significance of the Spanish Civil War – to Spain and to the world. We know what it means to face death and to inflict death. Nevertheless we cannot stomach the adolescent attitude of a young nitwit who has taken it into his head to gloat over the destruction of human life. There is no need to cast a roseate glow of romanticism over our task. Our enemy is fascism; we know it. Our objective is the preservation of democracy and its ultimate fulfillment; we know it. We also know that fascism is not an abstract social theory with neither material shape nor form. Its oppressiveness is expressed through the human beings who are its instruments. That is why it is impossible to destroy fascism without pitting ourselves against those human beings who have become its tools. (David Miller, Box 1, Folder 1, ALBA, Tamiment Library, New York University)

And in his July 4, 1937 pamphlet, written after he returned from the frontlines of Spain, David McCelvy White compared the fight against fascism in Spain to the fight for the revolutionary fight for freedom and democracy by U.S. colonists in 1774,

Today, in more ways than one, the Spanish people are fighting the battles of democracy. We in Spain knew that in the heat and horror of warfare we were once again recrossing inch by inch the battlefields of 1776. The armies of the Spanish Republic are fighting not
only that governments may derive their powers from the consent of the governed; they are fighting also for the power of the governed to make their consent known, free from the obstruction of the legal tricks, the hired thugs, the bribery and corruption and concentration camps of reactionaries and fascists. (David McKelvy White, Box 1, Folder 1, ALBA, Tamiment Library, New York University)

Regardless of whether U.S. foreign fighters conceived of themselves as defenders of democracy or crusaders of communism, the value that united all of them was their anti-fascism. Scholars have debated whether anti-fascism is best categorized as an ideology or as a movement, with the consensus agreeing that anti-fascism is an ideology because it can take on both active and passive forms and is based on the ideological belief that “fascism is antithetical to Enlightenment concepts of humanity and society” (Copsey and Olechnowicz 2010, xviii). This has been described as the “anti-fascist minimum.” Therefore, anti-fascism becomes an ideological unifier, where agents from different ideological backgrounds, be it communist, liberal, or conservative, oppose fascism on the basis that fascism is a negation of human dignity, natural rights, and a threat to other values. So, while fewer U.S. foreign fighters may have explicitly cited democracy as a value they were fighting and dying for, the prevalence of anti-fascist justifications among 92% of the U.S. foreign fighters in the sample suggests that the threat of fascism to sacred values was far more important to fighters than simply communism.

When communism was front and center in a foreign fighter’s mind, many connected their desires to fight for democracy with their dual desires to see a socialist government established in Spain. For example, Alfred Amery wrote in his autobiography,

We were fighting for democracy, the purest and cleanest democracy possible, where all parties, including the Socialist Party and the Communist Party, as well as some majority liberal parties, would participate…So we Communists were really idealists. There was nothing selfish in our efforts. But of course in the backs of our minds we hoped, and
more or less believed, that we were fighting for socialism eventually. (With Joe Stalin’s help. We thought that guy would work wonders!) (Alfred Amery, Box 1, Folder 1, ALBA, Tamiment Library, New York University)

Others, such as Jack Friedman, were more direct in their defense of communist values in Spain. Friedman wrote as such in a letter to his friend George in February 1937 on his decision to leave for Spain. Friedman wrote,

Ever since I accepted the communist solution as the correct one for suffering humanity, I have always been of the firm conviction that we would some day, somewhere, have to express our ideas in a most positive and active fashion. That day has come and the place is Spain. Sometimes it is necessary to sell Daily Workers on a street corner, we do that. At times we must educate from the soap box, we do that, then there are leaflets and strikes and demonstrations etc. We do all these things because it is necessary and important. Today it becomes vital that some of us go to “work” in Spain, and of course we go in the same manner. (It does not take silver-tongued orators or loud brass bands and flag waving to send us on our way, rather we hide and sneak and work in an undercover manner in order to offer all we can to a cause that is right. Rather we are pushed on by the certain knowledge that we are enlisted in a struggle that is for all humanity and one that must some day triumph.) (Jack Friedman, Box 1, Folder 1, ALBA, Tamiment Library, New York University)

The data suggests that regardless of whether most of the U.S. foreign fighters were communists, or whether they may have secretly hoped, as Alfred Amery did, that socialism would thrive again in Spain, the most prominent ideological value U.S. foreign fighters cited was anti-fascism. And while the threat of fascism may have represented a “marriage of convenience” between radical communists and more moderate defenders of democracy, it nevertheless became the ideological rallying point of U.S. foreign fighters in Spain. This finding bolsters the previous finding regarding the central importance of social networks in explaining the U.S. foreign fighter mobilization. According to theories of militant mobilization, social movement recruitment is only successful when members of the recruitment network already have a strong identification
with the movement’s values prior to activism (McAdam 1986). The existence of such values within a network helps create strong, effective ties not only to other fighters but to the cause, helping foster a willingness to fight. There is, therefore, ample evidence to support the hypothesis (Hypothesis #4) that individuals will become foreign fighters to defend a value they hold as sacred.

**Collective Identity**

The final factor that was significant for explaining the U.S. foreign fighter mobilization to Spain was a strong feeling of collective identity, which was the third most cited reason for U.S. foreign fighters who joined the Spanish Civil War. In Chapter Three, it was hypothesized (Hypothesis #5) that an individual will join a foreign conflict when that individual’s self-identity is merged with a collective identity that they mobilize to defend. The identification that was most broadly felt among the foreign fighters, and which they claimed to be fighting on behalf of, was a sense of connection with the “working-class” or the “proletariat.” All forty-one of the sixty U.S. foreign fighters (or roughly 68%) that cited a sense of collective identity cited working-class or proletarian solidarity as a reason. Twenty of the forty-one individuals that cited collective identity also cited solidarity with the people of Spain and eleven of the forty-one individuals cited communist solidarity. Five of the forty-one invoked their Jewish identity as a reason for becoming a foreign fighter. While not as significant a factor as social networks and sacred values, collective identity is an important variable linking an individual’s sacred values to social action, thereby supporting the hypothesis.
As detailed in Chapter Two, collective identities can be formed in such a way that they can help overcome collective action problems, realized by helping decision making and social continuity become much easier. Overlapping identities can help galvanize trust among potential movement actors and can trigger collective desires for action (Sheik et al. 2012). Taken together with the previous findings on social networks and sacred values, an individual’s commitment to idiosyncratic beliefs and their associated values can deepen trust by both identifying cooperators and galvanizing group solidarity. Therefore, beyond the physical connections that are critical for theories of collective action that emphasize social networks, the feeling of solidarity is also important for strengthening ties and motivating action.

The feelings of identification expressed by U.S. foreign fighters were complex and multifaceted. As illustrated in a letter written by “Butch” Entin to his mother on June 21, 1937,

…remember, that we volunteered to fight (and for a damn good reason), whereas in other wars, workers are forced to fight. I could have stayed in the U.S., and been perfectly safe. Certainly, but what a stinking traitor I would have been to the working class, and to my Spanish brothers and sisters, and to the glorious Soviet Union. (Bernard Entin, Box 1, Folder 28, ALBA, Tamiment Library, New York University)

In this passage, Entin identifies with the working class, Spanish “brothers and sisters,” and with the Soviet Union. Some combination of these three collective identities were present in the writings of all forty-one U.S. foreign fighters who invoked their feelings of collective identity as a driving factor in their decision to go to Spain.

Amongst the U.S. foreign fighters, a sense of working-class solidarity was broadly felt within the ranks of those fighting in Spain. As described by Mito Kruth upon his arrival in Spain in a June 3, 1937 letter to his wife, Helen,
Everywhere we are met with a raised fist in the workers salute. Little kids in mothers arms even raise their little fist. Crowds of people at every station and our necks get tired from watching so intently and cheering and saluting them. One thing impressed all of us at the stations and that is the deep understanding of the workers cause among the children. (Mito Kruth, Box 1, Folder 10, ALBA, Tamiment Library, New York University)

While not every U.S. foreign fighter was a member of the working-class, the feelings of solidarity were so broadly felt that some members attempted to hide their upper-class backgrounds. One U.S. foreign fighter in the sample, Joseph Dallet, attempted to do just that to be more accepted by his working-class comrades. Dallet was born into an affluent family and was raised on New York’s Long Island. He attended the Woodmere Academy, a private independent school in Woodmere, New York, prior to high school, was accepted and enrolled at Dartmouth University, and his parents provided a childhood filled with cultural and educational opportunities and travel. As described by veteran U.S. foreign fighter Steve Nelson in his autobiography, many accounts of Dallet contend that he worked hard to conceal his wealthy, educated background, and even performed an exaggerated “proletariat identity,” complete with “deliberately ungrammatical speech” (Nelson, Barrett, and Ruck 1981, 197). According to historian Cecil D. Eby (2007), “No one detected the change in Joe Dallet more quickly than the men in the Mac-Paps. They were mystified by his mercurial behavior bullying and threatening one moment and fawning and apologizing the next. His tantrums may have derived from his upbringing as a spoiled child, alien to most of the men.”

This working-class identity was broadly felt, not just by U.S. foreign fighters, but by all members of the International Brigades as the identity became a rallying point for international volunteers. As Robert Klonsky pointed out in an oral history interview about his time with the
International Brigades, “there were Irish, Polish, and Italian unemployed working-class people” who went to Spain. “Many of them didn’t even fully understand…It was more an emotional feeling, a nationalistic feeling, a feeling of… ‘Hey, they’re hurting my people! My people!’” (emphasis my own, Robert Klonsky, Box 1, Folder 2, ALBA, Tamiment Library, New York University). The reason a sense of working-class solidarity was so broadly felt was because it was the central political issue of the different ideologies present in the International Brigades. As described by veteran Herman Rosenstein in a July 8, 1937 letter to his sister after arriving in Spain,

The composition of the men that make up the IB is of the highest order. We have Communists (a majority, I’m proud to report), Socialists, Trade-Unionists, members of the ALP, members of the IWO and other workers’ organizations. We all faced many difficulties in reaching our objective. Especially is this true of those from Germany and Italy; and there were many. Almost every nation is represented by its best blood in the IB…As far as Spain goes, the youth here are united organically. The Communist Party, our party, is forging the bonds of unity with the Socialist Party, throughout all of Spain to form that great United Party of the Proletariat which is so necessary to crush fascism and wipe it out. That day is not long off…From the beginning of the struggle our position has not wavered, we were consistent and correct for we are a true Marxian Party. Thru the last crisis of the govt, we showed the way and the people followed. (Herman Rosenstein, Box 1, Folder 1, ALBA, Tamiment Library, New York University)

And while the members of the International Brigades represented an ideological mixture, Marx was the prominent ideological language. As illustrated in a letter from veteran Sidney Rosenblatt to friend, and future CPUSA leader and activist, Estelle Katz, written on October 21, 1937,

The conclusion remains that this war must be fought to the finish, we must continue our offensive and fierce attacks, and thousands of our lines will necessarily be sacrificed here and now. Otherwise, what will happen is that the Fascists will ravage the rest of the country (applies to the rest of the world simply “turn the other cheek”) and not thousands, but hundreds of thousands, will be murdered. They’ve already done that, and are continuing assassinating huge portions of the population in the territory which they control. The class struggle is stormy and dangerous, and the Spanish people have to (and
they will!) face the facts. And we I.B.ers here in the trenches, and all class-conscious revolutionaries the world over, have to face the facts, too, with chin up and fearless. (Sidney Rosenblatt, Box 1, Folder 1, ALBA, Tamiment Library, New York University)

U.S. foreign fighters also connected their sense of working-class identity with a perceived sense of connection with global communists and the Soviet Union. As previously mentioned, fifty-seven of the sixty U.S. foreign fighters in the sample were dues paying members of the CPUSA or YCL before they traveled to Spain and eleven of the forty-one foreign fighters that cited collective identity as a reason for joining the Spanish Civil War mentioned an identification with fellow communists or Soviets. The U.S. foreign fighters that expressed a sense of collective identification with global communism believed that they were part of a wider revolutionary struggle. In a passage from Alvah Bessie’s diary dated June 14, 1938, he reprinted a song that members of the International Brigades frequently recited together in Spanish, which he translated to English in his diary. The translation reads,

We are Communists, revolutionaries
Who together fight for liberty.
We want an end to the many injustices
And we want inequality to disappear
Ay ay ay, tossing off the bourgeoisie
Ay ay ay, how bad you’re going to look
Ay ay ay, long live our union
Because we are Communists to our very hearts!
(Alvah Bessie, Box 1, Folder 9, ALBA, Tamiment Library, New York University)

The U.S. foreign fighters that invoked a sense of communist or Soviet identity saw themselves as active participants in a broader progressive social revolution that began with the Russian Revolution (1917 – 1922) and the establishment of the Soviet Union (1922) and continued with the establishment of the Popular Front (1935) and then the war in Spain.
Upon arriving in Spain on January 12, 1937, Elias Begelman wrote to his friend Mike back home about his impressions of Spain, “…this town is run by a united front committee composed of Communists, Socialists and Anarchists, and moreover the latter continuously lose influence and go over to our side. Mike, I will not write anymore of all my impressions, only to say that *I am in the thick and thin of a social revolution*, and we are moving, daily, hourly” (emphasis added, Elias Begelman, Box 1, Folder 3, ALBA, Tamiment Library, New York University). Begelman was capturing a common mood that was felt by many U.S. foreign fighters that arrived in Spain in the early months of 1937 that reinforced their decisions to become foreign fighters as part of this social revolution. Many letters from U.S. foreign fighters sent back home during this time were filled with optimism about the composition of the International Brigades, the political climate among the Spanish workers, and the hope that they would quickly win the war against fascism and advance their progressive movement. In another letter from Begelman to Mike while Begelman was still in training on February 20, 1937,

This army is really an international army, you think New York where you have Greeks, French, Germans, Cubans, Czechs and what not – well, here we have them from 52 lands and if there were a 53rd they too would be represented. You call Chapayev when he was asked can he lead an army of all the countries…the language came up but we solved it. We have Frenchmen and Italians and Germans that baby with hands all kinds of signs. Oh we get along swell. But really we speak back home of Internationalism, here it’s in practice. Words fail me to describe the love and devotion for one another. It’s gigantic. Above all it is more vivid because all of us are the rank and file who directly face the enemy at home and here the fascists. (Elias Begelman, Box 1, Folder 3, ALBA, Tamiment Library, New York University)

One important reference in Begelman’s February 1937 letter is his reference to “Chapayev.” Chapayev, or Vasily Chapaev (the correct spelling in Russian), was a famous and widely celebrated commander of the Red Army during the Russian Civil War. Begelman was not
the only U.S. foreign fighter to mention Chapaev in their writings; three other foreign fighters refer to the Russian war hero, citing him as inspiration for their becoming a foreign fighter. A film entitled, *Chapaev*, a fictionalized depiction of the heroic death of Chapaev at the hands of the enemy White Army that was released in Russia in 1934, was regularly screened for International Brigade volunteers. The film has been described as a propaganda piece that worked to foster a “Soviet identity” in the wake of the Russian civil war, an identity many U.S. foreign fighters came to associate with. U.S. foreign fighter Mito Kruth saw *Chapaev* at least twice while in Spain, likening the experience to watching a “wild west” picture; “When the enemy gets licked a great cheer goes up” (Mito Kruth Box 1, Folder 12, ALBA, Tamiment Library, New York University). Republican reporters and propagandists expected Spanish troops to not only identify with the revolutionary heroes on screen but to also imitate them. And to make sure soldiers understood what they were supposed to take away from these films, commissars organized “explanatory conversations” after each screening (Kirschenbaum 2015).

Another collective identity that acted as a motivating factor for U.S. foreign fighters was their perceived sense of collective identification to the people of Spain, one that transcended national and linguistic boundaries. Referring back to the ethnicity data presented in Table 7, few U.S. foreign fighters had Spanish ancestry and yet twenty of the forty-one foreign fighters that cited collective identity as a motivator mentioned an identification with the Spanish people, one that clearly transcended borders, ethnicity, and ancestry. As mentioned in Chapter Two, theories of collective identity have discussed the centrality of transnational collective identities, those that transcend place- or time-specific markers, as important for transnational collective movements.
Morris Kornblum described the importance of transnational collective identity in a letter dated June 14, 1938 referencing his desire to defend the people of Spain, “These people are the same as us. We have no right to stand aside & let them be trampled over & crushed by the fascists” (Morris Kornblum, Box 1, Folder 1, ALBA, Tamiment Library, New York University). And in a more detailed account of this sense of connection between foreign fighters and the people of Spain, Jack Friedman connected the struggle of the Spanish people to a broader struggle for all of humanity against fascism, in a February 1937 letter to his friend George;

> Today it becomes vital that some of us go to “work” in Spain, and of course we go in the same manner. (It does not take silver-tongued orators or loud brass bands and flag waving to send us on our way, rather we hide and sneak and work in an undercover manner in order to offer all we can to a cause that is right. Rather we are pushed on by the certain knowledge that we are enlisted in a struggle that is for all humanity and one that must some day triumph.) Let me tell you, George, that to see the happily envious faces of the comrades who remain is in itself a great reward. But it is folly to think only on the barricades can one serve. Great is the honor that we must pay to those in Spain whose tireless work made the barricades possible. (Nelson and Hendricks 1996, 43)

These findings on U.S. foreign fighters’ feelings of collective identity challenge the argument that foreign volunteers were duped by the Comintern into helping the Soviet Union “Sovietize” Spain (see Kirschenbaum 2015). Such an interpretation was originally made by George Orwell (1938, 56) in *Homage to Catalonia* when he wrote that the “whole Comintern policy is now subordinated (excusably, considering the world situation) to the defense of the USSR.” Orwell believed that the Soviets were more interested in quashing the revolution than winning the war to ensure Soviet security via cooperation with France and the rest of Europe,

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4 During the McCarthy era, Kornblum changed his name to Martin Balter because he worried that his service during the Spanish Civil War would make him the target of the FBI.
countries that had maintained neutrality throughout the war. The collective identity that most U.S. foreign fighter associated with, and mobilized on behalf of, was their working-class identity, an identity that manifested during the Great Depression, the rise of trade union organization, and the expansion of local, left-wing political parties and not because of Soviet indoctrination. Furthermore, with so many Jewish volunteers, and five individuals invoking their Jewish identity as a reason for becoming a foreign fighter, foreign fighters identified with a diverse array of collective identity groups that influenced their decisions and appealed to different rationales not directly related to Soviet political or military strategy. A sense of collective identity, therefore, acted as a strong motivator for U.S. foreign fighters, supporting the hypothesis (Hypothesis #5) that an individual will become a foreign fighter when their self-identity is fused with a collective identity that they mobilize to defend.

**Personal Victimization**

In Chapter Three, it was hypothesized (Hypothesis #2) that an individual will join a foreign conflict if they feel a sense of personal victimization that motivates them to action. Only twelve of the U.S. foreign fighters, or 20%, cited a feeling of personal victimization as a reason for volunteering to fight in the Spanish Civil War. This finding suggests that theories linking personal victimization to collective action are insufficient for explaining the U.S. foreign fighter mobilization to Spain. In three of the cases, the primary mechanism linking a fighter’s feelings of personal victimization to their decision to fight in Spain was a personal trauma that they experienced that they came to relate directly to their decision to become a foreign fighter. One
significant exception was that nine of the twelve foreign fighters in the sample that cited personal victimization were Jewish and felt victimized as a result of their religious affiliations.

Harry Fisher felt a sense of personal victimization when he found out that his family had lost their entire life savings while his employer was able to secure his fortune when the stock market collapsed on October 29, 1929. Not only did this event spark Fisher’s desire to join the CPUSA but it influenced him to become an ardent anti-fascist. After four years as a member of the YCL and CPUSA helping assist members of the working class who had lost their jobs and homes, Fisher read about the burning of the German Reichstag, Germany’s house of parliament, on February 27, 1933. Germany’s courts found a group of communists guilty of the arson, which many believed was a “false flag” that led to the Reichstag Fire Decree that would officially suspend most civil liberties in Germany; an act which would not be undone until the fall of Nazi Germany after World War II (Hett 2014). Fisher came to associate fascism with the ills of the world, including his personal economic hardship and the war in Spain, which Fisher followed closely beginning in 1936. As Fisher recounted in his autobiography, “Soon it became clear that Germany and Italy were behind the rebellion in Spain. If they won, what a boost to fascism all over the world, including the United States! I worried about it and read all the newspaper accounts avidly…My anger was so strong, I knew I had to go. Fascism simply had to be stopped” (Fisher 1998, 15-6). Fisher’s anger is emblematic of the mechanism that scholars have argued links personal victimization to action (McCauley and Moskalenko 2011) but such feelings of trauma were not very widespread among Fisher’s fellow fighters.
Bill Bailey, who had gained a certain level of notoriety among working class seamen even prior to his going to Spain for having ripped the Nazi flag from the German *Bremen* that had docked in Manhattan in 1935, described a similar connection between a feeling of personal victimization for a loved one and his decision to go to Spain. Like many of the U.S. foreign fighters in Spain, Bailey had written a letter to his mother to be delivered to her in the event of his death on the battlefield. Bailey survived the war, so the letter was never sent, but he reprinted the letter in his autobiography to best reflect his reason for becoming a foreign fighter at the time. In a telling passage from that letter detailing his rationale for going to Spain, Bailey (1993) wrote:

I can recall the first time I missed your presence at home and discovered that you were out hunting for a job scrubbing floors in order to bring home some food for the family. I knew that something was very wrong with life, but I had no idea what to do about it to make it any different. It was only when I grew up and I too had to go around begging for work to live that I realized the wrongs had to be corrected.

In Spain there are countless thousands of mothers like yourself who never had a fair shake in life. Their whole existence has been one of trying to get enough food to stay alive for another day. One day these people did something about that. They got together and elected a government that really gave some meaning to their lives and promised to make it so that the millions of mothers like you would never again have to bend their knees and beg to exist in a world that had plenty for everyone.

But it didn’t work out the way the poor people expected. A group of bullies decided to crush and wipe out this wonderful thing the poor people had accomplished and drive them back to the old way of life.

That’s why I went to Spain, Mom – to help these poor people win this battle so one day it would be easier for you and the mothers of the future.

Later in the letter, Bailey goes so far as to say that his reasons for going to Spain had nothing to do with communism, only that he wanted to do right by his mother who had gone through hard
times and misery. Theories that link personal victimization to collective action, especially militant action, stipulate that individuals are prone to mobilize against a perpetrator not only when they are victims, but they perceive their friends and loved ones as victims. Again, however, the presence of such feelings was not widely felt among other U.S. foreign fighters, suggesting that foreign fighters were not internalizing feelings of victimization and such feelings were exceptions to otherwise broader recruitment trends amongst foreign fighters.

One important exception that explains a smaller trend in the data were U.S. foreign fighters that felt personally victimized because of their religious affiliations. An important statistic explaining how U.S. foreign fighters came to link their feelings of personal victimization with their desire to become a foreign fighter is that nine of the twelve foreign fighters in the sample that cited personal victimization were Jewish and were afraid of religious oppression and persecution. In an unpublished interview conducted in 1987, Robert Klonsky, a Russian Jew from NYC who was one of the first U.S. foreign fighters to join the Abraham Lincoln Brigades in February 1937, recalled growing up with unemployed parents who “fought desperately to feed a family of eight” (Robert Klonsky, Box 1, Folder 2, ALBA, Tamiment Library, New York University). “Problems of political thinking and political action were present at a very early stage in our lives,” declared Klonsky, “If we hadn’t been living the kind of life we were forced to live during that period, 300 men from my community alone would not have gone to Spain…to fight fascism.” Later in his interview, Klonsky continued, “Consequently, the issues of Nazism and fascism were central to their thinking and their feelings. Their fellow Jewish human beings were
being slaughtered over there, and the impact was felt at home.” And in a letter written to his parents written from the front lines on March 19, 1937, Klonsky wrote,

I promise you that next Passover I’ll be back home with all of you, and I’ll drink a toast to you with Papa’s wine that I miss very much. Meanwhile, my place, I believe, is here, doing my bit to make sure that in the future no race of people, whether Jew or Gentile, will have cause for mourning their dead. I know that you will agree with me, when I say that I am doing more for both my race and my class, here in Spain, helping in the fight against Fascism, than I could possibly do at home. (Robert Klonsky, Box 1, Folder 20, ALBA, Tamiment Library, New York University)

Many Jews who volunteered in Spain shared Klonsky’s sentiments because arguably more than any other group, Jews not only feared for their personal wellbeing but for the wellbeing of their entire nation. As summarized by veteran foreign fighter Martin Krauss in a public lecture, “I went to Spain…because I had a special revulsion for fascism and all that it stands for. As a Jew, we as a people were facing a fight for our very survival” (Martin Krauss, Box 1, Folder 1, ALBA, Tamiment Library, New York University). As a result, U.S.-Jewish foreign fighters rationalized their motivations for going to Spain as a need to put a stop to fascism before it came to victimize U.S. Jews. As written by Morris Kornblum in a letter to his father and mother dated June 14, 1938,

It’s clear that if the fascists win here (which they are not going to) they will get bolder & bolder. If Mexico should ever become fascist (which means Hitler dominated – do you realize that Hitler is out to dominate the whole world?) – then our own U.S. is in danger – What did fascism bring to the Jews of Austria? (ask Lester) what will fascism bring to all of us? We are answering that question by preventing it from ever coming to the U.S. and to prevent it there it must be smashed here. (Morris Kornblum, Box 1, Folder 2, ALBA, Tamiment Library, New York University)

As defined in Chapter Three, a victim is a person who suffers direct or threatened emotional or physical harm as a result of someone else. Arguably more than any other group,
Jews had a reason to feel victimized by fascist governments, around the world and in Spain, and these feelings of victimization were clearly strong motivators for the Jewish members of the International Brigades. Otherwise, a feeling of personal victimization played a limited role in influencing the decision of U.S. citizens to become foreign fighters. Only three of the twelve foreign fighters who cited a feeling of personal victimization cited something other than their religious affiliation. Absent of feeling victimized because of their religious affiliation, foreign fighters are unlikely to have experienced victimization at home that could be linked to political, social, or religious perpetrators abroad. The hypothesis (Hypothesis #2) linking personal victimization to foreign fighting is therefore not supported by the data on U.S. foreign fighters to Spain.

**Structural Grievances**

Only three of the sixty U.S. foreign fighters in the sample, or 5%, identified structural grievances, or perceived injustices at the broader country or societal level, as a motivation for joining the Spanish Civil War. This finding suggests that the hypothesis laid out in Chapter Three (Hypothesis #3), that an individual will join a foreign conflict if they perceive a structural grievance that motivates them to action, is not supported by the data on U.S. foreign fighters.

After returning from the front lines to become the Chairman of the Friends of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade (FALB), David McKelvy White, on July 4, 1938, wrote a pamphlet that summarized the many resemblances U.S. foreign fighters saw between Spain’s struggle for independence and that of the U.S.’s, and how injustice and tyranny motivated U.S. citizens to fight in both conflicts. McKelvy began the pamphlet by writing, “The root of both conflicts lay
in an economic oppression which had direct and immediate results in the limiting of human rights…When a nation fights for its life against injustice and tyranny, it is inevitable that men from all over the world should come to its active assistance.” McKelv conuded by writing, “It is natural and right that the United States should be generously represented in the International Brigades…These are the reasons why they are there, and why the American people must support them and the cause for the sake of which they are prepared to face not alone death but also the unspeakable terror and exhaustion of the battlefield” (David McKelvy White, Box 1, Folder 28, ALBA, Tamiment Library, New York University).

The three U.S. foreign fighters that cited structural grievances as a motivator for fighting in Spain cited the “tyranny” or “dictatorship” of fascism and its “authoritarian” nature. “It should be quite simple for you to understand then, why I and tens of thousands of other anti-fascists from more than 52 nations throughout the world, have come here to Spain to do part of our share in stamping out Fascism,” Bernard “Butch” Entin wrote to his mother in a May 31, 1937 letter (Bernard Entin, Box 1, Folder 28, ALBA, Tamiment Library, New York University). He continued, “We came here to help the Spanish people fight fascism and we are not leaving until we are victorious.” Entin was writing a series of letters home to his mother trying to justify becoming a foreign fighter, who at the time did not know he had gone to fight and Spain. Each letter expanded on the evils of fascism; “Fascism is the last phase of capitalism. Fascism is the open dictatorship, the most brutal oppression of the working people,” Entin wrote in another letter dated June 6, 1937. Harry Fisher, Entin’s best friend, shared many views about fascism and the war in Spain. In an April 26, 1937 letter to family back home, Fisher wrote, “I feel I must do
my part in the fight against fascism…That’s why I’m glad I’m here” (Harry Fisher, Box 1, Folder 1, ALBA, Tamiment Library, New York University). In a follow-up letter to his family on May 14, 1937, Fisher wrote,

I realize that what I am here for is a thousand times more important than all these beautiful luxuries. If you ever saw the two little children in bandages, wounded by fascist bombs, if you ever saw a thousand people forced to live in holes of a mountain because their lives are not safe in their homes continuously being bombed then beds and fine foods and pretty girls would seem insignificant as they do to me.

The U.S. foreign fighters to Spain have infamously been referred to as the “premature anti-fascists” (Gerassi 1986), a label that many of the U.S. foreign fighters who survived the war rejected. Bernard Knox, who was a poet, Professor of Classics at Yale University, and veteran foreign fighter of the Spanish Civil War, wrote upon first hearing the phrase, “I was taken aback by the expression. How, I wondered, could anyone be a premature anti-fascist? Could there be anything such as a premature antidote to a poison? A premature antiseptic? A premature antitoxin? A premature anti-racist? If you were not premature, what sort of anti-fascist were you supposed to be?” (Knox 2001). Anti-fascism was an ideological rallying point for International Brigade volunteers who had come from all over the world, but as previously mentioned, anti-fascism is not a structural grievance. The structural grievances U.S. foreign fighters cited were the structural ills that they believed fascism produced that motivated U.S. foreign fighters. For example, at various points in his autobiography, Harry Fisher cites the rise of greater economic inequality, mass unemployment, lack of meaningful opportunities, and mass poverty as structural grievances foreign fighters associated with creeping fascism that ultimately amplified their desire to fight in Spain (Fisher 1998). However, having never lived under fascism or having
experienced the “ills” as written about by Fisher, most foreign fighters never developed specific grievances. Instead, U.S. foreign fighters framed their motivations as an ideological resistance to fascism. There is therefore limited support that U.S. foreign fighters were motivated by structural grievances.

Economic Incentives

Arguably the most dominant explanation in the literature on contentious collective action for the past half-century has been the need for economic incentives to motivate individuals. It was hypothesized (Hypothesis #1) in Chapter Three that an individual will join a foreign conflict if they have a private economic incentive to do so. There is no evidence that economic incentives acted as a motivator for U.S. foreign fighters. The U.S. foreign fighters who fought in the Spanish Civil War were not soldiers of fortune. They received no compensation for their efforts. Though nationalist propaganda attempted to portray the International Brigades as a band of mercenaries, bought and paid by the Comintern, the fact was that many of the foreign fighters who went to Spain wrote of financial hardship while on the frontlines and even wrote home asking for money to be sent to cover their expenses in Spain while not on the front lines illustrates that these claims were fabrications. This propaganda became an especially sore spot for many veterans both because it was obviously untrue based on what we now know about the day-to-day lives of the foreign fighters in Spain but also because such claims invalidated the cause for which they claimed to be fighting.

A noteworthy confrontation among foreign fighters that occurred in a French jail prior to their arrival in Spain illustrates this point well. As retold by U.S. foreign fighter Joe Dallet in an
April 9, 1937 letter to his wife, he and twenty-five U.S. foreign fighters had been arrested for trying to illegally cross into Spain and among the prisoners already jailed were foreign fighters from other countries who had apparently suffered police brutality. According to Dallet, these other foreign fighters seemed ready “to confess to anything the authorities demanded.” When Dallet learned that a badly frightened Italian foreign fighter had told the French police that he had volunteered because the French Communist Party “offered him 10,000 francs and 50 francs per day to go to Spain” – a confession that even the public prosecutor did not believe – Dallet, in front of the other men, denounced and insulted the informer, recounting to his wife that, “He hung his head and was too scared to speak. We all threatened him and I was surprised how well I could curse in French. I found out yesterday that when they got him back to jail they beat him up and completely ostracized him” (Joseph Dallet, Box 1, Folder 11, ALBA, Tamiment Library, New York University). The very implication that a foreign fighter might be doing this for their own monetary benefit was something the U.S. foreign fighters would not stand for.

There is only one individual, James Lardner, that mentioned joining the war effort for a remunerative purpose; that purpose was the promise of future monetary rewards or promise of future employment from writing a book about the war. James Lardner was born on May 18, 1914 in Chicago, Illinois, the second of four sons born to the well-known journalist Ringgold Wilmer Lardner. As a result of his father’s literary connections, Lardner counted among his friends and acquaintances figures such as F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald and Dorothy Parker. Lardner went to Harvard University and in 1935 got a job as a reporter for the New York Herald Tribune. Finding the job “dull,” Lardner asked to be transferred to the Tribune’s Paris bureau where he would
report on the situation in Spain and on the U.S. foreign fighters joining the Spanish Civil War. In March 1938, Lardner traveled to Barcelona in the company of fellow journalists Ernest Hemingway and Vincent Sheean to observe the conflict firsthand. After witnessing the dire state of the International Brigades in 1938, Lardner decided to join.

Unlike Hemingway and Sheean, Lardner was one of the few journalists covering the war to take up fighting in the Spanish Civil War. However, like Hemingway, Sheean, and other journalists in Spain at the time, Lardner’s priority was gathering material for his job and to one day gather enough good material to write a novel or play about the experience. In a letter to his Mother written from Barcelona and dated May 3, 1938, Lardner wrote a list of the very specific reasons for enlisting in the International Brigade. Among them, Lardner wrote, “Because I want to find material for some writing, probably a play” (James Lardner, Box 1, Folder 2, ALBA, Tamiment Library, New York University). This might seem, at first glance, to be unconvincing evidence of a remunerative incentive given that among Lardner’s other cited reasons for later joining was an ardent anti-fascist attitude and a desire to help the Spanish people. However, there were many who criticized Hemingway for coming to Spain with such a motive (i.e., gathering material simply to write a book). Many Abraham Lincoln Brigade veterans called Hemingway “politically naïve” (Carroll 2012) and Milton Wolff, himself a novelist and arguably one of the most politically active veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade after the war, criticized Hemingway in an exchange of letters, calling him a “Tourist in Spain” (Milton Wolff, Box 1, Folder 1, ALBA, Tamiment Library, New York University; Ernest Hemingway, Box MS59, File 759, JFK). While many of the foreign fighters praised the reporting done by correspondents for
outlets like *New Masses* and *Daily Worker*, the profiting from the novelization of the Spanish Civil War afterwards remained something of a controversial topic among veterans, for similar reasons as Dallet’s opposition to the lying Italian volunteer from the French prison (see e.g., Cohen 2018). While this remunerative reason might not have been the most influential in Lardner’s decision to join, it could explain his late entry into the Brigades, as he was later referred to by Sheean (1939) as “the last American to enlist.” Lardner was also the only foreign fighter in the sample to even suggest a remunerative motivation, therefore providing limited support for the hypothesis (Hypothesis #1) that a foreign fighter will join a foreign conflict if they have a private, economic incentive to do so.

**Unidentified Reasons**

Explicit motivations for becoming a foreign fighter could not always be determined by examining the available archival material. There was only one individual in the sample where a specific motivation could not be established and that is the case of William Colfax Miller. Many of the details surrounding Miller’s life during and after the Spanish Civil War remain unverified. What is known is that Miller was born in Lake Andes, South Dakota, became a member of the CPUSA in 1933, and lived in Hollywood, California before sailing to Spain in 1938 where he contracted tuberculosis and was sent home a year after he left. The archival material available on Miller from his time in Spain included a disbound scrapbook that consisted primarily of photos, leaflets, and flyers as well as postcards to unknown individuals that were never mailed.

According to historian Diana Anhalf (2001), after returning from the war, Miller left the U.S. and went to Mexico to become a film director because his Marxist leanings were preventing him
from finding adequate work in Hollywood. Many of his accomplishments, including having participated in more than 150 films in Mexico, remain unverified. One notable exaggeration regarding Miller’s life that Anhalf (2001) personally investigated was that Miller claimed to have been personally involved in the attempted assassination of Leon Trotsky in Mexico City in May 1940, though this claim could never be verified.

In an unattributed obituary written about Miller in *El Ojo del Lago*, the magazine of the Lake Chapala region of Mexico, it was said that “Bill was…deeply admired for his commitment to political causes. In the ‘30s, feeling that fascism was destroying the great cultures of Europe, he joined the famed Lincoln Brigade and fought in the Spanish Civil War.” While the obituary clearly states that Miller went to Spain to fight fascism, much like the rest of his background, this claim could not be independently verified from material written or spoken by Miller himself. His motivation for joining the Spanish Civil War is therefore categorized as unidentifiable.

**Analysis and Conclusion**

Classic theories of collection action, social movements, and organizational behavior suggest that economic incentives, personal victimization, and structural grievances are the dominant paradigms for understanding why contentious collective action, especially violent political action, occurs. The findings from this chapter suggest that these dominant paradigms do not largely explain the mobilization of 3,000 U.S. foreign fighters to the Spanish Civil War. Economic incentives and structural grievances played an especially limited role, with only one individual citing an economic incentive and three individuals citing a structural grievance as a reason for becoming a foreign fighter. In addition, feelings of personal victimization, another
dominant paradigm in the literature, played a slightly greater, though still limited, role in motivating U.S. foreign fighters, and was more relegated to a particular sect of U.S. foreign fighters, namely the Jewish foreign fighters, who felt a sense of personal victimization because of specific fascist policies that sought their extermination.

The findings from this chapter instead suggest that there is a strong social logic to foreign fighter mobilizations. More than an individual, ideological decision, U.S. foreign fighters were influenced by their sense of connection to fellow working-class volunteers who were also putting their lives on the line in Spain. Forty-one of the sixty individuals in the sample, or 68%, cited a sense of collective identification with a peer group as a reason, with all forty-one of them citing solidarity with the working-class. However, more than a sense solidarity felt by this broader identity group, it was the physical connections of the individuals in the sample that was the most dominant factor. Approximately 98%, or fifty-nine of the sixty foreign fighters in the sample, knew someone that was in Spain or was going to Spain prior to their joining the war effort.

As detailed in Chapter Two, one of the most important social network factors that has been analyzed to explain collective action and social movements has been the role of “linkages,” or connections between individuals and organizations, between organizations and other organizations, and between movements and settings. The propensity and strength of diverse network linkages is one of the most robust predicates of militant mobilization in the literature (McAdam 1986). The demographic and archival data presented in this chapter together explain how dense the linkages among U.S. foreign fighters were. The demographic data show that U.S. foreign fighters likely did not just have one connection to an individual associated with the war,
but likely had several, overlapping connections because of their membership in organizations like the CPUSA, a labor union, or other ethnic community grouping. As a result of the recruitment strategy of the CPUSA and Comintern, these individuals were likely inundated with information about the war in Spain, and as more of their friends and colleagues began to sign up for the war, they too were motivated to participate. As was detailed in many of the archival materials collected on U.S. foreign fighters, these social network organizations helped coordinate every aspect of a U.S. foreign fighters’ transit to Spain. Therefore, without these dense social networks, it is very likely that, regardless of how motivated individual foreign fighters were, they would never have been able to overcome the barriers of entry into Spain that were set up by both the U.S. and other neutral European powers.

While the social aspect of the foreign fighter phenomenon as it relates to U.S. foreign fighters to the Spanish Civil War is the most significant factor, socially connected individuals still needed to have congruent values that motivated their desire to fight in Spain in the first place. Sacred values, as represented by the ideological, moral, and parochial values of individuals, were cited by fifty-five of the sixty individuals in the sample, or 92%. Of those fifty-five individuals, 82% cited anti-fascism as the dominant ideological reason for their participation. The other two dominant values U.S. foreign fighters cited were a commitment to communist values (53%) and commitment to democratic values (27%). As detailed in Chapter Two, the sacred values framework is a relative newcomer to the collective action and social movement literatures but is one that stands diametrically opposed to classic, rational choice theories of militant mobilization, which assume individuals are rational actors who require
incentives, especially economic incentives, to overcome psychological barriers to collective action. As previously mentioned, there was no incentive, economic or otherwise, for U.S. foreign fighters. Rather than conforming to the rational actor assumption, the U.S. foreign fighters would instead be considered “devoted actors,” or individuals who make costly sacrifices, where cost is clearly out of proportion to the potential reward, in the name of values they hold as sacred. In the case of the U.S. foreign fighters to Spain, knowing that, because of a global travel ban to Spain and a declaration of neutrality by the U.S. and the other democratic countries of Europe, they were the weaker side in the conflict, these individuals nevertheless put their lives on the line for their values, which they felt were being threatened by the rise of global fascism.

In conclusion, the U.S. foreign fighters to the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War mobilized for a mix of individual and social logics. These foreign fighters were both morally and ideologically committed to the cause of the International Brigades and had both a metaphysical and physical connection to other individuals who shared those commitments. With the help of organizations that strategically recruited and facilitated travel, these 3,000 U.S. foreign fighters were able to join 60,000 other foreigners from around the globe to aid the Spanish Republic. A song, chanted by members of the International Brigades and reprinted by Robert Klonsky in a May 3, 1937 letter home, captures these congruent sentiments well:

For in a very short, short while,
To Fascism we’ll put an end
Then workers will no longer Heil
For Hitler to hell we will send!
(Robert Klonsky, May 3, 1937 letter. Box 1, Folder 1).
In the next chapter on Tunisian foreign fighters to ISIS, I begin by contextualizing the Syrian Civil War and analyzing the effects of the Arab Spring on the world and on Tunisia, in particular. The chapter then provides a general demographic profile of Tunisian foreign fighters before analyzing the motivations of the Tunisian foreign fighters to ISIS.
CHAPTER FIVE

TUNISIAN FOREIGN FIGHTERS FOR THE ISLAMIC STATE OF IRAQ AND SYRIA
(ISIS) IN THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR (2011-PRESENT)

Marwan al-Dwiri, better known to many young Tunisians as Emino and to his ISIS counterparts as Abu Ameen al-Tunisi (his *nom de guerre*), was a rapper from Tunisia who became famous after the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings for posting photos of himself on social media doing drugs and posing with scantily clad women. He was arrested in 2012 on charges of marijuana possession and sent to prison for two years in what his lawyer categorized as a clear example of Tunisia’s “rampant political and economic corruption.” After his early release eight months later, Emino published a series of songs critical of the regime. He collaborated with fellow Tunisian rapper, Weld el 15 on a song called “*Boulicia Kleb*” (Cops Are Dogs), the music video of which finds the two in front of Tunisia’s Ministry of the Interior referring to Tunisian police by derogatory names. After a warrant was again issued for his arrest, Emino disappeared. It would later be revealed that he had taken refuge with a jihadi-Salafist network in Douar Hicher, part of the Manouba district of Tunisia, which he had gained access to thanks to acquaintances he had met in prison. Time with this network would begin to change him. In October 2013, he released a song that was uncharacteristic of his style entitled, “*Allahomma Amin*” (Oh God Hear Me) where he sang, “We don’t like to bring down our hearts, [but] we die like Saddam Hussein, Oh God Hear Me.” The song described how bleak life was in Tunisia, and
the Muslim world in general, where even powerful men like Saddam Hussein were victims of Western injustice. After a nearly two-year hiatus, Emino revealed on his Facebook page that he had joined ISIS in Syria, surprising many who believed he had a promising music career ahead of him, a rare thing in a country where nearly 40% of youth are unemployed (World Bank 2018). So why did Emino, along with 3,000 fellow Tunisians, join ISIS? The chapter argues that Tunisian foreign fighters to ISIS in the Syrian Civil War were primarily driven by an interaction of four factors.

The first and most important factor was the prevalence of local, close-knit social networks that helped link the local struggles experienced by Tunisians to the plight of Muslims all over the world. Demographic data on 650 Tunisian foreign fighters analyzed for this chapter shows that 96% of the fighters were actively recruited by high-ranking members of jihadi-Salafist networks with links to ISIS. Furthermore, interview and focus group data analyzed as part of the Tunisian prison study reveals that every individual, 100% of the fifty-seven Tunisian foreign fighter returnees that were interviewed, were members of a local jihadi-Salafist organization with active ties to ISIS prior to becoming foreign fighters. These jihadi-Salafist networks developed both local and global recruitment campaigns that targeted individuals to join their networks throughout Tunisia, which were freely operating because of new religious freedoms that resulted from the 2011 Tunisian revolution. It was these networks that later helped individuals overcome the physical barriers to mobilization. As was the case in the previous

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5 This is still available on Emino’s Facebook fan page: https://www.facebook.com/eminofficiel?ref=nf.
chapter on U.S. foreign fighters to the Spanish Civil War, social networks acted as a necessary condition driving the mobilization of Tunisian foreign fighters to ISIS.

Second, Tunisian foreign fighters came to adopt a new religious identity in opposition to their national or local identities. All fifty-seven of the Tunisian foreign fighters (100%) interviewed for the Tunisian prison study associated themselves with a transnational Islamist collective identity because of their involvement with jihadi-Salafist organizations. According to the fighters, this new identity was based on collective ideas about ISIS and its struggle in Iraq and Syria. Coupled with the government crackdown of these organizations in 2013, these identities ultimately helped Tunisian foreign fighters overcome the psychological barriers to mobilization.

Third, individuals that had joined jihadi-Salafist organizations also adopted new, radical sacred values that helped foster Tunisian foreign fighters’ “will to fight” abroad for ISIS. Tunisian jihadi-Salafist organizations, most notably Ansar al-Sharia, already had links to ISIS that stemmed from clandestine foreign fighter recruitment campaigns that took place during the Iraq War (2003 – 2011). These organizations worked to spread the “ISIS ideology,” one that all the Tunisian foreign fighter returnees who were interviewed for the prison study recited, including the belief that world powers (especially the U.S.) are conspiring against the nation of Islam and they have a strong commitment to return their civilization to the legal environment of the time of the Muslim conquests (seventh-century CE). Demographic data on Tunisian foreign fighters further reveals that most of the fighters did not have advanced religious knowledge,
making them susceptible to the “Prophetic methodology” of ISIS, which had been distilled in a way to make it more palatable to eager, young recruits.

Finally, Tunisian foreign fighters were driven to radical religious values as the result of a general disillusionment with their country after the 2011 revolution. Tunisian foreign fighters cited structural grievances, mostly associated with the country’s political and economic situation, as strong motivators for their action. Many of the foreign fighter returnees interviewed for the prison study, 69%, said the 2011 revolution in Tunisia was not a success and 89% of respondents said the Arab Spring, encompassing the entire movement that spread throughout the MENA region, was not a success. Tunisian foreign fighters connected this lack of success to a general lack of economic and political opportunities in Tunisia, which forced them to seek out radical groups and eventually join ISIS.

It turns out that Emino’s profile and rationale for joining ISIS fits with that of an average Tunisian foreign fighter described in this chapter. Emino announced that he had joined ISIS in March 2015, which would have made him twenty-five years old; roughly the average age of a Tunisian foreign fighter. He was single, did not have a college degree, and did not have a salaried job, all of which are revealed to be common traits of a Tunisian foreign fighter. He was not very religious prior to joining ISIS and was recruited by a jihadi-Salafist network that predated ISIS, both of which were common trends among Tunisian foreign fighters.² Finally, Emino, like many Tunisian foreign fighters, was highly critical of his country, citing structural

² Jihadi-Salafism, also known as Salafi jihadism and jihadist-Salafism, is a transnational religious-political ideology based on a belief in “physical” jihadism, or the act of fighting infidels, and Salafism, a movement based on a desire to return to what adherents believe to be “true” Sunni Islam (Hegghammer 2009; Hafez 2014). Salafists can be non-violent in the sense that belief in a return to true Sunni Islam does not require military conflict with non-believers.
grievances like political and economic oppression after the 2011 revolution as a major influence on his decision to join ISIS. Emino was killed in an aerial attack on a radio station he was working at in Mosul, Iraq on December 5, 2016.

This chapter analyzes the motivations of the Tunisian foreign fighters that joined ISIS in the Syrian Civil War and is divided into four sections. The first details the background to the Arab Spring and the Syrian Civil War to provide situational context for the mobilization of Tunisian foreign fighters to ISIS. Section two details the demographic profile of the average Tunisian foreign fighter using data on roughly 650 Tunisian citizens who joined ISIS. Section three builds on this demographic profile by analyzing interview and focus group data from a sample of fifty-seven Tunisian foreign fighters to test the six hypotheses presented in Chapter Three. The final section concludes with a summary and analysis of the findings.

**Background to the Conflict**

*The Arab Spring and the Rise of ISIS in Iraq and Syria*

The Assad family has ruled the Syrian Arab Republic since 1970 when Hafez al-Assad took power in a bloodless *coup d'état*, becoming first Prime Minister and then President of Syria (Drysdale 1981). His militarized Ba’ath party, which Hafez himself helped strengthen over a career in the Syrian military service, allowed him to maintain power as Syria’s authoritarian strongman until his death on June 10, 2000 when his son, Bashar, took power. Little changed in Syria when Bashar al-Assad took power. There was hope for democratic reform during the transition from Hafez to Bashar as groups of intellectuals began holding political meetings and rallies throughout Syria in what became known as the Damascus Spring (Lesch 2011). Optimism
for reform quickly soured, however, as Bashar began to employ the same strongman tactics as his father to control the population. The permanent emergency military law established under Hafez to suppress calls for greater political participation was maintained and under its guise the Syrian military began arresting Syrian intellectuals and quelling political protests.

Calls for reform remained quiet in Syria until the Arab Spring broke-out throughout the Middle East in late-2010. Syria was not part of the initial wave that saw governments in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya overthrown in January and February 2011.³ It was not until March that the uprisings came to Syria. They began when a group of teenage protestors painted anti-Assad graffiti on their school’s walls in their hometown of Daraa, Syria. The regime responded in force, arresting and in some cases torturing the teenagers responsible for the graffiti (Yacoubian 2020). News of this strong state response led to demonstrations across the city, which drew even greater ire from the state and resulted in the killings of several demonstrators. The unrest and response from the state triggered nationwide protests and by July 2011, hundreds of thousands of demonstrators had taken to the streets in small towns like Daraa and in major hubs like the capital, Damascus (Heydemann 2013). The at first peaceful demonstrators would come to form local militias to defend themselves, their families, and their towns from the violent reaction of the Syrian regime to the protests. The country soon descended into civil war.

By the time of the Syrian uprising, the seeds of what would become ISIS had already been sown in Iraq. In response to the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, a new offshoot of al-Qaeda, al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) was formed by known terrorist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (Stern and Berger

³ “Arab Spring” is the common terminology used to refer to the protests that challenged authoritarian rule in the Middle East and North Africa. Other terminology that is often used includes “Arab Uprisings” or “Arab Revolts.”
The group operated throughout the country, growing in numbers, eventually changing its name to the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI). With a series of unrelated but highly influential events occurring throughout 2010, including the death of first ISI leader Abu Omar al-Baghdadi (April 11, 2010), the withdrawal of U.S. special operations forces from Iraq (August 11, 2010), and the beginning of the Arab Spring in Tunisia (December 18, 2010), ISI became emboldened. During the early months of 2011, when the Syrian protests began to evolve into an armed insurgency, ISI’s new leader and future Caliph of ISIS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, took advantage of the regional instability and began sending operatives into Syria to form rival militia groups and recruit disgruntled Syrians for a newly envisioned “Islamic state” (Yacoubian 2020).

In the proceeding years, ISI backed militias successfully led a series of prison raids in Iraq and Syria that freed jihadi veterans of AQI and began to take control of parts of Syria. In 2013, ISI and its affiliates took control of major strongholds in Syria, including Raqqa, and in Iraq, including Fallujah and Ramadi. In January 2014, the group declared Raqqa the capital of a new Islamic state. And in June 2014, after the group took over the Iraqi cities of Mosul and Tikrit, it officially declared itself the worldwide Caliphate and rebranded itself the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (Stern and Berger 2016).

As ISIS’ territory expanded so too did its ranks and resources. By the time the Caliphate was announced in June 2014, ISIS had a fighting force of more than 100,000, at least 20,000 of

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4 Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a then unknown entity in Iraqi jihadi-Salafist circles, was made famous when he was described, in Colin Powell’s February 5, 2003 speech to the United Nations Security Council, as the link between Osama bin Laden’s al-Qaeda network and Saddam Hussein in Iraq, where Zarqawi operated. It was later revealed that Zarqawi and bin Laden hardly knew each other, and the link was erroneously made to justify U.S. intervention in Iraq (see Stern and Berger 2016).
which were foreign fighters. The territory ISIS took over in Syria put the organization in control of an estimated 60% of the country’s oil production capacity. The group sold this oil in black markets throughout the Middle East including, according to some reports, to the Assad regime itself (Cronin 2014). ISIS’ revenue from oil was estimated to be between $1 million and $3 million per day. Every time ISIS seized control of a new city it looted the banks and plundered antiquities to sell on the black market (Stern and Berger 2016). As a result of its control over major cities and transportation sectors throughout Iraq and Syria, the organization was able to operate a wide-ranging tax system that targeted individuals and businesses throughout its territory, taxing everything from small family farms to large enterprises such as cell-phone service providers and utility companies. The rise and success of ISIS led one commentator to declare that ISIS was not a terrorist organization, it was a “pseudo-state” with a complex administrative structure, tightly controlled territory, and was led by a conventional army (Cronin 2014). At its peak later in 2014-15, ISIS had a fighting force close to 200,000, 40,000 of which were foreign fighters (Cronin 2014). Between 1,500 and 3,000 of those foreign fighters came from Tunisia. The next section details the political and social changes happening in Tunisia during and in the immediate aftermath of the Arab Spring, when ISIS was recruiting most of its foreign fighters.

_Tunisia, the Arab Spring, and the Syrian Civil War_

Mohamed Bouazizi’s self-immolation on December 10, 2010 in front of the Governor’s mansion in Ben Arous, Tunisia is considered the triggering event that started the revolution in
Tunisia. Bouazizi was a twenty-six-year-old street vendor, a member of Tunisia’s informal economy, unmarried and without a college degree. He was born and worked near Sidi Bouzid, a rural town in Tunisia’s interior that is known for corruption and high rates of unemployment. The town would become known as the birthplace of the Arab Spring because of the protests that were launched in response to his death, but it had before that been a hub for jihadi-Salafist recruitment and activity (Merone 2020). Protests spread quickly after Bouazizi’s self-immolation and became even more rampant when he was pronounced dead on January 4, 2011. Ten days later, on January 14, 2011, Tunisian President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali fled to Saudi Arabia and became the first Arab dictator to fall to mass protests.

Tunisians revolted against the authoritarian tendency of the Ben Ali regime and the rampant political and economic repression that accompanied it. But Tunisia’s foreign fighter mobilization is best understood as a product of the immediate post-revolutionary environment, after the Tunisian population successfully ousted the former dictator. When Ben Ali fled, an interim government was established, senior security officials were forced out of power, and police and security agencies came under increased public scrutiny for their roles in decades of abuse against the Tunisian population (Zelin 2020). The newly established interim government, led by Ennahda, Tunisia’s predominant Muslim democratic political party, attempted to start anew and build an inclusive democratic society that corrected the wrongs of the previously administration. However, in addition to new elections and a promise to improve Tunisia’s economy, part of this “break with the past” included the release of thousands of political

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5 In Tunisia, the Arab Spring is often referred to as the “Jasmine Revolution” or “Jasmine Spring,” named after Tunisia’s national flower.
prisoners that had once threatened the political power of the Ben Ali regime (Zelin 2018). The combination of newly freed jihadi-Salafist prisoners, a weakened security force, and a democratizing country still facing high levels of political and economic uncertainty, allowed jihadi-Salafists organizations, such as Ansar al-Sharia and other groups linked to terrorist organizations abroad, to begin proselytizing across the country, recruiting vulnerable individuals.

Tunisia’s new freedoms would be one mechanism influencing an emerging foreign fighter movement. For over a year after the 2011 general prison amnesty granted freedom to thousands of radical clerics, untold numbers of preachers and recruiters for the future Islamic state openly toured Tunisia, recruiting young and impressionable individuals. Ansar al-Sharia, because of its size and organizational capacity, became the primary arm of ISIS recruitment in Tunisia. Its leaders and members openly spread ISIS rhetoric on the streets, operated their own mosques and local religious gatherings, conducted open interviews with local and foreign journalists about the cause of ISIS, and even appeared on Tunisian television and radio to disseminate their message live (Zelin 2018). By late-2013, when Ansar al-Sharia was officially designated by the Tunisian government as a terrorist organization, the message of ISIS was already widespread throughout Tunisia and large movements of foreign fighters had already begun to mobilize. When Tunisian security forces began to crackdown on the group’s activity, Ansar al-Sharia recruiters mobilized out of the country and began spreading their message on the internet from ISIS held strongholds inside of Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Turkey.

When the first estimates of foreign fighter totals by country were released in 2014 (ICSR 2014), Tunisia was clearly ahead of the rest of the world in terms of foreign fighter numbers.
Though, as detailed in Chapter One, other countries such as Russia and Saudi Arabia have reported estimates that are now greater than that of Tunisia, in 2014, with the first ever direct presidential election scheduled to be held in November, Tunisia, the only country in the region that seemed to be progressing quickly to a consolidated democracy after ousting their former dictator, became known as the hotbed of ISIS radicalism. As noted by one commentator, Tunisia quickly turned “from Jasmine to Jihad” (Cook 2018). The remainder of this chapter answers the question of why so many Tunisians took up arms and joined ISIS during this period.

**Demographic Data on Tunisian Foreign Fighters**

Demographic information on Tunisian foreign fighters was collected from leaked dossiers of ISIS foreign fighters known as the ISIS border documents. These documents were first leaked to NBC News in March 2016 and they include demographic information on approximately 25,000 foreign fighters that joined ISIS between 2013 and 2014. Recruit dossiers were meticulously recorded and kept by senior ISIS recruiters in Iraq and Syria. Foreign fighters had to fill out a prepared document that contained a set of twenty-four fields. As detailed in Chapter Three, these fields included the individual’s name, *Kunyah (nom de guerre)*, Mother’s name, date of birth and nationality, marital status, address and place of residence, educational qualification, level of obedience, level of religious knowledge, place of current work, prior employment, travel history, point of entry into Syria, name of recommenders, date of entry, past jihadi experience, envisioned role with ISIS, specialty, deposit items, date of death, place of death, address to communicate with, and notes.
I isolated the subset of the dossiers that belonged to Tunisian citizens and eliminated duplicate entries. Once completed, there remained a total of 650 unique Tunisian foreign fighter dossiers to code. Not all fields were filled across all documents and some of the fields, like level of obedience, date of death, and place of death, were always left blank to presumably be filled and updated later. This demographic data represents the most complete demographic profile of Tunisian foreign fighters available. Each foreign fighter entry was given a code number and their dossier information was translated into Microsoft Excel spreadsheets. Some data included in the documents was not relevant for the purposes of this study. For example, the notes or address of communication fields usually included arbitrary information or simply just phone numbers. Other fields, such as Mother’s name and blood type, were devoid of any analytical value and were therefore not reported. Though this demographic data represents a different subset of foreign fighters than what was collected during the ISIS prison study that will be analyzed in the next section, this data is more complete and therefore provides a more accurate picture of the average Tunisian foreign fighter. The 650 dossier entries represent 25% – 50% of the total number of Tunisians who joined ISIS.

Before detailing the demographic profile of Tunisian foreign fighters, it is important to demonstrate general demographic trends in Tunisia as a means of comparing the available data from the ISIS border documents. According to Tunisia’s 2014 census, 50.2% of the Tunisian population is female compared to 49.8% of the population that is male. Roughly 52% of the adult Tunisian population is single, 43% married, 4% divorced, and 1% widowed. The average Tunisian is thirty-two years old. Geographically, most Tunisians live in urban environments in
Tunisia’s northern and central governorates. Roughly 70% of the population resides in urban environments compared to roughly 30% of the population that resides in rural environments and 48.7% of the population lives in northern governorates, 36.7% in the central governorates, and 14.6% in the southern governorates.

Analyzing comparative 2014 data from the International Labour Organization reveals that 51.6% of the Tunisian population is employed in the service industry, 33.6% in the industrial sector, and 14.9% in agriculture. The African Development Bank estimates that between 30% and 45% of Tunisian workers are employed in the “informal economy,” or individuals who do not have labor contracts and do not pay taxes to the state, with 60% of working men and 83% of working women under the age of 40 employed in this sector (African Development Bank 2021). According to the 2014 census, Tunisia’s unemployment rate is 14.8%. The demographic group with the highest rate of unemployment are Tunisian youth. The age group with the highest rate of unemployment are those in the 20-24 age group (51%) followed by the 15-19 group (50%), the 25-29 group (39%), and the 30-34 group (20%). The subgroup with the highest rate of unemployment broken down by level of education are university graduates in the 25-29 group, which accounts for 49% of the total unemployed in the entire 25-29 age category. This rate is worse for female university graduates, which account for 62.6% of the total unemployed for that age category, than it is for males, which accounts for 33.8% of the unemployed in that same category. Among males, specifically, high school graduates account for a higher rate of unemployment in all age categories. In the 20-24 age category, male high school graduates account for 63.3% of the unemployed in that age category compared to 51.8% in the 25-29 age
category, and 41.2% in the 30-34 age category. More detailed unemployment rates, based on governorate data from the 2014 census, will be highlighted below.

One of the data fields in the ISIS border documents required foreign fighters to report their level of religious knowledge. Arab Barometer Surveys on religiosity in Tunisia suggest that religiosity, in general, is decreasing in Tunisia. Almost all Tunisians, over 99% of the population, identify as Muslim (Arab Barometer 2019). However, recent surveys from 2018 suggest that 33% of Tunisians now identify as “non-religious” compared to 2013 data when only 12% of Tunisians identified as such (Arab Barometer 2019). One of the more surprising findings from the Arab Barometer survey data is that 46% of Tunisian youth identify as “not religious.” While this trend, of increasing numbers of youth identifying as not religious, exists in other Arab-Muslim countries, the trend is far more drastic in Tunisia. Compared to other North African countries, roughly 30% of Libyan youth, 25% of Algerian youth, and 20% of Egyptian youth identify as not religious (Arab Barometer 2019).

Comparing these general demographic trends with data from the ISIS border documents tells an interesting story about recruitment trends in Tunisia around this time. Breaking the recruitment totals down by governorate, for example, shows that the highest raw number of foreign fighters came from populated northern neighborhoods like Tunisia’s capital, Tunis, and its surrounding suburbs like Bizerte. Tunisia’s affluent coastal areas, such as those of Sfax and Gabès, produced foreign fighters at a much lower rate (Table 12). However, it is the south of Tunisia, which, as previously mentioned, is far less densely populated, that has seen some of the highest recruitment rates. Unemployment figures and past recruitment trends from these regions
suggest that joblessness and a history of violent activism play a significant role in recruitment.

The governorate with the highest rate of ISIS recruitment was Kebili, which is in the south of Tunisia, near the Algerian border. Kebili relies heavily on the agriculture and service industries and has one of the highest rates of unemployment in the country, at roughly 25%. Tatouine, another city in the south of Tunisia that has the highest rate of unemployment in the country at roughly 30%, saw the fourth highest rate of ISIS recruitment. Medenine, the southeastern governorate of Tunisia near the Libyan border with an unemployment rate of 18%, does not have as high of an unemployment rate as Kebili and Tatouine, but it has long been a hotbed of foreign fighter recruitment for previous conflicts due to the presence of organizations like Ansar al-Sharia. Ben Guerdane, a city in the Medenine governorate, is also a well-known transit hub for Tunisian foreign fighters crossing the border into Libya.⁶

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Governorate</th>
<th>Raw Total</th>
<th>Rate per 100,000</th>
<th>Governorate</th>
<th>Raw Total</th>
<th>Rate per 100,000</th>
<th>Governorate</th>
<th>Raw Total</th>
<th>Rate per 100,000</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kebili</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>19.75</td>
<td>Manouba</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>7.38</td>
<td>Zaghouan</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bizerte</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>13.55</td>
<td>Kasserine</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>6.60</td>
<td>Nabeul</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>3.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tunis</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>10.60</td>
<td>Sousse</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>5.63</td>
<td>Béja</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tatouine</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10.04</td>
<td>Gafsa</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>5.04</td>
<td>Gabès</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medenine</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>8.55</td>
<td>Siliana</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4.48</td>
<td>Kef</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ariana</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>7.64</td>
<td>Kairouan</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>4.21</td>
<td>Jendouba</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monastir</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>7.47</td>
<td>Mahdia</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>4.14</td>
<td>Sfax</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sidi Bouzid</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>7.44</td>
<td>Ben Arous</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>3.96</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Total = 636. Population totals are broken down by governorate and are based on Tunisia’s 2014 census.

⁶ Ben Guerdane is seen as an important strategic point for ISIS due to its proximity to Libya. In March 2016, ISIS forces attempted to capture the city but were repelled by the Tunisian military, which had been stationed in the region to prevent active recruitment and attack planning.
Foreign fighter recruitment from Tunisia’s southern governorates corresponds to historical discrimination trends that have plagued the country since the era of French colonization (Challand 2020). Even after the country’s southern areas played an important role during the Arab Spring uprisings, these governorates still lack structure and authority from the state. The absence of “municipalization” in these areas has led to increases in unemployment and poverty, a growing informal economy, and a population that remains disconnected from national politics (Challand 2020, 252). The absence of the state in these areas keep locals from developing a feeling of national identity, the absence of which, as will be discussed below, can lead to new sectarian identities becoming more pronounced.

The historical trends of discrimination and disenfranchisement in Tunisia’s south make it all the more surprising to see that many of Tunisia’s northern neighborhoods also have comparatively high recruitment rates. However, historical demographic trends in these neighborhoods can help explain this finding. Ariana, for example, is one of the more affluent neighborhoods in Grand Tunis and has a 12% unemployment rate, lower than that of the country average, which, as previously mentioned, was 14.8% in 2014. But like Medenine in the south, Ariana was a highly active protest hub during the Arab Spring, and it was the first hub of Greater Tunis to have active protests in 2011 (Sterman and Rosenblatt 2018; Zelin 2018). Furthermore, Ariana is a governorate with stark differences in levels of socioeconomic development. For example, the town of Ettadhamen, located in the Ariana governorate, has an unemployment rate that is nearly double that of the affluent town of Ariana and was known in the 1990s as being an active, covert recruitment hub for Ansar al-Sharia (Volpi, Merone, and Loschi 2016). The same
is true for the governorate of Bizerte, which, as will be detailed below, has a legacy of foreign fighter recruitment that dates back to the Iraq War (2003 – 2011).

The geographic distribution of Tunisian foreign fighters shows that regional characteristics, such as unemployment, discrimination, and past levels of violent activism, play an important role in understanding ISIS recruitment trends. Another important factor that contributes to this observation is the trend regarding foreign fighter occupation. Roughly 25% of the foreign fighters, and the largest portion in the border documents, considered themselves some form of day laborer, while only 8% of foreign fighters noted that they were unemployed at the time of signing up to join ISIS (Table 13). In Tunisia, being a day laborer is common. These individuals are a part of the informal economy in that they rely on daily wages and do not have a contract for a regular salary. They are usually hired for construction projects, work in factories, or perform the roles of trash collectors or street cleaners. Their employment and income are therefore always inconsistent. This pay structure is the same for those who identified themselves as merchants or street vendors, the second most cited occupation. Together with the common occupations of agricultural worker and food service employee, these four categories illustrate how pervasive recruitment has been from Tunisia’s informal economy, which since 2011, has been the hardest hit by poverty and unemployment (World Bank 2014). Just these four sectors account for roughly 50% of the occupations of Tunisian foreign fighters.
Table 13. Occupation of Tunisian Foreign Fighters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Day Laborer</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merchant/Vendor</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business/Private Sector</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Driver/Mechanic</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineer</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food Service</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medicine</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Total = 627. Occupations are self-reported, so non-traditional occupations (such as Jihadi) are included if that is the occupation the foreign fighter identified.

Another large segment of Tunisian foreign fighters were students. Roughly 15% where occupation could be determined identified as students. It is unclear what type of school these foreign fighters were leaving to join ISIS, but the level of educational attainment (Table 14) shows that roughly 40% of the foreign fighters had already completed high school at the time of joining. The second largest proportion of Tunisian foreign fighters, 25%, had already completed their bachelor’s degrees by the time they joined. It is therefore likely, based on the statistics on age and level of educational attainment, that most foreign fighters that categorized themselves as students were college students and were dropping out of college to join ISIS. This finding tracks with the previously described trend in Tunisia, where males between the ages of 25 and 29 with a high school-level education had some of the highest rates of unemployment in the country. University graduates in this age group were the second most likely to be unemployed. As will be described in greater detail below, the lack of opportunities was an important motivation among Tunisian foreign fighters who sought out alternative opportunities with jihadi-Salafist groups in Tunisia during this time.
Table 14. Level of Education of Tunisian Foreign Fighters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Education</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle School</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School</td>
<td>254</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diploma</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postgraduate</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Total = 528

The average age of a Tunisian foreign fighter was twenty-six, which means these individuals were part of the age groups hardest hit by Tunisia’s economic hardships (Table 15). In addition, 69% of the foreign fighters were single, 16% were married, 2% were divorced, and 13% of the entries did not report a marital status. Together with the statistics on occupation and level of education, these trends potentially illustrate Tunisia’s persistent problem with a general lack of meaningful opportunities, which as detailed in Chapter Two, can be heavily influential in motivating individuals to participate in contentious collective action. Informal employment amongst this demographic group presents another potential factor in motivating foreign fighters. As documented in an OECD report on Tunisia’s informal economy, “high unemployment rates give only a partial view of the poor labour-market outcomes in Tunisia…informality affects one in three workers in the private non-agricultural sector and one in two in the private agricultural sector” (OECD 2015). In rural areas, such as in Tunisia’s south in governorates such as Kebili and Medenine where recruitment was highest, day labor contracts are the most common form of employment (World Bank 2014). In more urban areas, where there are a larger portion of college graduates, it takes an average of six years for these individuals to find stable employment, and by thirty-five years of age, half of those with college degrees remain unemployed (Angel-Urdinola 2014). These findings contribute to the overall trend in findings from survey research conducted
around 2014 in Tunisia that the majority of the country, regardless of age group or occupation, is pessimistic about Tunisia’s economic future and consider the situation to be “bad” or “very bad” (see e.g., Pew Research 2014; International Republican Institute 2013). These findings also explain why most Tunisian foreign fighters were unmarried. Marriage traditions in Tunisia still require men to pay dowries to the wife’s family before the wedding. A lack of sufficient income to make those payments means that Tunisian men are unable to marry and start a family, furthering preventing Tunisians from feeling like they have a place in their home country.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15-20</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-25</td>
<td>237</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26-30</td>
<td>227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-35</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36-40</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41-45</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46-50</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51-55</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>26.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 15. Tunisian Foreign Fighter Age

There was a field in the border documents for foreign fighters to name a “recommender” or “facilitator,” the high-ranking recruiter who was recommending them for service in ISIS. Almost every individual in the border documents, 96%, named a recommender illustrating how important active recruitment for ISIS in Tunisia was. Furthermore, while it was difficult to discern exactly how many unique recommenders appear in the forms as some individuals go by a similar nom de guerre, the data suggests that there were only between twenty and thirty unique recruiters responsible for all the recruitment of the Tunisian foreign fighters named in the border
documents. Some of these high-ranking recruiters had direct links to Ansar al-Sharia, which, as was previously mentioned, was the most prominent jihadi-Salafist organization operating within the borders of Tunisia. For example, Kamal Zarrouk (3), Abu Omar al-Tunisi (21), Ali al-Harzi (2), and Abu Zubair (27) were all high-ranking members of Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia and together recommended fifty-three individuals (Zelin 2018). There is evidence that some of the recommenders operated in a single geographic location while others had a more wide-ranging influence on recruitment. For example, Abu Ibrahim al-Tunisi, a Tunisian who became a religious official in ISIS’ Diwan al-Dawa wal-Masajid (Administration of Preaching and Mosques) in Abu Kamal, Syria (Zelin 2018), recommended forty-two Tunisians to ISIS. While there were a few of Abu Ibrahim al-Tunisi’s recruits who came from the same governorate, there is no clear pattern among the forty-two in terms of geography.

For other recruiters there is a clear geographic trend in recruitment that is linked to the jihadi-Salafist recruitment networks that predate ISIS. The Ansar al-Sharia leader, Abu Omar al-Tunisi, recruited almost exclusively in northern Tunisia. Nine of the sixteen individuals he recruited came from Bizerte, six from Tunis, and one from Ariana. The case of Abu Omar al-Tunisi illustrates the continuity between Ansar al-Sharia’s networks and the new networks established to recruit ISIS foreign fighters. First, Abu Omar al-Tunisi, whose real name was Tariq al-Harzi, was a known recruiter of foreign fighters from this network during the Iraq War (2003 – 2011). He is listed as a recruiter several times in the Sinjar Records, which were leaked dossiers of nearly 700 foreign fighters that entered Iraq between August 2006 and August 2007 (Fishman and Felter 2007). It was later discovered that Tariq was still recruiting and facilitating
the travel of foreign fighters to ISIS in 2013 (U.S. Department of Treasury 2014). What is most noteworthy, however, in terms of relevance to Tunisia’s networks of foreign fighter recruitment, is that Tariq tapped the same locations that Ansar al-Sharia long operated throughout Tunisia, notably in the northern part of Tunisia, especially, as previously mentioned, Ariana and Bizerte. Furthermore, Tariq’s brother, Falih al-Awni al-Harzi, who was also a member of Ansar al-Sharia, had fought in Iraq during the previous decade, and participated in the 2012 attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, would eventually join his brother in Syria sometime in late-2013, after Ansar al-Sharia members were forced out of Tunisia (Zeli 2018).

In the theoretical literature on social networks and collective action, the existence of preexisting ties to a network that has previously engaged in a certain type of collective behavior demonstrates that such activity has already been “institutionalized” within the organization or network (Perliger and Pedahzur 2011). In the context of the findings on Tunisian foreign fighters, if these individuals were recruited into a network where the act of foreign fighting was already institutionalized, the process by which new recruits are likely to engage in that type of activity is expedited. As will be highlighted in the next section, this finding suggests that, even if Tunisian foreign fighters were not originally brought into the network to become foreign fighters, when it became necessary for individuals to leave Tunisia for the frontlines of Iraq and Syria, they had already been conditioned for that type of behavior.

The final relevant fields of the border documents asked recruits to identify their desired role with the organization and level of religious knowledge. All new recruits to ISIS were expected to participate in some form of physical jihad. Regardless of their specialty or level of
education, all recruits had to choose whether they wanted to join in the role of “fighter,” “martyr,” or “inghimasi.” Most recruits, roughly 85%, signed up to join the normal rank-and-file of ISIS as fighters (Table 16). There is a slight definitional difference between a martyr and inghimasi. In the context of the border documents, those who signed up to be a martyr wanted to participate in martyrdom operations, or suicide bombins. These types of attacks target civilian populations and guarantee the death of the individual carrying out the operation. Inghimasi operations are slightly different. In inghimasi operations, the perpetrators usually wear explosive belts and charge into enemy positions to inflict as much damage possible and break the enemy ranks (Winter 2017). While the end of the operation usually ends in the perpetrator denoting their explosive belt, if they first succeed in breaking the rank of the enemy, they do not denotate. Therefore, the perpetrator’s death is not certain. In the Islamic faith, and especially in jihadist circles, martyrs, or Shahids, are thought to be the most devout as they have chosen to willingly give up their life for their faith (Thayer and Hudson 2010). Given the recent findings from Arab Barometer Surveys regarding the decrease in religiosity among Muslim youth in Tunisia, it is not surprising that only fifty individuals signed up to be martyrs, or roughly 8%, and thirty-six signed up to be inghimasi, or roughly 6%. Four individuals said they would be willing to play a dual role.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fighter</td>
<td>530</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martyr</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inghimasi</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fighter/Martyr</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fighter/Ingmasi</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 16. Tunisia Foreign Fighters’ Envisioned Role with ISIS

Notes: Total = 620
The ISIS border documents suggest that experienced recruiters were drawing from a new crop of young Tunisians who had limited religious knowledge. Of the individuals that claimed a level of religious knowledge on their recruitment form, 76% described their level of knowledge as “simple” (Table 17). It is important to note that respondents only had three categories to choose from so selecting simple was the lowest level of knowledge a foreign fighter could choose. Furthermore, less than 5% of the Tunisian foreign fighters who responded to the field regarding past jihadi experience noted that they had been involved in a previous conflict. Of those twenty-nine, twelve were involved in the conflict in Libya, nine in Syria, four in Afghanistan, two in Iraq, and two in Mali. As will become clear, this comparatively low level of religious knowledge and a lack of jihadi experience was consistent with the smaller subset of Tunisian foreign fighter returnees interviewed for the prison study. The lack of more advanced knowledge of Islamic principles made fighters more susceptible to the “ISIS ideology,” which distills down Islamic principles to make them more digestible for young and impressionable ISIS recruits.

Table 17. Religious Knowledge of Tunisian Foreign Fighters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Simple</td>
<td>425</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Total = 562

The profile of a Tunisian foreign fighter is a familiar one and one that tracks with broader demographic trends happening in Tunisia during this time. The average Tunisian foreign fighter was in their mid-twenties, unmarried, did not hold a college degree, was either unemployed or underemployed, worked in a non-specialized job, and likely had a very limited
knowledge of Islam. In the post-revolutionary environment of Tunisia, where policing and security was diminished and where experienced foreign fighter recruiters could work openly, one can see how Tunisia became one of the most prominent producers of ISIS foreign fighters. But this demographic profile of the young, unmarried, unemployed, and not religious Tunisian foreign fighter is consistent with the profile of the average Tunisian youth around this time. How and why did a subset of this demographic make the extraordinary decision to become a foreign fighter for ISIS? The next section analyzes interview and focus group data on a subset of fifty-seven Tunisian foreign fighter returnees to test the six hypotheses introduced in Chapter Three to answer this question.

Why Tunisian Citizens Fought for ISIS

This dissertation draws on a sample of fifty-seven Tunisian foreign fighters to test six theories of collective action: economic incentives, personal victimization, structural grievances, sacred values, collective identity, and social networks. It was not possible to draw a direct sample from the ISIS border documents detailed in the previous section. Tunisian terrorism laws consider any individual who joined ISIS a terrorist so any individual who joined ISIS and returned is now imprisoned or returned covertly. Instead, I was able to analyze original data from interview and focus group findings from what I refer to as the Tunisian prison study. As described in Chapter Three, the research study was sanctioned by the Tunisian government and conducted by independent researchers affiliated with ITES (Tunisian Institute for Strategic Studies). The researchers conducted interviews and focus groups with eighty-two individuals, seventy-nine men and three women, in Tunisian prisons all of whom were convicted of
terrorism-related charges. Fifty-seven individuals in the sample attempted to travel or traveled to Iraq and Syria to become foreign fighters during the 2011-15 period. I draw on this data and supplement it with my own original interview findings with researchers, members of Tunisia’s security sector, members of the Tunisian government, and friends and family members of foreign fighters, collected over fifteen weeks of fieldwork in Tunisia between 2015 and 2019.

As detailed in Chapter Three, ITES researchers sought information regarding the decision of individuals to become foreign fighters. They probed questions regarding an individual’s degree of religiosity, degree of ethnic solidarity (i.e., identification as Arab), and degree of religious identity (i.e., identification as Sunni). Interview and focus group questions also probed relevant socio-economic information such as the foreign fighter’s level of poverty, employment, and education, and political information such as the foreign fighter’s degree of disenchantment with political institutions, and degree of adherence to a radical political ideology. The research team asked about the subjects’ family backgrounds, history with drugs, suicide, and other traumas, and the values and events they internalized. Identities of all individuals were kept strictly confidential in the ITES reports.

**Overview of Tunisian Foreign Fighter Motivations**

The demographic characteristics of the Tunisian prison study sample were nearly identical to the sample analyzed as part of the ISIS border documents. The average Tunisian foreign fighter in the Tunisian prison study was in their mid-twenties, single, and only had a

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7 Researchers for the Tunisian prison study included in their sample non-foreign fighters to isolate significant differences between those convicted of domestic terrorism charges and those who explicitly wanted to become foreign fighters.
secondary school education. The governorate with the highest rate of Tunisian foreign fighter recruitment was still Kebili, though Sidi Bouzid had the second highest rate, and Tunis and Bizerte fell to fourth and fifth highest, respectively. The affluent coastal areas were still not heavily represented. In fact, Gabès is the only governorate in the Tunisian prison study that is not represented. Many of the foreign fighters in the sample came from the informal sector with 38% reporting being a merchant or street vendor and 16% reporting being a day laborer. Level of religious knowledge was not explicitly reported in the prison study though statistics that will be discussed below suggest that these foreign fighters were not devout Muslims prior to joining ISIS. There is also no evidence that any of the respondents had ever participated in jihad prior to joining ISIS. The findings begin with the most significant to least significant factors measured by number of respondents that cited a specific hypothesis as motivating their decision to become foreign fighters.

**Social Networks**

There is overwhelming evidence to support the hypothesis (Hypothesis #6) that an individual will become a foreign fighter if they have preexisting social ties and linkages to other foreign fighters in the network. As previously mentioned, 96% of Tunisian foreign fighters analyzed as part of the ISIS border documents reported having a recommendation from a high-ranking individual linked to ISIS illustrating the important social aspect of becoming a foreign fighter. The Tunisian prison study provides further evidence that interpersonal networks facilitated the radicalization, indoctrination, and recruitment of foreign fighters for ISIS. All fifty-seven, 100% of the foreign fighters interviewed as part of the prison study revealed that
they were members of organizations that Tunisian researchers characterized as jihadi-Salafist organizations with active ties with ISIS.⁸

To understand how networks became so prevalent in the recruitment of Tunisian foreign fighters, it is first important to understand how these recruitment hubs were able to grow and become so prominent. The rise of recruitment hubs began in 2011, when, as previously mentioned, hundreds of former jihadi-Salafists and ideologues were released from Tunisia’s prisons. This environment provided them with the ability to, for the first time, organize in the absence of an authoritarian state. In addition to a weakened security establishment, during the revolution residents in numerous neighborhoods throughout the country raided the local party offices of the Ben Ali regime. According to Rosenblatt (2019), these political offices housed detailed information about the former dictator’s Mukhabarat (intelligence services).

Furthermore, according to Wolf (2014), during the raid,

…residents uncovered a trove of documents naming the government’s informants in the neighborhood. These documents did not just include the names of the neighborhood informants, it listed what their salaries were and what information they were expected to provide. All the imams in this neighborhood were included in this list because they were an integral part of the state’s mass surveillance of Tunisia’s conservative religious community.

When information about the imam spies was made public, they were forced to flee not only their mosques but their neighborhoods, leaving them wide open for new, radical imams to step in. According to sources inside the Tunisian government, the state “lost control” of 400 out

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⁸ For security purposes and to protect the identities of the prisoners, Tunisian researchers for the prison study declined to report which organizations the foreign fighters were members of. The researchers did confirm, however, that the organizations mentioned by foreign fighters would be categorized as jihadi-Salafist organizations as defined at the beginning of this chapter.
of 5,000 mosques throughout the country to jihadi-Salafists (cited in Wood 2014). In areas that had a history of jihadi-Salafist activity and that were historically more heavily watched by the state, such as in Douar Hicher, in the Manouba district where Emino was radicalized, it was reported that ten out of the neighborhood’s eleven mosques were controlled by Ansar al-Sharia by 2011. With the ruling Ennahda party unwilling to adopt the same security measures as the previous regime to limit the growth of jihadi-Salafist activity and recruiting, the mosque became the locus of Ansar al-Sharia control throughout Tunisia.

Researchers for the Tunisian prison study asked detailed questions regarding the recruitment and travel process of foreign fighters. According to Sami Kallel, an independent psychologist with twenty-eight years of experience working with Tunisian prisoners and one of the primary authors of the Tunisian prison study, the recruitment process followed a distinct pattern. First, recruiters from these networks would make local connections to learn about potential new recruits before approaching them to join. A recruiter would approach them, sometimes in public spaces such as cafés or sometimes, if more intimate contacts could be established to initiate a meeting, at the home of the potential recruit. Once they initiated contact, they would adapt their pitch to align with what they found to be the target’s primary desires or concerns (e.g., joblessness, lack of money, or lack of meaning), often making it difficult for the recruit not to at least consider joining the organization. The initial encounters rarely involved becoming a foreign fighter. They first involved becoming a closer member of the religious community and mosque. After subsequent visits, more time spent with other potential recruits
and veterans, and after gauging the level of trust between a recruit and the recruiter, the offer to travel abroad for jihad was made.

The individuals who were recruiting for these groups were “selling” a lifestyle, a lifestyle that entailed full immersion with the religious group, and included nothing but prayer, mosque visits, and religious meetings. Current research on foreign fighter recruitment trends suggests that the individuals who “bought” into the lifestyle were those most suffering from an “identity crisis,” which recruiters exploited to interject their ideology (Chassman 2017). This is evident by the “full-immersion” practices of these networks where foreign fighters mentioned spending hours watching TV stations that had jihadi-Salafist propaganda on it, visiting social networking sites of jihadi-Salafists, reading ISIS propaganda such as the magazine *Dabiq*, and engaging with a broader network of jihadi-Salafists online and in-person. The ideology became their entire world.

To understand how this process was viewed from the outside, and to explain why not every individual was receptive to the recruitment strategy, I talked to several Tunisian students who were studying for their master’s degrees in Common Law, knew individuals who had joined these networks, and who were actively recruited themselves. Nour, one of the students I interviewed who had just finished her Common Law degree, told me that she knew young men in her neighborhood who started going to mosque very early in the morning (first prayer is at 4:00am) and not returning until evening, therefore avoiding interaction with anyone else in the neighborhood. She said this was common for new members being recruited into jihadi-Salafist groups. “You basically stop seeing them or interacting with them unless you are also a part of
that group,” she told me (Interview with Nour, August 7, 2019). Yosra, another current student, said that she would regularly hear her friends talking about their new “families,” “friends I knew were talking to Salafists on WhatsApp [a chat messaging platform for cellphones] and going to the mosque in the morning with them” (Interview with Yosra, August 7, 2019). Yosra said she knew fellow classmates that stopped going to class and only spent time with others who had started going to the new mosques with them, “it was surprisingly common in my neighborhood,” she said. Another Common Law student, Iheb, who described being actively recruited by a member of Ansar al-Sharia, told me that they used all sorts of methods to try and convince him to join, “money and jobs, religious appeals, a new family, peer pressure; these were all methods they used on me” (Interview with Iheb, August 6, 2019). However, Iheb admitted that, “once they knew I wasn’t [sic] interested, they left me completely alone. There are so many willing people that they don’t [sic] bother to spend the time on a hopeless cause.”

When asked why these students were not receptive to the offers made by recruiters, their answers all echoed the same idea; they had something in Tunisia to work for. For example, Iheb told me that he had his calling already, “to become an international lawyer,” and he had the support of his family and friends inside his law program (Interview with Iheb, August 6, 2019). Nour, who had just finished her degree, was already working as a Legal Assistant for an intellectual property firm in Tunisia. In fact, most of the individuals I spoke to for this study were either students or individuals that were gainfully employed. This was quite different from the roughly 50% of the foreign fighters that reported being members of the informal economy and the merely 30% of them that reported earning an income of 700 TND (approximately $250
in 2020 USD) or less a month, which is just barely enough to give them the status of “middle class.” As will be demonstrated in greater detail below, Tunisian foreign fighters did not cite economic gain as a primary reason for joining ISIS, but the lack of economic opportunities made Tunisians more susceptible to radical recruitment strategies.

It was not the case that foreign fighters came from broken homes. Most reported coming from families that cared for them. In fact, 86% of Tunisian foreign fighters in the prison study described coming from “normal” families, where both parents were married and lived together and 99% reported having mutual respect for their brothers, sisters, and parents. In fact, members of a potential recruit’s family were often aware that something was going on when their young son or brother was no longer home and was changing his way of speech, dress, and who he associated with. Mohammed Iqbel, who founded the *Association de Sauvetage des Tunisiens Bloques a l’Étranger* (Rescue Association for Tunisians Trapped Abroad) in 2013 and whose younger brother joined ISIS in 2012, explained that he could sense something was amiss when his brother, who normally did not go out much, was more frequently leaving the house. “I only noticed the odd behavior about a week before one day he just didn’t [sic] come home,” Iqbel told me. He later found out that most of his brother’s early contact with jihadi-Salafists was online, and due to a physical handicap, he did not go to the frequent religious meetings until the week before he knew he was going to be leaving for Syria (Interview with Mohammed Iqbel, February 13, 2019). Rosenblatt (2019), who interviewed the mothers of several foreign fighters, described how mothers knew and actively tried to counter the recruitment process. He reported that these mothers knew intimate details about the recruitment process, even having hosted jihadi-Salafist
recruiters in their own homes. According to Rosenblatt, the mothers and family members that knew to intervene likely prevented many Tunisians from ultimately making the decision to join ISIS;

…mothers and family members are often the reason why recruits ultimately decide not to go. Ibtesem [one of the mothers] said she keeps telling her son ‘Be patient, things will change. But it’s hard to say that you should be patient when conditions are so bad…I don’t want to push him…because I am afraid I will drive them into the arms of these people. My son uses very harsh language with me; he is very aggressive. I know he is under a lot of stress so I don’t push him.’ (Rosenblatt 2019, 18)

As previously mentioned, the recruitment of Tunisians into organizations like Ansar al-Sharia persisted for more than two years in the immediate aftermath of the Arab Spring, virtually unopposed by the Tunisian government. When the government began to crackdown on organization activity in late-2013, the decision by jihadi-Salafist organizations to move their networks overseas seemed like a natural progression in their religious evolution. Most commentators have focused on the statistics on foreign fighters who successfully made it to Iraq and Syria, but this misses an important component of the wider mobilization potential. According to official estimates, nearly 30,000 individuals from jihadi-Salafists networks in Tunisia attempted to join ISIS between 2012 and 2017 and were prevented by state security forces (Zelin 2018). It is this figure that illustrates the reach of the radical social networks throughout Tunisia and the impact those networks had on individuals throughout the country.

An important concluding note about the importance of social networks in the recruitment process of Tunisian foreign fighters involves the role these networks played in facilitating foreign fighter travel abroad. Prior to 2013, when Ansar al-Sharia was declared a terrorist organization and members were closely watched, travel to Iraq and Syria was relatively easy.
High-level recruiters with Ansar al-Sharia already had contacts with ISIS affiliates in Turkey, which was the first major transit hub into Iraq and Syria for Tunisian foreign fighters. Prior to 2013, recruiters simply helped Tunisian citizens gain access to legitimate travel documents such as passports and visas, and then these individuals were able to board flights to Turkey to meet local contacts on the ground and negotiate land entry into Iraq or Syria. This process was briefly documented in one of the focus groups in the Tunisian prison study: After securing enough money to fund their travel to Turkey, recruits were directed to Urfa (Şanlıurfa), a Turkish city on the border with Syria, where their arrival was already known to local contacts. They were welcomed, given instruction, and directed to a border crossing with directions on how to enlist with ISIS.

After 2013, recruiters developed new strategies to smuggle fighters into Iraq and Syria from Tunisia. The primary difference was that direct flights to Turkey became impossible because the Tunisian government mandated that all Tunisian men under the age of thirty-five submit at the airport a letter either from their employer or father stating their purpose for travel (Rosenblatt 2019). The new process, arranged by ISIS’ broad social network, included raising roughly 2,000 TND (approximately $730 in 2020 USD) to help transport and smuggle the foreign fighter into Libya. Recruits would be driven to the Tunisian border near the town of Ben Guerdane and would then drive 17 hours to Derna, Libya, which came under complete ISIS control in 2014. There they would spend two months training before flying to Turkey to cross into Iraq or Syria in much the same manner as pre-2013 recruits.
The evidence of an active recruitment component amongst Tunisian foreign fighters suggests that social networks played a critical role in their recruitment to ISIS. All the foreign fighters interviewed as part of the prison study described being a member of this type of network prior to joining ISIS. Without the logistical support and targeted recruitment of individuals by jihadi-Salafist organizations, it is possible that not only would there have been fewer, if any, Tunisian foreign fighters to ISIS, but ISIS’ global recruitment numbers may have been significantly lower. With several barriers to entry enacted by state governments to control the flow of foreign fighters, the recruitment of foreign fighters required a concerted strategy and global networks of willing participants to facilitate travel. The hypothesis, that an individual will become a foreign fighter if they have preexisting social ties and linkages to other foreign fighters in a network, is therefore strongly supported by these findings, which further suggest that social networks were a necessary condition driving the Tunisian foreign fighter mobilization to ISIS.

**Collective Identity**

There is clear evidence to support the hypothesis (Hypothesis #5) that individuals are more likely to become foreign fighters when their self-identity is merged with a collective identity that they mobilize to defend. Tunisian foreign fighters associated their identities with an Islamist collective identity that they mobilized to fight to defend. In interviews and focus groups conducted as part of the prison study, Tunisian foreign fighter returnees were explicitly asked about how they identify with different groups, including the Islamic nation, their family, their country, and their community. Respondents were also asked to rank the groups they most closely identified with and in all cases (100%) the foreign fighters perceived their identities as Islamist
first and Tunisian last. The common trend was summed up by one respondent who said, “my first belonging is to the Islamic nation and then to the family and close people…This is what our religion recommends.”

There is strong theoretical evidence that in the absence of a strong national identity, individuals can begin to associate more strongly with sectarian identities (Dodge 2020). Individual identities change as part of the process of socialization and national identities are often fostered as part of the state-making process (Hinnebusch 2018). Since decolonization there has been tension in the MENA region between national and sectarian identities. Part of the variation among MENA states is whether strong, inclusive institutions were established after colonization that favored more inclusive, national identities. Prior to the Arab Spring, ethnic and religious identities played a minor role in Tunisian national politics and the country was not historically vulnerable to sectarianism due to a half-century of heavy state repression of Islamism (Koplow 2011; Rørbæk 2019). After the Arab Spring, the combination of loosening restrictions on Islamist organization and an ineffective state struggling to consolidate new and legitimate democratic institutions left many Tunisians feeling, at best, ignored and at worst, betrayed, by the state (Rørbæk 2019). This feeling was acutely felt in Tunisia’s south (Challand 2020). The findings from the Tunisian prison study suggest that, in this new political and cultural milieu, and with newly released jihadi-Salafists organizing in Tunisia, many individuals that encountered these organizations constructed a new collective identity built along sectarian lines.

The close connection Tunisian foreign fighters expressed toward their perceived religious community is both emblematic of their close association with the values espoused by ISIS and a
product of their feelings of disillusionment with the state. Tunisian foreign fighters described
feelings of personal victimization by the state as motivating them to become interested in
religion and become foreign fighters with 90% of respondents in the prison study associating the
image of Tunisia as “the country of injustice.” A related finding that came out in the focus
groups was that many of the foreign fighters felt that the state was ignoring them and did not care
about them. Numerous foreign fighters said that they had no relationship with the state, declaring
that “the state does not exist” in their neighborhood. In addition, 54% of respondents believe that
being a good citizen and following the laws of Tunisia will lead to “individual failure.” This
explains why Tunisian foreign fighters did not develop a strong national identity and likely
sought out other identity groups to fill that void.

There is strong evidence that Tunisian foreign fighters closely aligned with the religious
identities that they fought to defend. Roughly 90% of the respondents expressed support for the
Palestinian cause, with 60% advocating that the cause was a pillar of the Arab-Muslim nation
and should be actively defended. Like the Palestinian cause, foreign fighters agreed that violence
is a legitimate reaction to aggression directed against “brothers in Islam.” Tunisian foreign
fighters went even further in formulating the way violence could be enacted, with some
individuals saying that “terrorist attacks” are an “indispensable act of reprisal to ward off
aggression” against Muslims. Foreign fighters also justified attacks against Muslim civilians in
this way, because, according to one individual, these citizens “acquiesced to paying taxes to
finance the governments they elected to fight our Muslim brothers.”
The final piece of evidence that supports the collective identity hypothesis is the way Tunisian foreign fighters referred to their religious counterparts, those who were members of local jihadi-Salafist organizations or fellow fighters in Iraq and Syria, as “brothers.” According to Moez Ghribi, Director of the Department of Geopolitics at ITES, many of the foreign fighters he interviewed referred to the recruitment process as joining the “brotherhood.” Many recruiters, both online and in-person, encouraged individuals to engage in the brotherhood to elicit the idea that these individuals were becoming part of a collective “family.” In an example that came out in focus group discussions regarding the crackdown of Ansar al-Sharia activity in 2013, fighters noted that the curtailment by Tunisian security services forced “many of the brothers [members of Ansar al-Sharia] in that period to resort to traveling abroad to places like Libya and Syria.”

According to Ghribi, Tunisian foreign fighters even had a name for this movement that was particular to their foreign fighter group. They referred to the exodus of their organization abroad as al-nafeer, which means “sacred mobilization,” and they saw their mobilization as their collective duty (fard al-kifayah) to restore true Islam and fight the injustices brought on them by the Tunisian government.

Moez Ali supports the theory that the lack of a Tunisian national identity made young people more likely to adopt the identity of radical groups. Ali is a civil society activist and founder and President of the Union des Tunisiens Indépendants pour la Liberté (Union of Independent Tunisians for Freedom) (UTIL). He is a strong advocate for educational reform in Tunisia as a means of “stemming the tide of radicalization” sweeping the country. He told me, “students are not encouraged to make friends and there is no room in their lives for
extracurricular opportunities…this leads to a breakdown in social cohesion where values are spread not from parents or their neighborhood but from social media” (Interview with Moez Ali, February 6, 2019). He further explained that these are exactly the types of individuals that get targeted by radical groups. This theoretical supposition is further supported by Scott Atran, Director of Research in Anthropology at the Centre national de la recherche scientifique (French National Centre for Scientific Research). In a 2015 address to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Atran (2015) relayed findings from his own research on ISIS foreign fighters that mimic that of the experiences expressed by Tunisian foreign fighters; “Violent extremism represents not the resurgence of traditional cultures, but their collapse, as young people unmoored from millennial traditions flail about in search of a social identity that gives personal significance and glory,” he said. “This is the dark side of globalization. They radicalize to find a firm identity in a flattened world: where vertical lines of communication between the generations are replaced by horizontal peer-to-peer attachments that can span the globe.” He continued by way of example, “Young people whose grandparents were Stone Age animists in Sulawesi [in Indonesia], far removed from the Arab world, told me they dream of fighting in Iraq or Palestine in defense of Islam.” These were the exact sentiments relayed by Tunisian foreign fighters.

As previously mentioned, I spoke to numerous Tunisian students and I asked them about their experiences coming up through Tunisia’s education system. At the time of our interviews, many of the students were getting ready to start their school year pursuing advanced law degrees at the University of Carthage, Tunis and others had just graduated the year prior. All of them were in their formative high school years when local recruitment by jihadi-Salafist organization
was at its peak between 2011 and 2013. They confirmed many of the findings that were present in the prison study. “We really didn’t [sic] do much other than study and stay home with our families,” Nour, a Common Law graduate told me (Interview with Nour, August 7, 2019).

Cyrine had a similar experience, “I lived sort of far from my school, so I didn’t [sic] do much other than go to and from school every day” (Interview with Cyrine, August 6, 2019). Iheb, who I interviewed at the same time as Cyrine, said he was a typical male youth, “I played [soccer] with my friends and occasionally watched it on TV, but other than that it was just school, family, and mosque” (Interview with Iheb, August 6, 2019). As detailed in the previous section, these students knew young friends at the time who were getting involved with jihadi-Salafist groups and frequently referred to themselves and other members as “brothers” and adopted the identity of a Salafist. Iheb said he was actively recruited at his local mosque when he was only thirteen years old, “They are like gangsters” he told me, “they try to convince you to join ‘the family’ which made it sound like a gangster organization and not a religious group” (Interview with Iheb, August 6, 2019). Iheb clarified by saying, “I understood that they were referring to Muslim brothers and the *Ummah* [greater Muslim community] but how they approached me about it made it seem like a gangster organization.” Cyrine told me she was also approached, “They try to sell you the ‘lifestyle’ by telling you that you will have more friends because you get to come to religious meetings and attend special morning prayers.” Iheb intervened, “It really is a lifestyle! Children who were part of the group all had the same schedule; Walk to mosque for morning prayer, break for [soccer], more prayer, meet at mosque, more [soccer], then reunion [sic] in the evening.” When I asked if these individuals likely formed new identities because of
being recruited, they confirmed, “adopting this type of identity was better than anything else in Tunisia,” Iheb told me, “there is no luxury, no life, no culture to be offered; there is no ‘Tunisian’ identity.” It is, therefore, not surprising that even these young university students have aspirations outside of Tunisia. As previously mentioned, Iheb wants to become an international lawyer, working for international organizations in Europe and the U.S., Cyrine told me she wants to one day “earn enough money as a lawyer to own a Maserati and live in Paris,” and Nour told me she hopes she will soon be able to transfer to a European branch of the legal organization she currently works for.

Not only do these findings support the theoretical conclusions made by scholars, that state insecurity can prevent individuals from developing a national identity, but they also support the hypothesis that individuals will become foreign fighters when they mobilize on behalf of a collective identity they adhere to. These findings, together with the findings detailed above regarding the importance of social networks, suggest that there is a strong social logic to the foreign fighter phenomenon in Tunisia. However, as will be further detailed below, this social logic is enforced by strong feelings of sacred values and grievances stemming from feelings of exclusion from legitimate political and economic positions in society.

**Sacred Values**

One of the most significant factors contributing to Tunisia’s foreign fighter mobilization was their commitment to sacred values. As detailed in Chapter Two, sacred values are non-negotiable preferences that seemingly drive behavior independent of any concrete material goals. In the context of Tunisian foreign fighters, the sacred values cited were parochial religious
values derived from the Islamic faith. This therefore conforms to the original supposition, made by Malet (2016) and detailed in Chapter One, that ISIS foreign fighters are best categorized as “true believers.” But the evidence regarding the role religious sacred values play in motivating Tunisian foreign fighters is contradictory. On the one hand, all evidence suggests that young ISIS recruits are not religious, or at least not in the traditional sense, in that they do not possess deep knowledge of Islamic doctrine, laws, or practices. However, in articulating their rationale for becoming foreign fighters, these individuals cited threats to their Islamic faith and threats to the global Muslim community suggesting that while they do not fully understand the tenants of Islam, they are still perceiving a threat to internalized Islamic values that they hold as sacred. There is therefore significant evidence to support the hypothesis (Hypothesis #4) that individuals will become foreign fighters to defend values they hold as sacred.

Recent scholarship has shown that ignorance of established religious doctrines provides a cognitive opening for individuals to adopt radical, conspiracy-laden values (Trip et al. 2019; Zmigrod, Rentfrow, and Robbins 2019). Studies have shown that a misplaced commitment to parochial religious values has led to the rise of conspiracy movements in places like the U.S., where the ideological commitment to “Christian nationalism” has led to large portions of the population believing in conspiracy theories regarding, for example, the vaccination of children (Perry, Whitehead, and Grubbs 2020). A similar process is demonstrated among Tunisian foreign fighters, who cite a strong commitment to the conspiracy-laden theories and values espoused by ISIS recruiters.
As previously mentioned, 76% of the ISIS recruits listed in the ISIS border documents identified their religious knowledge as “simple” and there are numerous examples from the Tunisian prison study that support the finding that foreign fighters do not have deep religious knowledge. For example, in trying to assess the degree of religiosity among the foreign fighters in the prison study, researchers asked questions regarding an individual’s religious beliefs, practices, and their conceptions of what they consider an ideal society. The responses confirm that these were not particularly religious individuals. Only 35% of foreign fighter respondents said they regularly participated in Salat (prayer) and 32% said they are committed to the five pillars of Islam, or the five “indispensable observances,” Salat (Prayer), Zakat (Alms), Sawm (Fasting), Hajj (Pilgrimage), and Shahada (faith). Other statistics similarly suggest that foreign fighters were not traditionally religious, including the finding that only 50% of respondents associate the concept of “ideal society” with the concept of Sharia (Islamic law), only 21% conceive of the “ideal family” as one that adopts the precepts of Islam, 3% conceive of their ideal neighborhood as one that observes religious rules, and 27% explicitly state that they want the world to be governed by Sharia. The responses to these questions are remarkable considering that ISIS’ prescribed goal is to establish a modern Islamic Caliphate, reminiscent of the Rashidun Caliphates, or Caliphates that are the spiritual and political successors of the Prophet Muhammad, which were governed by Islamic law and practices. However, this inherent contradiction is consistent with the previously documented trend in Tunisia that Muslim youth are increasingly likely to identify as not religious.
The finding that Tunisian foreign fighters are not religious in the traditional sense is mitigated by the finding that 100% of the respondents believe that world powers are conspiring against the nation of Islam and they have a strong commitment to return their civilization to the legal environment of the time of the Muslim conquests and the Rashidun Caliphates (seventh-century CE). While experts and commentators I spoke with agreed that ISIS and its fighters were not traditionally Islamic, the reality is that the Islamic State is very Islamic in that its teachings and values come from the Prophetic methodology of the Prophet Mohammed, which have been distilled in a way to make them more palatable to eager, young recruits. As noted by one scholar, “…pretending that [ISIS] isn’t actually a religious, millenarian group, with theology that must be understood to be combatted, [led] the United States to underestimate it and back foolish schemes to counter it” (Wood 2015).

Much of the focus group data from the Tunisian prison study detail the ISIS doctrines foreign fighters claimed to be fighting for. The two most important aspects of the ISIS ideology that were discussed by foreign fighters are as follows. First, according to the foreign fighters, ISIS claims to be awaiting the arrival of “the army of Rome” in Dabiq, Syria, whose defeat will initiate the countdown to the apocalypse. In Islamic eschatology, found in the Hadith, “The Last Hour would not come until the Romans land at al-A’maq [the Amik Valley in Southern Turkey] or in Dabiq. An army consisting of the best [soldiers] of the people of the earth at that time will come from Medina [to counteract them]” (Hadith 6924, 41:9). As a result of this confrontation, the Mahdi, or “the guided one,” who is believed to be the temporal leader of all Muslims, will

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9 Due to the religious significance of the city in Syria, Dabiq became the name of the glossy print magazine that ISIS distributed throughout its territory beginning in 2014.
return to earth to lead Muslims as they retake Constantinople and Rome, help Muslims to redeem Islam, and then ascend with Jesus Christ as he reclaims the true believers in heaven (see also Wood 2015; Stern and Berger 2016). Second, ISIS has developed a loose form of takfir doctrine. *Takfir* roughly translates to “excommunication” and denotes the act of declaring another individual as a non-believer (of true Islam). Traditionally, a takfiri is a Muslim who accuses another Muslim of being a non-believer, or an “apostate.” In traditional Islamic scripture, the accusation of apostasy was reserved for Muslims who outright denied the holiness of the *Qur’an* and could result in a sentence of death. As detailed by Tunisian foreign fighters, the ISIS ideology has expanded the position of apostasy to include any individual who does not conform to the narrow strictures of the ISIS ideology. As further detailed by other scholars (Wood 2015) studying the ISIS ideology, those who can be considered an apostate now include those who are accused of,

…selling alcohol or drugs, wearing Western clothes or shaving one’s beard, voting in an election—even for a Muslim candidate—and being lax about calling other people apostates. Being a Shiite, as most Iraqi Arabs are, meets the standard as well, because the Islamic State regards Shiism as innovation, and to innovate on the [*Qur’an*] is to deny its initial perfection.

In other words, ISIS’ *takfiri* doctrine has provided, according to its leaders and fighters, free reign to purify the world of what they see as all non-believers. This doctrine not only explains ISIS’ attacks on the West, but also explains the organization’s systematic genocide against the Yazidi (Van Schaack 2018), its terrorist attacks throughout the Muslim world (Schumacher and Schraeder 2020), and public and mass executions that occurred daily in ISIS-held cities throughout Iraq and Syria (Euben 2017).
The values and ideas Tunisian foreign fighters claim to be fighting for are emblematic of the ISIS ideology. During the focus groups, foreign fighters cited numerous examples as evidence of the conspiracy-laden doctrines of the ISIS ideology including that the problems of the Islamic world were caused by the “infidel West,” which recruits “traitors and mercenary agents” throughout the Muslim world to work against their fellow Muslims. The regime of Bashar al-Assad, for example, was cited as an “infidel Alawi regime” that has been coopted by Shiite agents and the Russians (which wages war against “brothers is Afghanistan and Chechnya”) to kill innocent Sunni women and children and oppress the greater Sunni nation. The U.S. is the “leader” of the conspiratorial plot against the nation of Islam and Israel is the physical manifestation of U.S. meddling in the region. The foreign fighters believe that they have an obligation to engage in “sacred jihad” in any Muslim country suffering from oppression and injustice brought about by these apostate regimes and they will rest for nothing less than their complete annihilation. Foreign fighters in the Tunisian prison study also noted that they frequently engaged with ISIS propaganda prior to becoming a foreign fighter, including the glossy print magazine of ISIS, called *Dabiq*, where the ideologic basis of the Caliphate is laid out in the first article, of the first issue, of the magazine;

Shaykh Abu Mus’ab az-Zarqawi (*rahimahullah*\(^{10}\)) anticipated the expansion of the blessed jihad from Iraq into *Sham* [Syria] and linked it to this *hadith* saying, ‘The spark has been lit here in Iraq, and its heat will continue to intensify – by Allah’s permission – until it burns the crusader armies in Dabiq.’ According to the *hadith*, the area will play a historical role in the battles leading up the conquests of Constantinople, then Rome. Presently, Dabiq is under the control of crusader-backed *sahwat*\(^{11}\), close to the warfront

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\(^{10}\) The transliteration of a traditional phrase used after mentioning anyone by name who has passed away. It literally translates to “God have mercy upon him.”

\(^{11}\) A derogatory term for Sunni Muslims that work with “apostate” governments.
between them and the Khilafah. May Allah purify Dabiq from the treachery of the sahwat and raise the flag of the Khilafah over its land. Amin [Amen]. (Dabiq, Issue 1)

During the interviews and focus groups, when researchers pushed back on foreign fighters about the religious origins of their ideology, they often responded with what Moez Ghribi, Director of Geopolitics at ITES and principal researcher on the prison study, referred to as “unverified parables – whose authenticity is difficult to prove” (Interview with Moez Ghribi, February 13, 2019). These parables usually came in the form of historical examples or religious “rulings” known as fatwa, whereby a scholarly authority in Islamic jurisprudence declares something legal or just under Islamic scripture. ISIS has developed a strategy to overcome religious opposition to their brutality using fatwa to convince young recruits that their actions, like violent jihad, the execution of apostates, and war, are justified. For example, researchers cited [then] current events, including the burning of Jordanian-Muslim pilot, Muath al-Kasasibah, in January 2015 and the terrorist attacks that had occurred in Tunisia, one at the Bardo Museum in March 2015 and the other on a beach resort in Sousse in June 2015, that killed several citizens from Western countries as well as Tunisian-Muslims, as examples of ISIS’ brutality against their own people. When respondents were asked to reconcile these actions with Qur’anic verse, respondents cited parables from the Prophet Mohammed’s biography as historical precedent for their actions, such as, “Did you know that when the situation required a certain course of action, the Prophet killed 600 Jews simultaneously…When Islam orders us to defend Muslims, there is no other choice except using violence…but is it called violence when it is self-defense?” The execution of Muath al-Kasasibah was self-defense; retribution for his
bombardment of Caliphate Soldiers.” The attacks on Tunisia were likewise retribution for the “state’s ban on public religious action.”

The reality is that real-world events made it possible for ISIS to convince young recruits of its apocalyptic propaganda. As described by Atran (2015) in his speech to the UNSC, “when you’ve [sic] already lived through a lot of horrific violence, it’s easier to buy into these narratives of worldwide persecution,” said Atran, “the idea that there’s a worldwide plot to kill Muslims, or Muslims like you, starts to seem a bit less crazy.” “This isn’t an outlandish proposition in their lived circumstances,” Atran continued, Iraqis in Kirkuk told him about “growing up after the fall of Saddam Hussein in a hellish world of constant guerrilla war, family deaths, and dislocation, and of not being even able to go out of their homes or temporary shelters for months on end.” Atran (2015) further explained that years of wars in the Middle East directed by the West and coupled with “the notorious human-rights abuses of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad…help animate the fanaticism of ISIS members.” What Atran described to the UNSC echoes what was found in the Tunisian prison study. When Atran conducted interviews with ISIS foreign fighters, he described asking them, “what is Islam?” to which they answered, “my life.” However, as described by Atran, “they knew nothing of the Qur’an or Hadith, or of the early Caliphs Omar and Othman, but had learned of Islam from al-Qaeda and ISIS propaganda, teaching that Muslims like them were targeted for elimination unless they first eliminated the impure.”

The values inherent in the ISIS ideology and the justifications provided by Tunisian foreign fighters do not align with previous scholarship that regard “spiritual selective incentives”
as the motivating factor driving individuals to radical Islamic groups (see Wiktorowicz and Kaltenthaler 2006). There is no evidence from the interviews and focus groups that Tunisian foreign fighters were seeking otherworldly rewards such as increasing the prospects of salvation for becoming a *Shahid*. Instead, Tunisian foreign fighters were fighting for worldly causes and values associated with the broader goals of ISIS including establishing a Muslim Caliphate to protect fellow Muslims from worldly injustices. Therefore, the motivational impetus is not spiritual payoffs and a path to salvation but a defense of themselves and others who are like-minded and who they believe are being targeted for elimination (Atran 2015).

Tunisians who knew friends or family members that became foreign fighters believe that those who claim religion, rather than money, inspired their turn to ISIS are probably lying. Many who saw friends or family make a “radical” turn to religion note that these turns were often sudden and unexpected. For example, Cyrine and Iheb, who both knew fellow students that had joined ISIS, said that they were surprised to see their once secular colleagues so fully embrace Islam after the revolution. “My colleagues were not from particularly religious families,” Iheb told me, “but when the Islamists took power, people tried to become more Islamic. They grew out their beards, dressed in Islamic clothing, and started attending the local mosque when they never did any of these things before” (Interview with Iheb, August 6, 2019). According to the students, these changes were not due to these individuals becoming more committed to their faith. As described by Cyrine, “these people were opportunists; they wanted to get in the good graces of Ennahda so they could get jobs and money” (interview with Cyrine, August 6, 2019). Ennahda had, in 2011, won the majority of seats in Tunisia’s legislature after the first free
elections in 2011 and was a part of the three-party Troika government that ruled Tunisia from 2011 to 2014.

According to Cyrine and Iheb, it seemed that everyone they knew was suddenly becoming more Islamic, and the presumption among many was that it was all a façade. When those individuals who became seemingly more devout beginning in 2011 found few new job prospects even after embracing Ennahda, the renewed jihadi-Salafist networks were there to offer these individuals the opportunities they sought. “It was never the truly devout that joined Ansar al-Sharia or ISIS,” Cyrine explained. Regardless of whether the radical turn within these communities was a true spiritual turn or whether new converts wanted to better align with the Ennahda party in hopes of some new opportunity, the fact is few opportunities eventually arose for these converts. In the absence of such opportunities, recruits found meaning in new organizations and values.

Tunisia’s first post-revolution president, Moncef Marzouki, summed up the dilemma facing Tunisians that partly explains their turn to ISIS. In a 2013 address he said, “We had a dream—our dream was called the Arab Spring. And our dream is now turning into a nightmare. But the young people need a dream, and the only dream available to them now is the Caliphate” (cited in Trofimov 2016). The dream of the Caliphate, one of the sacred values inherent in the ISIS ideology, proves to be one of the strongest motivators for Tunisian foreign fighters, supporting the hypothesis that individuals will become foreign fighters to defend values they hold as sacred. As will be detailed in the next subsection, Tunisian foreign fighters were disappointed that the Arab Spring did not deliver on its promises. When their dreams of a better
home evaporated, the sacred values inherent in the ISIS ideology offered a new avenue for Tunisians looking for answers and hope.

**Structural Grievances**

According to Sami Kallel, “the lack of economic opportunities, confusion about Tunisia’s socioeconomic future, and social and economic vulnerability are the most important risk factors in the life trajectories of the foreign fighters I examined [for the Tunisian prison study]” (Interview with Sami Kallel, February 6, 2019). Neji Jalloul, who was the President of the Tunisian Institute for Strategic Studies (ITES) when the prison study was sanctioned through the institute, also put “political, economic, and religious grievances above all else” as the driving reasons Tunisians became foreign fighters for ISIS (Interview with Neji Jalloul, February 11, 2019). There is ample evidence to support the hypothesis (Hypothesis #3) that structural grievances motivate individuals to become foreign fighters. References to structural grievances in the focus group and interview findings were abound. The grievances described were local political and economic grievances and included unemployment, lack of opportunity, poor governance and corruption, and the failure of Tunisia’s educational system to provide soft skills and critical thinking. Even though many of the cited grievances were also partly the cause of the Arab Spring in Tunisia, the foreign fighters tied these structural grievances to Tunisia’s post-revolutionary environment, linking them to an overall feeling that the revolution failed to produce desirable outcomes or alleviate these problems.

Tunisians had hope for a better life following the fall of the Ben Ali government in 2011. Those in the prison study believed the revolution failed to deliver on the promise for a better life.
The respondents were evenly split in terms of those who participated (50%) and those who did not participate (50%) in the uprisings. Regardless of whether they participated directly, most respondents, 69%, said the revolution in Tunisia was not a success. Furthermore, 89% of respondents said the Arab Spring, encompassing the entire movement that spread throughout the MENA region, was not a success. Fakhreddine Louati, a junior researcher at ITES who helped run the focus groups, summarized what he heard during the meetings by stating, “they [the foreign fighters in the study] thought revolution would be something amazing for them, their country, and their region, but it never happened,” he continued, “the government failed them…they were not satisfied” (Interview with Fakhreddine Louati, August 6, 2019).

The evidence suggests that foreign fighters felt a strong sense of aspirational deprivation, a classic variant of grievance theory (Gurr 1970). As described in Chapter Two, aspirational deprivation occurs as a combination of rising expectations against stagnating opportunities. Tunisians believed that their country’s transition to democracy would lead to more political and economic opportunities. Not only has political and economic development not been realized but in many areas of Tunisia, especially, as previously mentioned, in the southern parts of the country, the situation has gotten worse since the revolution. This led many young Tunisians to seek other avenues for opportunity and fulfillment.

According to the World Bank (2018), despite Tunisia’s recent high scores on various development indicators, distortions in the country’s economy have manifested in a continued failure to create jobs and deliver inclusive and sustainable growth. Members of Tunisia’s government whom I spoke with understand that economic development has so far not followed
Tunisia’s political development and is creating increasing unrest. Nidaa Tounés parliamentarian (MP) Fatma Mseddi, who was a member of the parliamentary commission in charge of investigating the foreign fighters that joined ISIS, said that grievances stemming from a lack of political and economic progress in Tunisia triggered the movement of young Tunisians to seek out radical groups and eventually join ISIS.\textsuperscript{12} She blamed Ennahda for the lack of progress; “in 2011, people demanded liberty, democracy, rights, and transparency and Ennahda did not prioritize any of those things,” she continued, “Ennahda was only concerned with social issues and bringing Islam back to Tunisia” (Interview with Fatma Mseddi, February 5, 2019). Even members of Ennahda agreed that they did not have the experience to run the country. Oussama Sghaier, an Ennahda MP and spokesperson, as well as member of the party’s 150 member Shura Council, agreed that the party spent too much time “trying to reconcile Islam with Tunisia’s new democracy” (Interview with Osama Essghir, February 5, 2019).\textsuperscript{13}

By favoring social issues over economic issues, Ennahda contributed to an environment that became conducive to religious radicalization. As previously mentioned, with the 2011 general prison amnesty, jihadi-Salafist groups organized without resistance from state security forces in an environment where religious groups had not been able to practice freely in the decades under Ben Ali. This gave radical organizations the opportunity to reach tens of thousands of potential recruits who, without other opportunities or jobs, became interested in

\textsuperscript{12} Mseddi resigned from this commission in protest, citing the lack of good faith on the part of Ennahda to take responsibility for the rise in jihadi-Salafist networks across Tunisia.

\textsuperscript{13} “Shura” roughly translates to “Consultative.” “Shura Councils” are decision-making bodies primarily associated with Islamist political parties because the Qur’an says decisions that affect the Muslim community should be made in consultation with fellow Muslims.
radical ideologies. Understanding how this new religious environment became so engrained in Tunisia, one only need to look at the redevelopment of Ansar al-Sharia after 2011. As described by Rosenblatt (2019), the revitalized base of Ansar al-Sharia consisted of three main components:

1. Ex-prisoners who were either already jihadi-Salafists (e.g., returnees from Afghanistan and Iraq) or those imprisoned on other charges but were indoctrinated in prison. These prisoners, numbering roughly 1-2,000, were virtually all granted amnesty in the months after the 2010-2011 revolution.
2. Exiles (forced or self-imposed) who held jihadi-Salafist beliefs and who were trained abroad. Many of these exiles were already active in jihadi-Salafist recruitment networks.
3. A small number of intellectually curious young people whose main influences were hardline preachers from Egypt and Saudi Arabia, whose teachings were broadcast on satellite television.

With the leadership base established, Ansar al-Sharia began a mass recruitment and proselytization campaign. Estimates suggest that at its peak in early-2013, the organization counted as many as 100,000 members across all of Tunisia, with membership coming from every region and every governorate in the country (Rosenblatt 2019; Zelin 2020).

As far as Moez Ali is concerned, the foreign fighter issue in Tunisia begins and ends with the state; “No opportunities, poor education…these are all things my government has failed to provide. My goal now, with my organization, is to develop an action plan to make sure we provide alternatives beyond jihad which the state clearly cannot do” (Interview with Moez Ali, February 6, 2019). However, according to recent surveys conducted in Tunisia, such sentiments have been echoed across the entire population. In 2014, when ISIS’ strength was at its peak and Tunisia was about to host its first presidential election, Tunisia’s confidence in its own democracy was already waning. According to Pew Research Surveys conducted in 2014, only
48% of respondents agreed that “democracy is preferable to other kinds of government” compared to 63% in 2012. Furthermore, the difference between Tunisian preferences for a “strong economy” and “good democracy” were becoming starker. In 2012, 59% of Tunisians favored a strong economy over good democracy compared to 2014, when 73% of Tunisians favored a strong economy. Tunisia’s post-revolutionary environment, one that was defined by a lack of political and economic opportunities and where Tunisians were still looking for solutions that the Arab Spring uprisings did not deliver, was clearly an important variable explaining its foreign fighter mobilization.

While more individuals in the prison study cited social variables (social networks and collective identity) and sacred values, structural grievances remain a significant factor explaining why Tunisians became foreign fighters for ISIS. Without widespread structural grievances, Tunisians never would have sought out alternatives such as those offered by radical jihadi-Salafist organizations, and therefore, these individuals would have never been indoctrinated into the ISIS ideology. This suggests that the existence of structural grievances may propel, or push, individuals to seek alternative solutions, but it does not suggest what type of alternatives individuals seek. As detailed in the previous three sections, the choice of solution is based more on what type of social network and identity group that individual connects with, which further determines what types of values they come to hold as sacred. This relationship, between grievances, opportunities, and the likelihood of engaging with radical organizations, is nevertheless a finding the warrants additional research.
Personal Victimization

Findings from the Tunisian prison study suggest that the remaining two hypotheses relating to personal victimization and economic incentives are not significant explanations for Tunisia’s foreign fighter phenomenon. To begin, there is only ancillary evidence to support the hypothesis (Hypothesis #2) that feelings of personal victimization influence individuals to become foreign fighters. Several interview questions were asked to probe the backgrounds of foreign fighters regarding their personal lives and none of the outcomes lend significant support for the hypothesis that personal victimization fueled a motivation to join ISIS. For example, in terms of trauma experienced during a foreign fighter’s upbringing, which is a strong predictor of radicalization identified in the literature (see McCauley and Moskalenko 2008), few of the foreign fighters experienced such trauma. As previously detailed, about 86% of those who responded to background questioning described coming from “normal” families, where both parents were married and lived together. Almost all the respondents, 99%, reported having mutual respect for their brothers, sisters, and parents and 62% reported having a sufficient family income to avoid hardship. Furthermore, respondents reported having a generally positive impression of the neighborhoods they lived in; 70% said they believed relationships in their neighborhoods were characterized by mutual respect, 85% consider youth in their neighborhoods to be respectful of women and the elderly, and 67% believe the adults in their neighborhoods, in general, adhere to morally appropriate behavior.

In addition to reporting coming from healthy social environments, none of the foreign fighters reported traumatic instances of physical or sexual abuse, either before or after becoming
foreign fighters. These findings were further supported in the focus groups conducted by researchers. For example, many foreign fighters talked about the love they felt among their families and communities. One individual responded, “I have no social problems…Thank God; I am loved by all those around me.” Another said, “The last time I was released from imprisonment, neighbors in my place slaughtered sheep to celebrate my release…They do love me.”

However, one broad sense of victimization that was cited by foreign fighters in the Tunisian prison study was that Tunisia was a country of “injustice,” with 90% of respondents associating the image of Tunisia as “the country of injustice.” Respondents categorized injustice as a belief that the state “violates their rights and treats them unfairly,” suggesting that this is not just a feeling of structural grievance (discussed above), but a direct feeling of victimization felt by the individual. However, the lexical evidence from interview and focus group data suggests that foreign fighters associated these feelings of injustice with religious persecution they faced after 2013, when the state began cracking down on jihadi-Salafist proselytizing. It is therefore unclear to what extent each of the individuals citing a feeling of personal victimization was being personally victimized prior to joining a jihadi-Salafist organization or if they were expressing a broad sense of victimization associated with the rhetoric of their jihadi-Salafist environment. This is largely because the crackdown against Ansar al-Sharia did not begin until mid-2013, after hundreds of foreign fighters had already left to join ISIS (Rosenblatt 2019; Zelin 2018).

As previously discussed, the period between 2011 and 2013 was one of unprecedented religious freedom. During this time, those individuals who could not find jobs or meaning in
their own country began to turn to new jihadi-Salafist networks. As one respondent explained, “I had been marginalized, and I lost hope. I no longer had a goal in life. When I committed myself and joined the Salafi movement, my life changed.” After 2013, the situation once again resembled that of pre-2011 Tunisia. In one of the focus groups, a foreign fighter spoke about a group of his friends who used to gather together at their local mosque as being victims of Tunisia’s religious persecution, “Tunisia proved to be a country of injustice, a country of confinement and imprisonment…it tried us for our ideas.” While this individual claimed to have been tried for their ideas, background data suggests that only three foreign fighters in the sample had served time in prison prior to becoming a foreign fighter and in one instance, this happened many years prior to 2013. In that example, the individual spoke about having a long history of conflict with Tunisian authorities regarding his religious beliefs and membership in a jihadi-Salafist organization, stating, “My problems with the state started at the age of 16 when the external signs of religiosity became apparent on my face and my way of clothing after I joined the Salafi movement…I did not even find the time to reach the legal age when the regime began harassing me and sent me to prison at the age of 18 because of my affiliation with the Salafi movement.” No other individual cited such an experience.

While in power, Ennahda did not want to impose religious sanctions like the ones they faced under Ben Ali. Members of Ennahda instead hoped that, over time, “democracy would moderate [Ansar al-Sharia]’s violent, anti-establishment belief” (Rosenblatt 2019, 10). It took until February 2013, when Chokri Belaid, an opposition leader with the left-secular Democratic Patriots’ Movement and staunch critic of Ennahda, was assassinated by Ansar al-Sharia
operatives for Tunisian leadership to even begin to consider the rising threat of jihadi-Salafist militancy. And it was not until an additional five months later, in July 2013, when a second opposition leader, Mohamed Brahmi of Tunisia’s People’s Movement, was assassinated in the same manner and by the same people as Belaid, that the Tunisian Ministry of the Interior began to consider Ansar al-Sharia a terrorist organization. When I spoke to Mohamed Brahmi’s wife, Mbarka Brahmi, an MP for the Popular Front who is now endearingly known in Tunisia as the “Wife of the Martyr,” about her husband’s death, she said she was happy that her husband’s death brought increased attention to the social problems facing Tunisia, but she blamed both Ennahda and the West for failing to address the issues sooner. According to Brahmi, “America and the West only help when the situation becomes bad and Ennahda has made the Tunisian situation a bad one; the terrorists have taken my husband and are taking our young,” she continued, “How is it possible to be a new democratic regime but still send jihadists to Syria? We need to focus on jobs and money and not on Islam” (Interview with Mbarka Brahmi, February 5, 2019). Brahmi was convinced that had Ennahda started its crackdown sooner, her husband would still be alive.

When the state did begin to crackdown on the organization’s activity and began arresting key members, Ansar al-Sharia leadership had already decided that the best way to avoid prosecution was to flee the country. “They would arrest you even on the suspicion that [you] were involved with Ansar al-Sharia,” explained Wissem, a member of Ansar al-Sharia during the 2013 crackdown (cited in Rosenblatt 2019). New security measures quickly triggered a mass
exodus of young jihadi-Salafists out of Tunisia, many fleeing through recruitment hubs in Libya and Turkey, where they would transit to become foreign fighters for ISIS.

When I probed experts about whether and to what extent personal victimization, or being a victim of “Tunisian injustice,” factored into an individual’s decision to become a foreign fighter, they agreed that personal victimization was not a dominant factor. Moez Ali, who, as previously mentioned, is passionate about reforming Tunisian schools to provide children with more extracurricular activities, said the only thing young Tunisians are victims of is boredom; “kids are making these decisions [to join radical groups] at ages twelve and fourteen,” Ali told me, “kids should be playing! They carry the burden of adults, seeing life as any unemployed citizen sees it” (Interview with Moez Ali, February 6, 2019). He further described how this boredom carries on into adulthood and affects their social relationships and identity, further supporting the social variables described above; “These people are vulnerable, they have no identity, there is no social cohesion, they just sit at cafés, drink tea, and smoke shisha [molasses-based tobacco heated in a hookah or water pipe]. Sami Kallel agreed; “The individuals I observed did not link their decisions with their personal backgrounds or with injustices they faced, their decisions were more political and ideological in nature, and any response otherwise is symbolic of their ideological convictions” (Interview with Sami Kallel, February 6, 2019). Mohammad Iqbel, who, as previously mentioned, has worked with several foreign fighters and their families, also found that the individuals he encountered did not come from traumatic backgrounds nor did they face injustice. “My own brother [who joined ISIS], who has a physical handicap, trouble walking, moving, using his muscles, never felt like a victim, but he was
indoctrinated to believe that joining ISIS could bring him purpose” (Interview conducted with Mohammad Iqbel, February 13, 2019).

As suggested in Chapter Two, the theoretical literature shows that an individual can feel personally victimized, and therefore motivated to retaliate violently, as the result of harm to another person or group even though there was no direct harm against the individual undertaking the aggression or violence. But the Tunisian foreign fighters interviewed did not express feelings of victimhood. Instead, these fighters framed their grievances in broad, structural terms suggesting that structural changes, or lack thereof, promoted group interest in contentious collective action by way of foreign fighting. This suggests that individuals and groups do not have to be personally affected by social structures or structural differentiation to be motivated to act. Therefore, the hypothesis linking personal victimization to foreign fighting is not supported.

**Economic Incentives**

There is mixed evidence that economic incentives played a role in motivating Tunisian foreign fighters to join ISIS. In the Tunisian prison study, respondents did not frame their decisions to join ISIS as one that was based on economic gain, favoring more religious and identity-based explanations. While there is ancillary evidence that some individuals became foreign fighters to pursue an opportunity for economic gain, there is not enough evidence from the interview and focus group data to support this study’s hypothesis (Hypothesis #1) that an individual will become a foreign fighter when there is an opportunity for economic gain.

Of those individuals who reported traveling, or attempting to travel, abroad to join ISIS, 32% said that their true purpose for travel was to find meaningful work. According to the
demographic information presented in the Tunisian prison study, 85% of the foreign fighters had jobs and 5% of them were students; only 10% of the sample was unemployed. However, consistent with data from the ISIS border documents, roughly half of the prison study sample belonged to the informal sector and these individuals reported incomes far below the national average. For example, only 30% of the foreign fighters in the Tunisian prison study earned an income of greater than 700 TND (approximately $250 in 2020 USD) a month, which is just barely enough to give them the status of “middle class.” This means 70% of the sample earned less than 700 TND. Furthermore, only 19.5% of respondents reported receiving benefits from Tunisia’s social security system, which is well below the national average, which, according to data from Tunisian Ministry of Social Affairs cited by researchers, was 81% in 2011.

In a question posed to respondents of the Tunisian prison study, approximately 60% agreed that the “will to earn money” was the main motivator governing human behavior and most of the respondents in the prison study agreed that Tunisia does not provide individuals with the opportunity to earn money. One respondent summed up the sentiment well when they said, “I did not want to live in Tunisia. I wanted to leave this country. I wanted to live somewhere else. Any other place. What matters most is that I can improve my life conditions. There is neither money nor opportunities here.”

Many of the specialists I interviewed regarding Tunisian foreign fighter motivations spoke of economic gain as a potential reason governing these recruit’s decisions to join ISIS. When asked specifically about how money motivated individuals to join ISIS based on his observations of prisoners in the prison study, Sami Kallel, who, as previously mentioned, was
one of the primary authors of the prison study, acknowledged that it was difficult to discern whether money truly did not matter to these individuals or whether they simply would not admit that it did. However, Kallel posed the simple, albeit hypothetical, choice he believed most Tunisian foreign fighters thought they had to make; “you either die in poverty in Tunisia, die at sea fleeing for Italy [as a refugee], or die at war fighting for Daesh’” (interview with Sami Kallel, February 6, 2019). According to Kallel, the choice for young Tunisians he observed in the prison study was simple; “only one of those options guaranteed money, joining ISIS.” Moez Ali echoed Kallel’s message, citing what he had personally heard from many foreign fighters; “young Tunisians have no vision for a future, they all say to me ‘I am already dying here in Tunisia, but I would rather die in Syria for money for me and my family!’” (Interview with Moez Ali, February 6, 2019).

While the evidence in the prison study linking economic gain to the decision to become a foreign fighter is mixed, other investigators have suggested that ISIS used its vast tax and oil revenues to target the MENA region’s unemployed with promises of cash and benefits (Luck 2016). However, it is difficult to establish how widespread this strategy was. There are examples from Tunisia that show that ISIS maintained its promise to pay for service in their military. In an example given previously in Chapter Two, a young Tunisian named Malik, who had quit school at age fourteen to help support his working-class family, was promised $1,500 by ISIS in return for his service. ISIS’ local networks inside of Tunisia delivered the money back to his family via Western Union when he joined. In another instance, a Tunisian baker (name omitted for privacy) joined ISIS because, according to his brother (name also omitted) “it was a good chance for him
to make a living” (cited from Zelin 2018). According to his brother, “he didn’t [sic] go to college, and he tried to get a visa to move to Europe, but he didn’t have any luck.” Another individual, who asked to go by the pseudonym Muhammad, was a foreign fighter who later defected from ISIS and returned to Syria. He described ISIS’ recruitment strategy as one that specifically targeted lower-middle-class neighborhoods, promising to wire upwards of $3,000 to families for three months of military service (Luck 2016).

According to a report published by Taylor Luck (2016) in a special issue of The Christian Science Monitor, it was often not just the promise of a one-time payment that attracted foreign fighters. According to Luck (2016), ISIS also promised “high salaries, housing, and additional benefits of $250 per month for families.” This strategy, of not only promising high salaries for individuals but offering bonuses for families, is one that ISIS used to attract not just single men, but married men, who wanted to provide a better standard of living for their families. Keeping in mind that the $250 bonus is roughly equivalent to 700 TND (in 2020 TND), a sum that most Tunisian foreign fighters in the prison study did not make, and it is easy to see how this recruitment incentive may have been effective.

According to Luck (2016), as ISIS targeted individuals who were unemployed and from lower-middle-class backgrounds, there was a noticeable change to standards of living in parts of Tunisia’s most economically marginalized neighbors. As described by Luck (2016), “the influx of cash is noticeable. Several homes of alleged fighters in the working-class Hay Ettadhamen neighbors…have newly erected second – and third – white concrete stories. Other impoverished neighborhoods in Tunis are witnessing a minor ‘building boom.’” According to Badra Gaaloul,
president of the International Centre for Strategic, Security, and Military Studies in Tunis, “families in impoverished neighborhoods are suddenly living beyond their means, and it is all because their sons are fighting in Iraq and Syria” (cited from Luck 2016).

While the above findings suggest that some Tunisian foreign fighters, or at least their families, were paid for their service with ISIS, evidence collected from the Tunisian prison study does not suggest that this practice was widespread nor was it the predominant factor ultimately influencing their decision to join a foreign conflict. As detailed in Chapter Two, Olson (1956) was pointed in his assertion that only a strong economic incentive could motivate individuals to overcome the free-rider problem and participate in collective action. The expectation, based on Olson’s (1956) account, is that there would be a clear and consistent payment trend offered to foreign fighters, but none has ever been uncovered. Foreign fighters are often joining organizations that are the weaker side in a conflict and cannot make firm offers for payment, profit, or goods. Foreign fighters are not soldiers of fortune and therefore appeals to something other than economic incentives must be made to motivate them to participate in a foreign conflict. Therefore, Hypothesis #1 is not supported; Olsonian rational choice theory is inefficient as a model for explaining foreign fighting.

**Analysis and Conclusion**

This chapter examined the motivations behind why Tunisians became foreign fighters for ISIS in the Syrian Civil War. Six theories from the literatures on collective action, social movements, and organizational behavior were tested. I find that four factors were significant. First, the most significant finding from this chapter was that social considerations are
instrumental in explaining the act of foreign fighting. Evidence presented suggests that close-knit social networks helped link the local struggles experienced by Tunisian foreign fighters to the plight of Muslims all over the world. These networks also facilitated travel to transit hubs in Libya and Turkey that allowed motivated Tunisians to circumvent international travel restrictions and join ISIS. Becoming a foreign fighter required first becoming an active member of a local social network and that connection was made by recruiters who were exploiting preexisting social networks for new recruits. This finding is consistent with the literature on social networks that engage in political violence that show that many social networks that come to engage in violence existed long before they engaged in that type of activity (Perliger and Pedahzur 2011). The findings from the prison study further suggest that without the connections between local networks and the broader recruitment networks that existed throughout the MENA region during the rise of ISIS, Tunisians would not have been able to effectively mobilize into Iraq or Syria. The presence of active social networks, therefore, proves to be a necessary variable in explaining Tunisia’s foreign fighter mobilization.

Second, the evidence strongly suggests that feelings of collective identity played a significant role in explaining why Tunisians became foreign fighters for ISIS. Tunisian foreign fighters adopted a new transnational Islamist collective identity. Their lack of community and lack of national connections coupled with their involvement with jihadi-Salafist organizations facilitated this identity formation. As is consistent with theories of collective identity, theories of collective identity, Tunisian foreign fighters who adopted a sectarian identity congruent with the ISIS ideology developed collective beliefs about ISIS’ campaign throughout Iraq and Syria, which helped foreign fighters
overcome psychological barriers to mobilization. As is further consistent with findings from the literature, when individuals are unable to develop a strong local identity, such as a strong national identity, individuals are not motivated to stay home and fight to improve local conditions. Instead, having developed a collective identity that is more associated with a transnational group made the progression from participating in local jihadi-Salafist activity to being part of the global struggle to establish the Islamic Caliphate an easy one.

Third, there is strong evidence that a commitment to and concerted defense of sacred values played a significant role in explaining why Tunisians became foreign fighters for ISIS. Individuals that joined jihadi-Salafist organizations adopted new, radical sacred values that would eventually help foster Tunisian foreign fighters’ “will to fight” for ISIS in Iraq and Syria. Though ISIS recruits were shown to not be very religious in the traditional sense, Tunisian foreign fighters overwhelmingly adopted the radical values espoused by ISIS and cited these values as reasons and justifications for their participation in ISIS. Tunisian foreign fighters cited ISIS’ takfir doctrine, where fighters believe that their goal is to purify the world of what it is sees as all non-believers, as well as other conspiracy-laden beliefs, including that Muslims are obligated to participate in the divine confrontation with the West that will result in the redemption of all true Muslims in heaven, as driving reasons for joining ISIS and supporting its goals and methods.

Structural grievances then played an intermediate role in motivating Tunisians to become foreign fighters for ISIS. Tunisians turned to revived jihadi-Salafist organizations that came to power after the 2011 general prison amnesty in Tunisia as an alternative to a lack of other
economic or social opportunities in the country. Stemming from the lack of economic development after the 2011 revolution, Tunisians not only became more susceptible to, but actively sought out, radical religious alternatives. At the time of the 2011 revolution, Tunisians hoped that they would have new opportunities for employment and financial gain. When the state failed to deliver on the promises of the revolution, Tunisians developed broad structural grievances and became disillusioned with the state. They then sought out radical alternatives, developed new values, and eventually became foreign fighters.

Personal grievances and economic incentives played a limited role in motivating Tunisians to become foreign fighters for ISIS. Instead, the confluence of social networks, collective identity, sacred values, and structural grievances tell the story of Tunisia’s foreign fighter phenomenon. The evidence suggests that rather than a single variable that explains the reason one individual is more likely to join a foreign conflict over another, becoming a foreign fighter should instead be viewed as a process. The process is consistent with scholarship that has identified what has become known as the “process of radicalization” by which individuals and groups develop extremist beliefs, emotions, and behaviors (McCauley and Moskalenko 2008; Bott et al. 2009; Neuman 2010; Klein and Kruglanski 2013; Schmid 2013; Trip et al. 2019).

There are both individual and social aspects to this process. First, individuals seek out values that are antithetical to the fundamental values of their society. Individuals turn against society’s values as a result of discrimination, socioeconomic crisis, and political repression, events that are operationalized in this dissertation as structural grievances. Individuals in this situation go through dual experiences. First, individuals in this type of situation can experience
what is known as a “cognitive opening” where they become susceptible to ideologies that try to provide explanations for the lack of success or meaning (Wiktorowicz 2005). Second, individuals who face uncertainty about their life and do not have direction from legitimate institutions, such as the state or local communities, will seek out new identities by seeking other, like-minded individuals and groups. These groups provide individuals with new forms of collective identity, which reduce uncertainty regarding who they are and provide new guidelines as to how they should think and behave (Hogg and Adelman 2013). Tunisians no longer believed a solution to their lack of opportunities could be found by tapping legitimate avenues for meaning and advancement, instead finding solace in new, radical solutions such as those offered by ISIS.

The final chapter, Chapter Six, further clarifies these findings by considering them in light of the comparative findings from Chapter Four on U.S. foreign fighters for the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War. After clarifying the comparative findings and highlighting their scholarly significance, the chapter suggests several avenues for future research and offers some initial policy recommendations.
CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

On September 24, 2014, the UNSC convened a historic meeting of the Heads of State or Government to address the acute and growing threat posed by foreign fighters. The result of that meeting was the unanimous adoption of UNSC Resolution 2178. According to the resolution, foreign fighters are a threat to global security because they increase the intensity and duration of conflicts. As further documented in the resolution, foreign fighters constitute a serious danger both to their countries of origin as well as destination countries and have shown to be a danger to neighboring countries as foreign fighters, prior to returning home at the conclusion of a conflict, often avoid persecution by fleeing across porous borders. The resolution reaffirms the Security Council’s commitment to countering terrorism in all forms, including the threat of foreign fighting, by calling on Member States to adopt operational strategies to counter this emerging global threat.

As detailed in Chapter Three, according to data available on foreign fighters, nearly 400,000 individuals have participated in ninety-three different conflicts since the Greek War on Independence (1821 – 1832). With ISIS having emerged as the most prolific recruiter of foreign fighters in the twenty-first century, the aspirations of the UNSC have never been more prescient. However, no one has yet found a satisfying answer to the question of why individuals take the extraordinary risk of becoming a foreign fighter in another country’s conflict. This dissertation was designed to address this question.
This dissertation compared two of the largest and most significant foreign fighter mobilizations in history: the foreign fighters who fought in the Spanish Civil War and the foreign fighters who fought in the Syrian Civil War. The dissertation specifically compared the motivations of the U.S. citizens who traveled to fight for the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War and the Tunisian citizens who traveled to fight for ISIS in the Syrian Civil War. This concluding chapter discusses the comparative findings of the dissertation and is divided into three sections. Section one analyzes the significant findings from the comparative analysis and discusses their scholarly implications. Section two highlights some of the potential policy implications considering the dissertation’s findings. Section three concludes the dissertation with a discussion of some suggested areas for future research.

Summary and Implications of the Comparative Findings

This dissertation’s findings suggest that a robust understanding of the foreign fighter phenomenon must, by necessity, draw on multiple theories and scholarly literatures. Three factors, social network, collective identity, and sacred values, are significant across both cases, suggesting that they are necessary factors driving the foreign fighter phenomenon. A fourth factor, structural grievances, was significant in explaining the case of Tunisian foreign fighters to ISIS but not U.S. foreign fighters to the International Brigades, suggesting that the finding is not robust, but is nevertheless one that is ripe for future research. Personal grievances and economic incentives were not significant factors in either case. These results potentially establish foreign fighting as an act that is distinct among different types of collective action, with implications for
both academics and policymakers. This section dissects the findings and places them in comparative perspective.

First and foremost, there was no evidence to suggest that economic incentives or personal grievances played a role in influencing foreign fighters in either case. These dominant paradigms for understanding why contentious collective action, especially violent political action, occurs do not hold up. This dissertation shows that when the cost of participating in a collective act like foreign fighting is high and reward or benefit for participating is low, if it is known at all, and where the political context of where they plan to fight is equally as important as the political context in which they fled to fight, then theories of economic incentives and personal grievances are insufficient.

The social aspect of foreign fighting stands out as a key factor driving the foreign fighter phenomenon. As demonstrated by the personal narratives of U.S. and Tunisian foreign fighters, the role of social networks was the most significant factor driving their decisions to become foreign fighters. The comparative findings of this dissertation therefore confirm the hypothesis (Hypothesis #6) that an individual will join a foreign conflict when they have direct links to other individuals engaged in the conflict. Social networks were not only influential in recruiting like-minded individuals in both cases, but findings also show that, in both cases, these organizations were instrumental in helping coordinate every aspect of an individual’s travel to a foreign conflict zone.

The demographic and archival data on U.S. foreign fighters presented in Chapter Four illustrate how dense linkages to a social network can influence an individual’s decision to
become a foreign fighter. The demographic data show that U.S. foreign fighters likely did not just have one connection to an individual associated with the Spanish Civil War, but likely had several, overlapping connections because of their membership in other networked organizations like the CPUSA, a labor union, or other ethnic community group. As was discussed in Chapter Two, social networks do not exist in a vacuum (Fernandez and McAdam 1988). Social networks are often connected to other movement organizations in what are known as “multiorganization fields” (Zurcher and Curtis 1973). Simply stated, when an individual has ties to multiple organizational fields, they are more likely to become recruited for collective action. In the case of U.S. foreign fighters, when organizations like the CPUSA and Comintern began a concerted recruitment campaign to establish the International Brigades, they focused their efforts on individuals who were already likely to support the war effort by identifying existing networks of willing participants. Sympathetic individuals, due to their multiorganizational ties, were then inundated with information about the war in Spain, and as more and more individuals signed up to become foreign fighters, they recruited friends and colleagues from similar organizations to join along with them.

While demographic and interview data on Tunisian foreign fighters presented in Chapter Five further show that social networks were instrumental in explaining the foreign fighter phenomenon, there is no evidence that individuals had overlapping membership in different, relevant fields. All the foreign fighters interviewed as part of the prison study described being a member of a jihadi-Salafist organization prior to joining ISIS. Evidence presented suggests, as was the case with U.S. foreign fighters, that these close-knit organizations helped link the local
struggles experienced by Tunisian foreign fighters to the plight of Muslims all over the world. These organizations also had network links to foreign terrorist organizations that predated ISIS, and they therefore already had the organizational capacity to funnel willing individuals to conflict zones abroad. However, the lack of overlapping membership among Tunisians suggests that the process by which individuals joined a relevant social network was different than that of the U.S. foreign fighters. In the case of U.S. foreign fighters, there was a distinct geographic component to the network mobilization with most of the foreign fighters coming from major urban areas where the CPUSA, labor organizations, and ethnic groups were most prominent. The strongest commonality among Tunisian foreign fighters was that their encounters with new organizations helped them foster a new, sectarian identity as a result of not being able to foster a feeling of national identity after the perceived failure of the Tunisian revolution. With jihadi-Salafist organizations recruiting individuals in the immediate aftermath of the revolution in Tunisia, individuals that bought into the lifestyle offered by these organizations became more likely to become foreign fighters for ISIS. The slight differences in network recruitment among U.S. and Tunisian foreign fighters potentially explains why structural grievances were significant in the case of Tunisian foreign fighters and not significant in the case of U.S. foreign fighters. I discuss this potentiality in greater detail below.

One clear commonality between U.S. and Tunisian foreign fighter networks was that, beyond just bringing like-minded individuals together, these networks were instrumental in organizing and facilitating the travel of fighters to foreign conflict zones. In both cases, there existed several barriers to entry enacted by state governments to control the flow of foreign
fighters. Therefore, the recruitment of foreign fighters to both conflicts required a concerted strategy and global networks of willing participants to facilitate travel. In the case of U.S. foreign fighters to the Spanish Civil War, motivated individuals faced numerous barriers including a commitment of neutrality by the U.S., a legal ban on travel to Spain, and a lack of financing and organization to make the journey. The same was true in the case of Tunisian foreign fighters to ISIS. Tunisian foreign fighters faced a limit on international travel for adult men under the age of thirty-five, and as recruitment to ISIS became an international concern, countries worked to close transit hubs to prevent foreign fighters from crossing borders into Iraq and Syria. Individuals alone could not circumvent these restrictions and evidence presented in both cases suggests that social networks were the physical mechanism allowing individuals to join a foreign conflict.

Social networks stand out as a necessary variable for explaining the foreign fighter phenomenon for without such networks, it is possible that even the most motivated individual could not have successfully traveled abroad to fight. Theories that focus on profiles of individuals more likely to engage in foreign fighting should consider this social dimension by looking at patterns of social interaction. As will be discussed in greater detail below, understanding the social component of collective action, especially foreign fighting, has implications for both theories of social networks and for strategies seeking to counter this type of behavior. Scholars should consider whether, and to what extent, differences in network structure can lead to varying outcomes. Furthermore, states seeking to stem the tide of foreign fighters should start by looking for the prevalence of social networks and then searching for vulnerabilities to destabilize such networks before a networked mobilization can occur.
Collective identity is also a crucial variable for explaining the foreign fighter phenomenon. In the case of U.S. foreign fighters, it was the third most important variable. In the case of Tunisian foreign fighters, collective identity was the second most important variable. There is therefore ample evidence to confirm the hypothesis (Hypothesis #5), that an individual will join a foreign conflict when their self-identity is merged with a collective identity that they mobilize to defend. A significant, comparative finding is that it is not the type of identity that matters for the act of foreign fighting. In other words, it is not the case that only a transnational Islamist collective identity or transnational Communist collective identity is important. Instead, it is the congruence of an individual’s identity with that of a transnational collective that is the significant factor. Individuals in both cases joined on behalf of an identity that was compatible with that of the organization’s values that they joined to defend.

As detailed in Chapter Two, a group’s commitment to transnational identities and their associated values can deepen trust by both identifying cooperators and galvanizing group solidarity. As this dissertation hypothesized, when an individual’s personal self-concept is merged with that of a collective, they will be more willing to engage in extreme, pro-group behavior like foreign fighting. The U.S. foreign fighters linked their motivations for fighting with a sense of working-class or proletarian identity. This identity manifested during the Great Depression, with the rise of trade union organization, and the expansion of local, left-wing political parties. This was not an economic situation that was isolated to the U.S. The dire economic situation brought about by the Great Depression was global. When a left-wing, pro-worker, and democratic government was elected in Spain in 1936 only to be overthrown by
Spanish fascists in alliance with German and Italy fascists, U.S. workers identified with the plight of like-minded individuals in Spain. The violent 1936 coup d'état against the democratically elected Spanish Republic thus became an overt display of threat that many working-class U.S. citizens associated as a threat to themselves and their identity group.

Tunisian foreign fighters associated their identities with an Islamist collective identity that they mobilized to defend. Like the U.S. foreign fighters that mobilized on behalf of a collective identity group under threat, Tunisian foreign fighters cited becoming members of a collective family or brotherhood that they had a collective duty to defend. The transnational collective identity that Tunisians cited feeling a part of is one steeped in the ISIS ideology, which teaches sympathizers that world powers are conspiring against the nation of Islam and they therefore have a responsibility to defend their ideologically like-minded brothers by returning the Islamic civilization to its former glory. All the Tunisians analyzed as part of the prison study associated their personal identities with the Islamic nation first, above family, local community, and Tunisia. The dissolution of local identities among Tunisian foreign fighters made their transnational commitment to an Islamist collective identity a strong motivational impetus for becoming foreign fighters for ISIS.

Scholars (e.g., Whitehouse et al. 2014) provide ample evidence that feelings of identification with a family-like group of “comrades in arms” can foster an even stronger bond than genetic family ties. These feelings of collective identification underpin the willingness of foreign fighters to fight even in the face of death and defeat. In both cases, U.S. foreign fighters and Tunisian foreign fighters were joining the weaker side of a conflict. Making a costly
sacrifice in defense of a collective group is an important mechanism that helps individuals overcome psychological barriers, such as a being a weaker party to a conflict or lacking a clear incentive to participate, to entry into a foreign conflict.

These findings, together with the findings detailed above regarding the importance of social networks, suggest that there is a strong social logic to the foreign fighter phenomenon. Furthermore, what is significant about this finding, from a theoretical perspective, is that it supports past scholarship that has linked individualism with group norms of glory, self-sacrifice, and heroism (Lois 1999). Evidence from both U.S. and Tunisian foreign fighters suggests that individuals joined a foreign conflict not with the goal of harming other people but instead joined with the goal of helping their ideological comrades from what they perceived as an ideological threat. Although it was sacred values that operated as the necessary moral imperative to individual action for both U.S. and Tunisian foreign fighters, values were not alone sufficient for explaining their choice. Instead, sacred values were shown to be embedded and distributed in social networks, creating intimate networks of imagined comrades, best associated as collective identity. Therefore, social dynamics that bound foreign fighters together and initiated group desires to sacrifice for one another in the name of sacred values defined the process whereby individuals ultimately decided to join a foreign conflict.

The final variable that was significant across both cases was sacred values. In the case of U.S. foreign fighters, a commitment to sacred values was the second most significant variable and for Tunisian foreign fighters it was the third most significant variable. Therefore, there is enough evidence to confirm this dissertation’s hypothesis (Hypothesis #4) that an individual will
become a foreign fighter to defend a value they hold as sacred. Like the findings regarding the role of collective identity in explaining the foreign fighter phenomenon, the importance of the comparative findings on sacred values is that it is not the types of values that matter for the act of foreign fighting, it is the feeling that an individual’s parochial values are under threat and therefore acting in defense of those values has become a moral imperative.

As detailed in Chapter Two, past scholarship suggests that when people act in defense of sacred values, they act in ways that cannot be reliably predicted by assessing material risks and rewards (Atran 2016). Unlike theories that express the importance of instrumental rationality, the sacred values framework assumes that individuals will act for deontic (i.e., rules and obligations) reasons. For U.S. foreign fighters, it was the ideological congruence between anti-fascism and progressive values that motivated them to fight in Spain. The data suggest that regardless of whether most of the U.S. foreign fighters were ardent communists, or whether they hoped that socialism would thrive again in Spain, the most prominent ideological value U.S. foreign fighters cited was anti-fascism. And, as discussed in Chapter Four, while the threat of fascism may have represented a “marriage of convenience” between radical communists and more moderate defenders of democratic socialism, the anti-fascist threat nevertheless became the ideological rallying point of U.S. foreign fighters in Spain.

For Tunisian foreign fighters, the sacred values cited were parochial religious values derived from the Islamic faith. Evidence from the prison study showed that the young ISIS recruits that were interviewed were not devout Muslims. The individuals did not partake in the traditional tenants demanded by the Islamic faith nor did they possess deep knowledge of Islamic
doctrine, laws, or practices. However, in articulating their rationale for becoming foreign fighters, these individuals cited threats to their Islamic faith and threats to the global Muslim community suggesting that while they did not fully understand the principles of Islam, they still perceived a threat to internalized Islamic values that they held as sacred.

Both U.S. and Tunisian foreign fighters framed their decisions as based on threats to their values. As previously mentioned, U.S. foreign fighters cited the rising tide of global fascism as a threat to progressive values. These threats, in many ways, were legitimate concerns shared amongst democratic countries in the West during the 1930s and became a central pillar on which World War II would ultimately be fought. The threats perceived by Tunisian foreign fighters are quite different, and can be categorized as conspiracy theories, or ideas about certain events and situations that are based on insufficient evidence (Trip et al. 2019). However, the finding is consistent with recent studies that have shown that a misplaced commitment to parochial religious values can lead to a rise in conspiracy-minded ideas (Trip et al. 2019). The value-driven motivation cited by Tunisian foreign fighters was predicated on the belief that world powers are conspiring against the nation of Islam and Muslims therefore have an obligation to defend their religious brethren. According to Tunisian foreign fighters, the principle means of defending the Muslim nation from the encroaching West is to return their civilization to the legal environment of the time of the Muslim conquests and the Rashidun Caliphates (seventh-century CE). As discussed in Chapter Five, these values come from what has become known as the ISIS ideology, which preaches values born from the Prophetic methodology of the Prophet Mohammed and which have been distilled in a way to make them more palatable to eager, young recruits.
Recent research on the ISIS ideology has shown that counter-radicalization campaigns that work to simply convince foreign fighters that the goals of ISIS are laden in half-truths and conspiracies constitute a dangerous misconception about how these values pervade parts of the Muslim world (Atran 2015). The ideal of the Caliphate, and the values and ideology surrounding it as an ideal, have already emerged as a mobilizing cause in the minds of many Muslims. As one imam in Barcelona told researchers studying the foreign fighter phenomenon in Spain (Atran 2016): “[T]he Caliphate.... We dream of it like the Jews long dreamed of Zion. Maybe it can be a federation, like the European Union, of Muslim peoples. The Caliphate is here, in our hearts, even if we don’t know what real form it will finally take.” Taken together with this dissertation’s findings regarding the social aspects of foreign fighting and it becomes clear that an individual’s commitment to sacred values is bolstered by being around other like-minded members of a social network and identity group, leading to a higher likelihood of extreme behavior. Given this dissertation’s findings, it is clear that a global network that has adopted the values of the ISIS ideology exists and is working to spread its message to willing new recruits. Therefore, any serious counter-radicalization strategy must be attuned to both individual values and to their social networks.

The findings are further consistent with recent research suggesting that ordinary people are prone to extreme behavior when dynamic individual and social processes contribute to them becoming a “devoted actor.” The devoted actor framework defines these individuals as individuals willing to protect morally important or sacred values through costly sacrifice and extreme actions, even being willing to kill and die, because their values are embedded in or
merged with a collective identity, becoming intrinsic to who they are as individuals. This
dissertation shows that becoming a foreign fighter is a dynamic individual and social process, a
process that is not predicated on any one variable or explanation, but instead is based on
individual circumstance and social and cultural contexts.

Unlike with the previous three variables, the role of structural grievances was only a
significant factor in explaining the decision by Tunisian citizens to become foreign fighters.
There was weak evidence that structural grievances played a role in motivating U.S. foreign
fighters to fight in the Spanish Civil War. Therefore, there is insufficient evidence to confirm the
hypothesis (Hypothesis #3) that individuals will become foreign fighters when they perceive a
structural grievance that motivates them to action. Nevertheless, the finding warrants discussion
considering the previous findings.

As discussed at length in Chapter Five, the structural grievances described by Tunisian
foreign fighters were local political and economic grievances and included unemployment, lack
of opportunity, poor governance and corruption, and the failure of Tunisia’s educational system
to provide soft skills and critical thinking. Interview and focus group data suggest that without
widespread structural grievances, Tunisians never would have sought out alternatives such as
those offered by radical jihadi-Salafist organizations, and therefore, these individuals would have
never been indoctrinated into the ISIS ideology. At least in the case of Tunisian foreign fighters,
it can be argued that the existence of structural grievances propelled individuals to seek
alternative opportunities that eventually led them to become foreign fighters for ISIS.
Tunisian foreign fighters perceived of their national government as illegitimate, linking grievances inherent in the structures of Tunisian society to their decisions to become foreign fighters for ISIS, where they could fight to establish a new, Islamic state. U.S. citizens that became foreign fighters did not perceive of the U.S. as an illegitimate government, and therefore did not link local, structural grievances to their reasons for becoming foreign fighters. While many U.S. foreign fighters claimed to be fighting on behalf of their working-class identity, U.S. foreign fighters developed that identity even prior to their experiences with the Great Depression. These individuals therefore did not associate economic struggles, such as those cited by Tunisians, with their decisions to fight in Spain. Instead, U.S. foreign fighters saw their fight in Spain as a continuation of their ideological fight for worker’s rights, an ideal that is best explained by theories of collective identity and sacred values. U.S. foreign fighters also did not link structural grievances brought about by a foreign adversary to their decision to become foreign fighters. As was discussed in Chapter Four, there were a few U.S. foreign fighters who wrote of the potential structural problems that could arise should fascism to take hold throughout the globe. But in 1936-37, the U.S. and many other European countries were still on friendly terms with countries like Italy, which had become fascist in 1923. Furthermore, while Hitler had come to power in Germany in 1933, the belligerence of the Nazi regime would not be on full display until 1939 when Hitler invaded both Czechoslovakia and Poland. It is for this reason that U.S. foreign fighters to the Spanish Civil War have been colloquially referred to as the “pre-mature anti-fascists,” a label that, as previously mentioned, was one they accepted with both pride and confusion.
According to theories that link structural grievances to collective action, the conditions conducive to collective action, especially extreme forms of collective action like foreign fighting, require certain push factors, or structural factors from which collective action directly emerges (Nanes and Lau 2018). Push factors include lack of socio-economic opportunities; marginalization and discrimination; poor governance, and the violations of human rights and the rule of law. These factors were rampant in the case of the Tunisian foreign fighter mobilization, but in the social context of the U.S. foreign fighter mobilization to Spain, fighters did not need the same push. As previously mentioned, U.S. foreign fighters were already inundated with information about the war because of their involvement in multiple, overlapping networks of like-minded supporters. These individuals were already involved in the local labor disputes that were prevalent in the U.S. during the Great Depression and their working-class identities had been fostered over years of new and diverse forms of progressive politics in the U.S.

In the case of Tunisian foreign fighters, however, their break with the nation-state and development of a new sectarian collective identity was more sudden and traumatic. On the heels of the Arab Spring in Tunisia, when Tunisians had expected a better life following the fall of the Ben Ali government in 2011, those who became foreign fighters did not believe that the new regime did enough to improve their life-situation. In other words, the combination of years of political and economic oppression under Ben Ali, rising expectations after the Arab Spring, and a further stagnation of opportunities even after the revolution led many young Tunisians to seek other avenues for opportunity and fulfillment outside of the state. This included opportunities with new, radical organizations that had gained new freedoms after 2011.
These inconsistent findings suggest that structural grievances can act as an important first step in pushing individuals to seek out alternative opportunities when none are provided by the state, pushing individuals to networks that promote radical values and ideologies. But, as illustrated by the case of U.S. foreign fighters, the presence of structural grievances is not a necessary condition for explaining foreign fighting. This dissertation’s findings instead illustrate the importance of social processes and individual values in driving the foreign fighter phenomenon.

In sum, this dissertation’s findings have theoretical implications for understanding the transnational dimensions of collective action, for understanding the processes by which individuals turn to radical ideologies, and for understanding the individual and social processes of foreign fighting. The comparative findings demonstrate that becoming a foreign fighter is a dynamic process that to understand requires considering how collective action is justified by individuals within a certain social context. This dissertation argued that U.S. and Tunisian foreign fighters both conformed to a similar process. These are individuals whose self-identities have been linked with a collective identity that was steeped in shared sacred values that thus provided all group members with a similar desire to become foreign fighters when those values were under threat. Social network organizations were not only influential in recruiting like-minded individuals to such groups in both cases, but findings also show that these organizations were instrumental in helping coordinate every aspect of a fighter’s travel to a foreign conflict zone. The next section discusses some of the policy implications of these findings before concluding, in the final section, with some suggested avenues for future research.
Policy Implications

The dissertation has numerous policy implications. First, this dissertation offers the first in-depth, individual-level analysis of the foreign fighter phenomenon, which the U.S. continues to confront in a variety of conflicts throughout the globe, including three conflicts that are critical for U.S. national security: Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria. Second, this dissertation explores the competing factors that motivate foreign fighters, which, if past is prologue, will help scholars and policymakers confront the foreign fighter challenges of tomorrow including developing methods for preventing radicalization and foreign travel. Finally, the dissertation is timely in that the dilemma posed by the thousands of foreign fighter returnees from Iraq and Syria are invoking a global policy debate regarding how to treat these individuals who potentially threaten the peace and security of disparate countries across the globe. Understanding their motivations for leaving can help inform policies for confronting their inevitable return and can provide avenues for future reintegration policies.

An important assumption of the foreign fighter literature is that effectively (i.e., peacefully) reintegrating foreign fighter returnees as productive members of society requires understanding the reasons why they left in the first place. But practically confronting the foreign fighter phenomenon and the returnee challenge requires coordination and cooperation between not just experts (policymakers and academics) but with other members of civil society, governments, and organizations that exist across different countries all over the world. For example, when looking at the case of Tunisia, it is estimated that at least 600 of Tunisia’s foreign fighters, or approximately 20% of the total 3,000 who have fought for ISIS, have returned home.
to Tunisia (Zelin 2018). While the returnee challenge has global ramifications, members of Tunisia’s security establishment told me they have been particularly concerned with those who may attempt to return to Tunisia clandestinely with the intent of undertaking terrorist attacks. Indeed, Tunisian and U.S. policymakers have argued that Tunisian foreign fighters, whether those who have left to fight abroad, or those who have returned, constitute the heart of a growing Tunisian national security challenge, with important implications for the Tunisian economy (i.e., terrorist attacks have gravely affected the tourism industry), regional security along Tunisia’s western and southeastern borders, and the country’s still-fragile transition to democracy.

There are lessons for Tunisia that can be learned from the U.S. foreign fighters who fought for the International Brigades and later returned home. Veteran U.S. foreign fighters were treated by the FBI as a security risk and the Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade organization was put on the General’s List of Subversive Organizations (Hochschild 2016). Veteran U.S. foreign fighters were also denied military promotions while serving in WWII and were barred from government jobs out of fear that communists could rise to prominent ranks in the U.S. government (Carroll 1994). Many veterans were denied housing, refused passports, and as mentioned in Chapter Four, were forced to change their names to avoid further persecution.

Regarding the returnee challenge posed by the dissolution of ISIS, international stakeholders are calling for a commitment to peaceful reintegration strategies, so as not to further fuel violent extremism (UNSC 2015). Many Tunisian state (e.g., Tunisian politicians) and non-state (e.g., Tunisian human rights groups) actors that I interviewed for this dissertation are already working to establish programs to help convicted foreign fighter returnees navigate the process of
becoming active and engaged citizens of the country. These actors need to consider counter-
radicalization strategies that focus on the ideological aspect of their original motivation, as well as the social aspect that helped influence their decision to fight abroad.

The contemporary case of Tunisia analyzed for this dissertation does not represent the most extreme example of the security challenge posed by the foreign fighter phenomenon. In September 2014, three months after ISIS declared its Caliphate, U.S. Director of National Intelligence James Clapper admitted that the U.S. had radically underestimated ISIS’ “will to fight” while drastically overestimating that of the Iraqi army (Payne 2014). Then House speaker, John Boehner called ISIS fighters “barbarians,” and said “They intend to kill us. And if we don’t [sic] destroy them first, we’re going to pay the price.” But the ISIS “army” was outnumbered forty to one and the Iraqi army had training and military equipment from U.S. special forces. ISIS was fighting wars on two fronts, in Iraq and Syria, and most of its new recruits had never held a gun. ISIS and its large army of foreign fighters seemingly defied strategic calculations that assumed that the better equipped, better trained, and better staffed armies would easily quell the spread of ISIS. The problem was that traditional military calculation does not factor in an enemy’s willingness to die for values that they hold as sacred and for their ideological comrades especially when those individuals feel those values and groups are threatened by a recognized enemy.

Even as the power of ISIS dwindles in Iraq and Syria and the organization poses less of a traditional military threat, the world has seen the security dilemma posed by foreign fighters fleeing the conflict zones of Iraq and Syria to countries across the globe, most notably to the
MENA region but also to Europe (Syrian-trained fighters were responsible for a series of attacks in Europe in 2015, notably the attacks in Paris and Brussels), Asia, and even North America. Thus, developing a collaborative strategy to confront the foreign fighter phenomenon requires working with strategic partners across the globe at different levels of society, including with governments, civil society organizations, and individuals, to stop foreign fighting. An underlying assumption of this dissertation is that any attempt at stemming the flow of foreign fighters to any conflict must start with exploring the competing factors that motivate foreign fighters in the first place. The findings from this dissertation provide a framework for understanding the disparate motivations of foreign fighters that can therefore help inform broad, international policy initiatives.

**Conclusion and Avenues for Future Research**

The methodology adopted for this dissertation can be utilized to expand the scope of analysis to other cases of foreign fighting. It also provided new comparative data from one historic and one contemporary case of foreign fighting and proposed a new theoretical framework for understanding the process by which individuals take the extraordinary risk of traveling abroad to take part, and potentially die, in another country’s conflict. The dissertation therefore makes a significant contribution to the literature in that it provides a new and highly original theoretical and methodological benchmark for exploring the foreign fighter phenomenon in more than 90 conflicts during the last two centuries, including numerous contemporary conflicts with a foreign fighter dimension. By analyzing the competing motivations of foreign fighters from the two most significant foreign fighter mobilizations in history, U.S. foreign
fighters in the Spanish Civil War and Tunisian foreign fighters in the Syrian Civil War, the dissertation further provided the first individual-level analysis of the foreign fighter phenomenon and thus has implications for academics who study collective action and violent conflict.

The dissertation has numerous scholarly implications and has the potential to foster peer-networks of experts, practitioners, and scholars from different countries and backgrounds who could all be working, in their respective conflict contexts, to understand and confront the issue of foreign fighting. But data, theories, and methods to study foreign fighting must constantly improve, and there are numerous areas where researchers from different backgrounds can contribute to the cumulative knowledge of the foreign fighter phenomenon. By way of concluding this dissertation, I provide two areas that I believe are ripest for future research.

The most significant findings from this dissertation involve the social processes of the foreign fighter phenomenon. One variable in particular, social networks, acted as a necessary factor driving both the U.S. and Tunisian foreign fighters. This is an area that is ripe for future research. In both cases, it was networks that predated the foreign conflict that were important. Is it possible to predict what type of social network is most susceptible to this type of contentious collective action? One way to further investigate the role of social networks is to code historical social network data from disparate civil conflicts that also contained a foreign fighter dimension. Historical cases can be fruitful in this regard, as the archival data available on U.S. foreign fighters provided an opportunity for more in-depth, genealogical research that helped identify several organizational connections among foreign fighters.
One obvious question to consider is whether social networks played a significant role in other foreign fighter contexts? For example, do social networks remain significant when looking at conflicts that are not categorized in the typology detailed in Chapter One as conflicts associated with true believers? Again, historical case studies with ample historical and archival data can help answer these questions. Chapter One highlighted several historical civil conflicts that had a foreign fighter dimension. Collecting and analyzing social network data on such cases will allow for additional comparative studies and even the potential for large-N, statistical analysis if enough cases can be coded.

One of the primary obstacles to future research on foreign fighters is the availability of contemporary, individual-level data. Therefore, the second area that is ripe for future research is for scholars to locate and code individual-level data for other cases of foreign fighting to see if the hypotheses tested for this dissertation hold up. One finding that warrants future research in this regard is the finding related to religious sacred values in the case of Tunisian foreign fighters. As was previously discussed, individuals with seemingly low levels of religious knowledge were susceptible to the ISIS ideology. Is this finding applicable to other conflicts and foreign fighter cohorts with an Islamic dimension? What about foreign conflicts with a definitive Christian or Jewish dimension, such as the Israeli War of Independence (1948 – 1949)? Do we need to reconceptualize religion as ideology, or do we only need to reconsider the religious dimensions of ISIS’ Prophetic methodology? An excellent comparative case study would be to compare similar individual-level data from the Iraq War (2003 – 2011), where foreign fighter veterans are still potentially available to interview. Though it is estimated that only 6,000 foreign
fighters participated in the Iraq War on the side of Islamists, it would be valuable to investigate whether, and to what extent, religion played a motivating role, considering that Islamist foreign fighters in that conflict were fighting U.S. coalition forces in Iraq.
APPENDIX A.

ARCHIVAL RESEARCH CHECKLIST
Individual’s Name: _______________________ Source Type: ______________________

SOURCE LEGEND

D = Diary I = Interview
L = Letter P = Speech of Public Statement
A = Autobiography B = Biography or Secondary Source

FACTORS THAT MOTIVATED WHY THE PERSON DECIDED TO BECOME A FOREIGN FIGHTER

ECONOMIC INCENTIVE REFERENCED? (when a foreign fighter is motivated by personal economic gain such as a direct payment or job)

☐ The foreign fighter referenced an economic reason for joining

Types of economic incentives (check all that apply):
- Direct monetary payment
- Promise of future monetary rewards
- Potential to loot goods/resources (for example: gold, diamonds, antiquities)
- Employment
- Promise of future employment
- Additional economic incentive (write in): ______________________________

☐ Other details:

_______________________________________________________

SACRED VALUE REFERENCED? (when a foreign fighter is motivated by a higher moral or ideological value that they consider to be of great importance)

☐ The foreign fighter referenced a sacred value

Types of sacred value (check all that apply):
- Political, economic, or social equality
- Democratic socialism
- Democracy
- Secularism
- Communism
- Global communist revolution
- Anarchism
- Feminism
- Worker’s rights
- Anti-fascism
- Anti-capitalism
o Civil rights
o Establish Communist state
o Establish socialist/left laws
o Additional sacred value (write in): _____________________________________

☐ The foreign fighter expressed willingness to die for the value
☐ Other details:

________________________________________________________________________

PERSONAL VICTIMIZATION REFERENCED? (when a foreign fighter is motivated by perceived mistreatment of self)
☐ The foreign fighter referenced a personal victimization (a perceived mistreatment of self)
Types of personal victimization (check all that apply):
  o Humiliation
  o Loss of a friend or loved one
  o Victim of injustice
  o Victim of violence
  o Feeling of alienation
  o Additional personal victimization (write in): ______________________________

☐ Other details:

________________________________________________________________________

STRUCTURAL GRIEVANCE REFERENCED (when a foreign fighter is motivated by perceived injustices at the country-level)
☐ The foreign fighter referenced a structural grievance
Types of structural grievance (check all that apply):
  o Economic inequality
  o Political inequality
  o Religious inequality
  o Ethnic inequality
  o Racial inequality
  o Gender inequality
  o Mass unemployment
  o Lack of meaningful opportunities
  o Mass poverty
  o Authoritarianism
  o Political repression
  o Religious repression
Legal repression
Lack of access to education
Foreign interference in my country
Additional structural grievance (write in): _______________________________

Other details:________________________________________________________________________

COLLECTIVE IDENTITY GROUP REFERENCED? (when a foreign fighter is motivated by an expressed shared orientation with others and acts on that basis)

Type of collective identity (check all that apply)

☐ The foreign fighter expressed a sense of connection to fellow Communists and the global Communist community
☐ The foreign fighter expressed a sense of collective duty
☐ The foreign fighter expressed a sense of connection to fellow foreign fighters in Spain
☐ The foreign fighter expressed a sense of connection to another group (write in): _______________________________

Other details:________________________________________________________________________

SOCIAL NETWORK REFERENCED? (when a foreign fighter is motivated by a concrete relationship with another foreign fighter, recruiter, or member)

Types of social network (check all that apply)

☐ The foreign fighter joined alone
☐ The foreign fighter was abducted
☐ The foreign fighter knew someone else that had joined the war effort
☐ The foreign fighter referenced a friend or family member that were already in the war or that they joined the war effort with
☐ The foreign fighter referenced political group or meeting as a primary location where planning, recruitment, or travel to Spain was discussed or organized
☐ The foreign fighter referenced an additional concrete relationship or multiple other relationships
☐ What other relationships were referenced? Describe the relationship(s):

Other details:________________________________________________________________________
GLORY OR HEROISM REFERENCED? (when a foreign fighter is motivated by the desire to bolster their status and be seen as a hero)

☐ The foreign fighter referenced glory or heroism as a reason for joining
☐ Other details:

______________________________________________________________________________


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VITA

Dr. Schumacher specializes in the political science subfields of comparative politics, political theory, and international relations and has a regional specialization in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. His research, which lies primarily at the intersection of comparative politics and political theory, analyzes why individuals get involved in contentious, especially violent, forms of political behavior and relies on a variety of techniques to demonstrate the individual, social, and structural logics behind violent political action.

Dr. Schumacher specializes in mixed methods research, including qualitative and quantitative strategies such as archival research, structured interviews, participant ethnography, and statistical techniques. His research has been published in several academic journals including *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, Democracy and Security, Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression*, and *The Journal of North African Studies*. His current book project, based on research completed for his dissertation, seeks to understand why individuals make the extraordinary decision to become foreign fighters, or noncitizens of a conflict state who travel to that country voluntarily to join an insurgency during a civil conflict. His findings are based on years of research on two comparative case studies; the U.S. citizens who fought for the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War (1936-39) and the Tunisian citizens who fought for the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in the Syrian Civil War (2011-Present). Field research for this project has taken him to Spanish Civil War archives in New York City, New York (USA) and Boston, Massachusetts (USA) and he has completed months of ethnographic
interviews in Tunisia including with foreign fighter returnees, their families, and friends and colleagues who knew them.

Dr. Schumacher’s research has been funded by numerous agencies and foundations including the American Political Science Association (APSA), the Smith Richardson Foundation, the Horowitz Foundation for Social Policy, the Ernest Hemingway Foundation (through the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library), the Association for the Study of the Middle East and Africa, and the Arthur J. Schmitt Foundation.

Aside from his research, Dr. Schumacher is also an award-winning educator who teaches classes across the range of political science subfields. He currently lives in Chicago with his wife and three cats.