



# FIELD ANALYSIS REPORT

Regional Analysis with National Perspective.



5 August 2015

## (U//FOUO) Ohioans Traveling to Syria and Iraq to Fight Against ISIL

(U//FOUO) Prepared by the DHS Office of Intelligence and Analysis (I&A) with contributions from ICE Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) Columbus and Detroit, Ohio National Guard, Ohio Strategic Analysis and Information Center (SAIC), Northeast Ohio Regional Fusion Center (NEORFC), Greater Cincinnati Fusion Center (GCFC), Delaware Information & Analysis Center (DIAC), and Kentucky Intelligence Fusion Center (KIFC).

(U//FOUO) **Scope:** This Field Analysis Report (FAR) examines the recent trend of US persons, including several Ohioans who are military veterans, traveling to Syria and northern Iraq to fight with Kurdish groups against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). This travel, which has been covered in a variety of traditional media and online outlets, allows US persons increased access to an active war zone. Our findings are based on a review of DHS reporting, CBP interviews, press reporting, social media postings, and information provided by local law enforcement and the Ohio National Guard. This FAR is designed to raise awareness and inform enforcement and collection operations undertaken by federal, state, and local partners involved in homeland security and counterterrorism efforts. Some of the activities described in this FAR may be constitutionally protected activities, and they should be supported by additional facts to justify increased scrutiny. The totality of relevant circumstances should be evaluated when considering any law enforcement response or action.

### (U) Key Findings

- (U//FOUO) Several dozen US persons, including at least three from Ohio, have traveled from the United States to Kurdish-controlled territory in Syria and northern Iraq to fight alongside groups combating ISIL.
- (U//FOUO) Many of these US persons are military veterans, including the three Ohioans. Additionally, a current member of the Ohio National Guard has indicated his willingness to travel to fight ISIL, but has not attempted such travel.

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**(U) Introduction**

(U//LES) Since the summer of 2014, several dozen US persons, including at least three from Ohio, have traveled to the Kurdistan region of northern Iraq, with possible onward travel to northeast Syria, to join Kurdish groups fighting ISIL, according to outbound CBP interviews, ICE HSI reporting, and press reporting.<sup>1- 10</sup> Many of these US persons—none of whom are ethnic Kurds and several of whom served in the US military—have connected with the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) to facilitate their travel to the region. They have often made contact with YPG by using social media sites, to include the English-language “Lions of Rojava”<sup>USPER</sup> Facebook page run by one of the US fighters affiliated with the YPG. The US persons who have traveled to fight ISIL have provided a host of motivations, to include aiding Syrian Kurds’ efforts to resist ISIL occupation, unspecified religious motivation, and protecting individuals they perceive as innocent.<sup>11,12,13,14</sup> Additionally, some of the US persons have conducted media interviews to publicize their involvement with the YPG against ISIL.

- (U) A US military veteran with two years of military experience traveled to Syria in September 2014 to join the YPG and is now assessed to have spearheaded the “Lions of Rojava’s” online recruitment efforts. This includes promoting the group, dispensing advice on how to travel, what materials to bring, and arranging facilitators to help prospective fighters enter Syria, according to press reporting.<sup>15,16</sup> The individual claimed he was motivated to fight ISIL because he wanted to prevent the slaughter of Christians, with whom we assess he may identify as co-religionists.<sup>17,18</sup>

**(U) Ohio-Specific Examples of US Persons Traveling to Combat ISIL**

(U//LES) Three military veterans from Ohio have traveled to fight with Kurdish forces and a fourth, who is an active member of the Ohio National Guard, expressed interest to his chain of command to travel for that purpose but has not attempted such travel.

- (U//LES) A USPER, who served in a US Army airborne unit from 1988-1990 and received a general discharge after being accused of threatening to harm a former soldier, traveled to Iraq on 23 February 2015 to join Kurdish forces fighting against ISIL. He stated he wanted to support the Kurdish people and would take guard positions against ISIL or help the local population rebuild from the destruction caused by ISIL, according to ICE HSI reporting. Prior to departing for Iraq, he participated in some form of organized practice in Ohio with a group of ex-soldiers he referred to as a “minutemen group”, which we assess may have been intended to prepare him for joining Kurdish forces fighting against ISIL.<sup>19</sup>
- (U//FOUO) A USPER, a former US Marine, traveled to and spent a week in Iraq in November 2014. He may have illegally carried firearms with him because they were not declared to CBP on either his outbound or inbound travel, according to a suspicious activity report.<sup>20</sup>
- (U//FOUO) A USPER, who claims to have served in the US Army and been a deputy at a sheriff’s office in Ohio, traveled to Iraq on 6 September 2014, according to press reporting. This individual is identified by the codename “Zagros,” according to press reporting.<sup>21</sup>

(U//FOUO) On 20 February 2015, an identified member of the Ohio National Guard indicated his desire to join the “Lions of Rojava” to combat ISIL. He inquired with his chain of command about transferring his status to Individual Ready Reserve or Inactive National Guard if he was not able to deploy with an Ohio National Guard unit. The individual’s father was willing to finance his son’s trip overseas to Syria or Iraq, according to information provided by the Ohio National Guard.<sup>22,23</sup>

**(U) Intelligence Gaps That, if Filled, Would Further Our Understanding of this Issue**

- (U//FOUO) Whether US persons who are active duty, reserve military, or National Guard members are being recruited by Kurdish groups combating ISIL;
- (U//FOUO) Whether these groups have adapted their recruiting tactics and the travel guidance they are providing to prospective members; and
- (U//FOUO) Whether these groups are vetting potential candidates to ensure volunteers are committed to fighting ISIL.

**(U) DHS I&A and HSI Alternative Analysis: Homegrown Violent Extremists Could Use Kurds’ Facilitation Network to Join ISIL**

(U//FOUO) DHS I&A assesses homegrown violent extremists (HVE) intent on traveling overseas—in support of ISIL or other Syria-based violent extremist groups—potentially could seek to circumvent US law enforcement and travel restrictions by masking their true intentions and using the “Lions of Rojava’s” facilitation network.<sup>\*</sup> Although we have no information HVEs are considering using this facilitation method, or are aware of the “Lions of Rojava,” we assess such a development would present would-be foreign fighters with an additional pathway for traveling to Iraq or Syria.

(U//FOUO) Comments, requests, or shareable intelligence may be directed to the East-Central Region at [SL\\_EastCentralRegion@hq.dhs.gov](mailto:SL_EastCentralRegion@hq.dhs.gov).

**(U) Source Summary Statement**

(U//FOUO) The information used in this *FAR* is drawn from open sources, DHS, and other reporting from state of Ohio agencies. DHS has **high confidence** in the information obtained from US government and state of Ohio agencies. DHS has **medium confidence** in the information obtained from open sources, which include media reports and Internet websites whose information is credibly sourced and is plausible, but may contain biases or unintentional inaccuracies. Some open source information has been corroborated through law enforcement and government sources and is considered credible. Based on our assessment of the sources, we have **medium-to-high confidence** in the judgments and conclusions in this *FAR*.

**(U) Report Suspicious Activity**

**(U) To report suspicious activity, law enforcement, Fire-EMS, private security personnel, and emergency managers should follow established protocols; all other personnel should call 911 or contact local law enforcement.** Suspicious activity reports (SARs) will be forwarded to the appropriate fusion center and FBI Joint Terrorism Task Force for further action. For more information on the Nationwide SAR Initiative, visit <http://nsi.ncirc.gov/resources.aspx>.

**(U) Tracked by:** HSEC-8.1, HSEC-8.2, HSEC-8.6, HSEC-8.7, HSEC-8.8, HSEC-8.9

<sup>\*</sup> (U//FOUO) DHS defines an HVE as a person of any citizenship who has lived and/or operated primarily in the United States or its territories who advocates, is engaged in, or is preparing to engage in ideologically motivated terrorist activities (including providing support to terrorism) in furtherance of political or social objectives promoted by a foreign terrorist organization, but is acting independently of direction by a foreign terrorist organization. HVEs are distinct from traditional domestic terrorists who engage in unlawful acts of violence or to intimidate civilian populations or attempt to influence domestic policy without direction from or influence from a foreign actor.

- <sup>1</sup> (U//FOUO); DHS; IIR 4 006 0289 15; 25 FEB 2015; DOI 08 DEC 2014; (U//FOUO); "ICE: TERRORISM WATCHLIST—Third U.S. Citizen Recruited via Social Media to Travel to Iraq to Join Kurdish Forces Fighting ISIL"; Extracted information is (U//LES); Overall document classification is (U//LES).
- <sup>2</sup> (U//FOUO); DHS; IIR 4 006 0423 15; 02 FEB 2015; DOI 12 JAN 2015; (U//FOUO); "ICE: Travel of a U.S. citizen to Iraq to Join Kurdish Forces in ISIL Fight"; Extracted information is (U//LES); Overall document classification is (U//LES).
- <sup>3</sup> (U//FOUO); DHS; IIR 4 006 0446 15; 25 FEB 2015; DOI 07 JAN 2015-22 JAN 2015; (U//FOUO); "ICE—U.S. Citizens Travel to Iraq to Join Kurdish Forces in ISIL Fight"; Extracted information is (U//LES); Overall document classification is (U//LES).
- <sup>4</sup> (U//FOUO); DHS; IIR 4 006 0469 15; 25 FEB 2015; DOI 15 JAN 2015-16 JAN 2015; (U//FOUO); "ICE—U.S. Citizens Traveling to Provide Humanitarian Aid to the Kurdish People in Iraq"; Extracted information is (U//LES); Overall document classification is (U//LES).
- <sup>5</sup> (U//FOUO); DHS; IIR 4 006 0474 15; 24 FEB 2015; DOI 24 JAN 2015; (U//FOUO); "ICE: TERRORISM WATCHLIST—Return of U.S. Citizen Attempting to Fight ISIL in Iraq"; Extracted information is (U//LES); Overall document classification is (U//LES).
- <sup>6</sup> (U//FOUO); DHS; IIR 4 006 0482 15; 25 FEB 2015; DOI 29 JAN 2015; (U//FOUO); "ICE: TERRORISM WATCHLIST—Travel of Two U.S. Citizens to Join Kurdish Forces and Fight ISIL in Iraq"; Extracted information is (U//LES); Overall document classification is (U//LES).
- <sup>7</sup> (U//FOUO); DHS; IIR 4 006 0548 15; 16 MAR 2015; DOI 05 MAR 2015; (U//FOUO); "ICE—Former U.S. Soldier Attempting to Acquire Military Equipment for Yekineyen Parastina Gel"; Extracted information is (U//LES); Overall document classification is (U//LES).
- <sup>8</sup> (U//FOUO); DHS; IIR 4 006 0551 15; 17 MAR 2015; DOI 01 JAN 2015-9 FEB 2015; (U//FOUO); "ICE— Former U.S. Army Scout Traveled to Iraq to Fight Kurdish Forces Against ISIL"; Extracted information is (U//LES); Overall document classification is (U//LES).
- <sup>9</sup> (U//FOUO); DHS; IIR 4 006 0622 15; 02 APR 2015; DOI 14 MAR 2015; (U//FOUO); "ICE—Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga Recruiting Online Through Facebook and New Website"; Extracted information is (U//LES); Overall document classification is (U//LES).
- <sup>10</sup> (U//FOUO); DHS; IIR 4 006 0793 15; 15 MAY 2015; DOI 25 APR 2015; (U//FOUO); "Current Situation Regarding the Relationship between Kurdish, Iraqi, and Syrian Groups, as of 25 April 2015"; Extracted information is (U//FOUO); Overall document classification is (S//NF).
- <sup>11</sup> (U//FOUO); DHS; IIR 4 006 0423 15; 02 FEB 2015; 12 JAN 2015; (U//FOUO); "ICE: Travel of a U.S. citizen to Iraq to Join Kurdish Forces in ISIL Fight"; Extracted information is (U//LES); Overall document classification is (U//LES).
- <sup>12</sup> (U//FOUO); DHS; IIR 4 006 0469 15; 25 FEB 2015; DOI 15 JAN 2015-16 JAN 2015; (U//FOUO); "ICE—U.S. Citizens Traveling to Provide Humanitarian Aid to the Kurdish People in Iraq"; Extracted information is (U//LES); Overall document classification is (U//LES).
- <sup>13</sup> (U//FOUO); DHS; IIR 4 006 0482 15; 25 FEB 2015; DOI 29 JAN 2015; (U//FOUO); "ICE: TERRORISM WATCHLIST—Travel of Two U.S. Citizens to Join Kurdish Forces and Fight ISIL in Iraq"; Extracted information is (U//LES); Overall document classification is (U//LES).
- <sup>14</sup> (U//FOUO); DHS; IIR 4 006 0551 15; 17 MAR 2015; DOI: 01 JAN 2015-9 FEB 2015; (U//FOUO); "ICE— Former U.S. Army Scout Traveled to Iraq to Fight Kurdish Forces Against ISIL"; Extracted information is (U//LES); Overall document classification is (U//LES).
- <sup>15</sup> (U); Paul Szoldra; *Business Insider*; 28 OCT 2014; "The American Fighting Against ISIS In Syria Is Trying To Recruit More US Military Veterans"; <http://www.businessinsider.com/jordan-matson-recruiting-veterans-2014-10#ixzz3gXGvKEIx>; accessed 19 MAR 2015.
- <sup>16</sup> (U); Sophie Cousins; *USA Today*; 07 OCT 2014; "Exclusive: American explains why he's fighting ISIL"; <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2014/10/06/jordan-matson-joins-kurds-against-islamic-state/16796487/>; accessed 19 MAR 2015.
- <sup>17</sup> (U); Paul Szoldra; *Business Insider*; 28 OCT 2014; "The American Fighting Against ISIS In Syria Is Trying To Recruit More US Military Veterans"; <http://www.businessinsider.com/jordan-matson-recruiting-veterans-2014-10#ixzz3gXGvKEIx>; accessed 19 MAR 2015.
- <sup>18</sup> (U); Sophie Cousins; *USA Today*; 7 OCT 2014; "Exclusive: American explains why he's fighting ISIL"; <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2014/10/06/jordan-matson-joins-kurds-against-islamic-state/16796487/>; accessed 19 MAR 2015.
- <sup>19</sup> (U//LES); DHS; ICE; Homeland Security Investigations 2015SIR00066138; 25 FEB 2015; Extracted information is classified (U//LES); Overall document classification is (U//LES).
- <sup>20</sup> (U); OHFVICV00-2015-00045; 20 MAR 2015; DOI UNK; Extracted information is classified (U//FOUO); Overall document classification is (U//FOUO).
- <sup>21</sup> (U); *Vice News*; 22 OCT 2014; "A Divorced Father-of-Two from Ohio Is Fighting the Islamic State in Syria"; <https://news.vice.com/article/a-divorced-father-of-two-from-ohio-is-fighting-the-islamic-state-in-syria>; accessed 19 MAR 2015.
- <sup>22</sup> (U//FOUO); Ohio National Guard; 201551FEB15; 20 FEB 2015; DOI UNK; Extracted information is classified (U//FOUO); Overall document classification is (U//FOUO).
- <sup>23</sup> (U//FOUO); Ohio National Guard; 201641FEB2015; 23 FEB 2015; DOI UNK; Extracted information is classified (U//FOUO); Overall document classification is (U//FOUO).



Product Title:

1. Please select partner type:  and function:

2. What is the highest level of intelligence information that you receive?

3. Please complete the following sentence: "I focus most of my time on:"

4. Please rate your satisfaction with each of the following:

	Very Satisfied	Somewhat Satisfied	Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied	Somewhat Dissatisfied	Very Dissatisfied	N/A
Product's overall usefulness	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Product's relevance to your mission	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Product's timeliness	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Product's responsiveness to your intelligence needs	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

5. How do you plan to use this product in support of your mission? (Check all that apply.)

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Drive planning and preparedness efforts, training, and/or emergency response operations</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Observe, identify, and/or disrupt threats</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Share with partners</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Allocate resources (e.g. equipment and personnel)</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Reprioritize organizational focus</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Author or adjust policies and guidelines</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Initiate a law enforcement investigation</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Initiate your own regional-specific analysis</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Initiate your own topic-specific analysis</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Develop long-term homeland security strategies</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Do not plan to use</li> <li><input type="text"/> Other:</li> </ul> |
|---|---|

6. To further understand your response to question #5, please provide specific details about situations in which you might use this product.

7. What did this product not address that you anticipated it would?

8. To what extent do you agree with the following two statements?

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	N/A
This product will enable me to make better decisions regarding this topic.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
This product provided me with intelligence information I did not find elsewhere.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

9. How did you obtain this product?

10. Would you be willing to participate in a follow-up conversation about your feedback?

To help us understand more about your organization so we can better tailor future products, please provide:

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Organization: <input type="text"/>	State: <input type="text"/>
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