Reports of Western foreign fighters leaving for Syria and Iraq indicate that between 15 and 25% of them are converts to Islam, coming from non-Muslim backgrounds; in addition, they are mostly middle class. Many of them are new to Jihadi ideology or Middle East politics, and economically well off.

These statistics are at odds with the common narrative in media and government circles, dominant during the Bush administration and also popular in the Obama era, according to which Jihadi radicalization is caused by lacking economic, political, or educational opportunities.

According to this narrative, the more economically disenfranchised and politically marginalized Muslims of Europe are more likely to resort to terrorism, whereas the well-integrated, educated, and economically successful U.S. Muslims are unlikely to attack their homeland – as they are mainly occupied with their quest for the American dream. Consequently, U.S. authorities did not consider homegrown Jihadi terrorism a real threat until a spike in plots and attacks in 2008 and 2009 changed the U.S. approach, as evinced by the 2011 White House strategy on Countering Violent Extremism and numerous government statements since.

While the U.S. government has changed its approach, and the narrative of the poor, uneducated, and disenfranchised terrorist was more common during the Bush administration, the latter continues to be entertained by the Obama administration and leading media outlets today. When discussing U.S. counterradicalization efforts at a February 2015 White House Summit, President Barak Obama referred to the link between economic and political grievances and terrorism, “impoverished communities,” lacking “educational opportunities” and “democratic change.” When speaking at a United Nations summit in fall 2015, Obama again emphasized the connection between political and economic grievances and terrorism, as well as the “need for more democracy.” In the aftermath of the 2015 Paris attacks, the Washington Post and New York Times have consistently mentioned, inter alia, the high unemployment rate in Brussel’s Molenbeek neighborhood, considered a breeding ground of violent Islamist extremism and home to various individuals suspected of involvement with the attacks in Paris.

This paper takes a close look at Western foreign fighter contingents, including the Paris attackers, to shed light on their backgrounds, motivations, and the underlying reasons of wanting to wage jihad in Syria and Iraq. The purpose is to move beyond the
narrative of the poor, angry, and religious Jihadi terrorist, and contribute to a more substantive and comprehensive analysis of the prevailing mechanisms of Jihadi radicalization.

1 See, for example, Anthony Faiola and Souad Mekhennet, “Europe’s Converts to Islam Hearing the Call to Jihad,” Washington Post, May 7, 2015; “It Ain’t Half Hot Here, Mum,” Economist, August 30, 2014.
2 White House, Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States (August 2011);
White House, Office of the Press Secretary, “Remarks of Denis McDonough, Deputy National Security Advisor to the President--As Prepared for Delivery,” March 6, 2011.
5 See, for example, Steven Mufson, “Belgian Neighborhood has Become the Hotbed for Radicals,” Washington Post, November 26, 2015.