In 2014, FBI Director James Comey pronounced that the recruitment of potential homegrown terrorists in the United States by the Islamic State (ISIS) takes place "24 hours a day" in "all fifty states." He stated that the challenge was to "stop them [these recruits] from acting" against the United States. According to CIA estimates, roughly two thousand Westerners have traveled to Iraq and Syria (most via Turkey) to join ISIS. More than one hundred of these individuals are from the United States, five hundred from the United Kingdom, and more than seven hundred from France. An additional 150 Americans have attempted to travel to Syria, and each day more and more Westerners are drawn to ISIS.

This recruitment of young people to join ISIS constitutes a crime under U.S. law, and individuals who recruit fighters for ISIS as well as the combatants themselves are criminally liable for providing "material support" to a terrorist organization (discussed in Chapter 14). The recruiters, however, are difficult to apprehend because their communications invariably are encrypted and they typically are outside the United States and beyond the reach of American law enforcement.

In October 2014, three American teenage girls from Colorado of Somali and Sudanese descent, age sixteen, seventeen, and eighteen, stole their passports and $2,000 in cash from their parents and boarded a flight to Germany where they were arrested by the FBI. In April 2014, Shannon Conley, a nineteen-year-old convert, was arrested at Denver International Airport attempting to board a flight to Turkey with the intent of marrying an ISIS member. Earlier in the year, Mohammed Khan, a Chicago teenager, was arrested before boarding a plane to the Middle East. These recruits not only bolster ISIS ranks overseas; they pose a potential threat when they return to the United States and Europe and are able to blend into these countries without raising suspicion. Most of the terrorists responsible for attacking sites in Paris in 2015 and in Belgium in 2016 had been trained by ISIS in Syria.

Mufid Elfgeeh, a Yemen-born manager of a pizza restaurant in Rochester, New York, was charged with recruiting members to ISIS. In announcing Elfgeeh's arrest, U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder proclaimed that "[w]e are focused on breaking up these activities on the front end, before supporters of ISI[S] can make good on plans to travel to the region or recruit sympathizers to this cause."

Commentators speculate that ISIS offers a sense of family and emotional support to the teenagers looking for purpose, meaning, self-esteem, and heroic adventure. ISIS recruits young people on social media with sophisticated appeals and videos. The terrorist organization's violent tactics provide the organization with an aura of strength and defiance that attracts young people who may feel isolated, alienated, and alone. Many of these American young people are from families that emigrated from the Middle East or that converted to Islam, and ISIS appeals to their sense of obligation to protect the Muslim faith from what ISIS portrays as an onslaught by the United States and Europe. Most of the individuals who have volunteered for ISIS lack a detailed knowledge of Islam and are