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Converts and Islamist Terrorism: An Introduction

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Converts and Islamist Terrorism:

An Introduction

Converts to Islam represent a small percentage of the Muslim community in Western countries. Yet when it comes to Islamist extremism and terrorism, research has suggested that converts are considerably overrepresented. This ICCT Policy Brief serves as an introduction to this topic by providing an overview of what is known about converts' involvement in homegrown jihadism and the foreign fighter phenomenon. Notwithstanding considerable reservations about the quantity and quality of the available data, this Policy Brief finds support for the notion of convert overrepresentation in these activities. This is especially so in the case of foreign fighters. What little data was found on converts' involvement in homegrown jihadism provided a more nuanced picture, emphasizing that overrepresentation may not be the norm in all Western countries and that it may be a relatively recent development. Numerous explanations for converts' involvement in Islamist extremism and terrorism have been provided, running the gamut from structural-level explanations to distinctly personal motives. At present, however, a comprehensive, theoretically sound and empirically grounded understanding of how and why converts become involved in Islamist militancy is absent. The Policy Brief concludes by stressing the need to develop our understanding of this important yet under-researched topic.

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About the Authors

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Bart Schuurman is a Research Fellow at ICCT and has worked as a researcher at Leiden University's Institute of Security and Global Affairs (formerly Centre for Terrorism and Counterterrorism) and PhD candidate since 2011. Bart has a background in History and International Relations. Past projects have included a study on potential "indicators" of terrorist intent and capability conducted in cooperation with the Dutch National Police, and a year-long evaluation of a Dutch reintegration programme for (violent) extremists. Currently, Bart is engaged in a three-year-long European Union-funded collaborative research project that focuses on gaining a better understanding of lone actor terrorists' pre-attack behavior. His PhD thesis focuses on understanding involvement in terrorist groups by studying primary-sources based data using structural, group and individual level perspectives. In 2014, he spent several months working with Professor John Horgan at UMass Lowell as a Fulbright Visiting Researcher. In addition to various aspects of (counter-)terrorism, Bart's research interests include military strategy, asymmetric conflicts, negotiation and the Clausewitzian theory.

Peter Grol

Peter Grol is a visiting Research Fellow at Leiden University's Institute of Security and Global Affairs. Peter finished his Master Islamic Studies at Leiden University in 2011. Over the past years he has researched radical Islamic movements in the Netherlands. His research interests at Leiden University and ICCT are, amongst others, radicalisation processes and jihadi terrorism. He was recently involved in several research projects on the life stories of (potential) Dutch jihadi foreign fighters. Peter and Edwin Bakker are currently writing a book about contemporary Dutch jihadism.

Scott Flower

Scott is an academic at the University of Melbourne whose research focus is on converts to Islam in the Pacific. His expertise in the study of religious conversion has more recently extended to the study of Muslim convert involvement in radical and violent political and religious movements. Scott is currently Co-Principal Investigator with Professor John Horgan on a large, three-year US Department of Defense research project. Scott is also the Principal Investigator on a two-year research project on Muslim Converts in Canada funded by the Canadian Government.

About ICCT

The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT) is an independent think and do tank providing multidisciplinary policy advice and practical, solution-oriented implementation support on prevention and the rule of law, two vital pillars of effective counter-terrorism. ICCT's work focuses on themes at the intersection of countering violent extremism and criminal justice sector responses, as well as human rights related aspects of counter-terrorism. The major project areas concern countering violent extremism, rule of law, foreign fighters, country and regional analysis, rehabilitation, civil society engagement and victims' voices. Functioning as a nucleus within the international counter-terrorism network, ICCT connects experts, policymakers, civil society actors and practitioners from different fields by providing a platform for productive collaboration, practical analysis, and exchange of experiences and expertise, with the ultimate aim of identifying innovative and comprehensive approaches to preventing and countering terrorism.

1. Introduction

Converts to Islam represent a small percentage of the Muslim community in Western countries.¹ Yet when it comes to Islamist extremism² and terrorism³, research has suggested that converts are considerably overrepresented.⁴ By summarising some of the most notable existing studies, this ICCT Policy Brief clarifies what is known about converts' involvement in homegrown jihadism and the foreign fighter phenomenon. Its goal is to serve as an introduction to this topic. Two questions guide the discussion. First, does the available data corroborate the idea that converts to Islam are overrepresented in Islamist extremism and militancy? Second, what explanations have been put forward for how and why some converts to Islam adopt extremist views and, in some cases, become involved in terrorist violence?

A small number of researchers have looked specifically at converts' role in Islamist extremism and terrorism.⁵ Yet a clear understanding of the issue has yet to emerge. As Van San argues, "empirical research on the involvement of converts in Islamism-related offences shows a fragmented picture".⁶ By bringing together current insights into this subject, the present paper hopes to provide a nuanced point of entry into an important and as of yet under-researched topic. The qualification "nuanced" needs to be emphasised, as it is the authors' intention to avoid the stigmatisation of all converts to Islam. A convert is defined here as a person with a religious but non-Islamic or a non-religious background who adopts a Muslim identity.⁷ The majority of those who adopt this religion never become radicalised or involved in terrorism. Converting to Islam should by itself not be seen as raising a security concern. Indeed, conversion much more frequently has positive influences, such as increased self-esteem, that are too frequently left out of the discussion.⁸ The question is what factors set some converts

¹ See Table 1.

² "While radicals might be violent or not, might be democrats or not, extremists are never democrats. Their state of mind tolerates no diversity. They are also positively in favour of the use of force to obtain and maintain political power (...). Extremists generally tend to have inflexible 'closed minds', adhering to a simplified mono-causal interpretation of the world where you are either with them or against them, part of the problem or part of the solution". From: A.P. Schmid, "Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review", (International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2013).

<http://www.icct.nl/download/file/ICCT-Schmid-Radicalisation-De-Radicalisation-Counter-Radicalisation-March-2013.pdf>.

³ "Terrorism refers, on the one hand, to a doctrine about the presumed effectiveness of a special form or tactic of fear-generating, coercive political violence and, on the other hand, to a conspiratorial practice of calculated, demonstrative, direct violent action without legal or moral restraints, targeting mainly civilians and non-combatants, performed for its propagandistic and psychological effects on various audiences and conflict parties". A.P. Schmid, "The Revised Academic Consensus Definition of Terrorism", *Perspectives on Terrorism* 6, no. 2 (2012), p. 158.

⁴ See for instance: S. Mullins, "Re-Examining the Involvement of Converts in Islamist Terrorism: A Comparison of the U.S. and U.K.", *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 6 (2015), pp. 72-84; L. Vidino and S. Hughes, "ISIS in America, From Retweets to Raqqa", *Program On Extremism* (The George Washington University, 2015), <https://cchs.gwu.edu/sites/cchs.gwu.edu/files/downloads/ISIS%20in%20America%20-%20Full%20Report.pdf>; S. Flower, "Muslim Converts and Terrorism", *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analysis* 5, no. 11 (2013), pp. 6-9.

⁵ See for instance, S. Kleinmann, "Radicalization of Homegrown Sunni Militants in the United States: Comparing Converts and Non-Converts", *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 35, no. 4 (2012), pp. 278-297; E. Karagiannis, "European Converts to Islam: Mechanisms of Radicalization," *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 13, no.1 (2012), pp. 99-113; S. Mullins, "Re-Examining the Involvement of Converts" (2015).

⁶ M. van San, "Lost Souls Searching for Answers? Belgian and Dutch Converts Joining the Islamic State", *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 5 (2015), p. 47. Van San mentions the following empirical studies: O. Roy, "Al-Qaeda: A True Global Movement" in R. Coolsaet, ed., *Jihadi Terrorism and the Radicalisation Challenge in Europe* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 19-26; S. Kleinmann, "Radicalization of Homegrown Sunni Militants in the United States: Comparing Converts and Non-Converts", *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 35, no. 4 (2012), pp. 278-297; R. Leiken, *Europe's Angry Muslims: The Revolt of the Second Generation*, (Oxford: University Press 2012), p. 235; N. Ferguson & E. Binks, "Understanding Radicalization and Engagement in Terrorism through Religious Conversion Motives", *Journal of Strategic Security* 8, no. 1 (2015), pp. 16-26.

⁷ See: Karagiannis, "European Converts to Islam", (2012), p. 100.

⁸ Finding based on ethnographic data collected in Australia, the Pacific and Canada by the third author.

apart, bringing them to adopt extremist interpretations of their newfound faith or even leading to involvement in terrorism.

2. Outline & Methodology

After briefly outlining the research methodology, the discussion turns to the question of numbers. What data is available on converts and their involvement in Islamist extremism or terrorism? How many foreign fighters are converts to Islam? Subsequently, the focus shifts to the explanations that have been put forward to account for convert radicalisation and/or their involvement in militancy. The Policy Brief concludes with a call for a more comprehensive research agenda focused on better understanding the varied factors that can bring some converts to Islam to adopt radical views or become involved in Islamist terrorism.

This paper is based on a literature review that incorporated two steps of data collection. First, Internet search engines and relevant databases of academic research were used to survey the literature. Secondly, the references given in these publications were utilised to find further literature via the “snowballing” approach.⁹ Because this Policy Brief is intended as a brief introduction to the topic of convert radicalisation, the literature review was limited in scope to those publications that dealt mainly or exclusively with converts’ involvement in homegrown jihadism or foreign fighting. In other words, the focus is on those converts who actually become involved in militancy and terrorism rather than on those who ‘merely’ adopted fundamentalist or radical views.

Even with this demarcation in place, the review uncovered numerous publications – some written by academics, others by journalists or researchers at think tanks – that deal with or reference converts’ involvement in Islamist extremism or terrorism.¹⁰ Most of these do not, or largely in anecdotal fashion, provide empirical data on converts’ involvement in extremism and terrorism. Peer-reviewed academic studies that focus exclusively on convert radicalisation are currently few in number.¹¹ Most of these works

⁹ Academic search engines included Picarta and Google Scholar. Search terms included: ‘convert radicalisation’, ‘convert terrorism’, ‘convert jihad’ and ‘convert foreign fighter’. Results were studied up to and including the tenth page of returns.

¹⁰ For media articles, see for instance: A. Faiola and S. Mekhemet, “From Hip-Hop to Jihad, How the Islamic State Became a Magnet for Converts”, *The Washington Post*, 6 May 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/from-hip-hop-to-jihad-how-the-islamic-state-became-a-magnet-for-converts/2015/05/06/b1358758-d23f-11e4-8b1e-274d670aa9c9_story.html; A. Shaukat, “The Group of Walsall Converts Who Became Britain’s Largest Group of ISIL Fanatics”, *The Telegraph*, 1 April 2016, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/terrorism-in-the-uk/12168612/The-group-of-Walsall-friends-who-became-Britains-largest-group-of-Isil-fanatics.html>; B. Taub, “Journey to Jihad, Why Are Teen-Agers Joining ISIS?”, *The New Yorker*, 1 June, 2015, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/06/01/journey-to-jihad>; L. Moosavi, “Are Converts More Likely to be Extremists Than Other Muslims?”, *The Guardian*, 24 May 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2013/may/24/islam-converts-woolwich-attackers-extremists>; B. Ahmed, “Why Converts To Islam Are So Susceptible To Becoming Terrorists”, *Think Progress*, 3 February 2016, <http://thinkprogress.org/world/2016/02/03/3743136/muslim-converts/>; S. Kleinmann and S. Flower, “From Convert to Extremist: New Muslims and Terrorism”, *The Conversation*, 24 May 2013, <http://theconversation.com/from-convert-to-extremist-new-muslims-and-terrorism-14643>.

For think-tank pieces, see for instance: S. V. Krishna, “Radicalisation of Muslim Converts”, *Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses* (2015), http://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/RadicalisationofMuslimConverts_svkrishna_310815; D. Benjamin, “The Convert’s Zeal: Why Are So Many Jihadists Converts to Islam?”, (Brookings Institute, 2007), <http://www.brookings.edu/research/articles/2007/09/07terrorism-benjamin>; J.E. Arasli, “Violent Converts to Islam: Growing Cluster and Rising Trend”, (Global Ecco, 2011), <https://globalecco.org/ctx-v1n1/violent-converts-to-islam>.

¹¹ Publications include: Karagiannis, “European Converts to Islam”, (2012); M. Bartoszewicz, “Controversies of Conversions: The Potential Terrorist Threat of European Converts to Islam”, *Perspectives on Terrorism* 7, no. 3 (2012), pp. 17-29; S. Flower and D. Birkett, “(Mis)Understanding Muslim Converts in Canada: A Critical Discussion of Muslim Converts in the Contexts of Security and Society”, *TSAS Working Paper Series* (Canadian Network for research on Terrorism, Security

take the form of case-studies. The numbers of converts analysed per study ranges from a handful to several dozen. Empirical insights into the life stories and motivations of (would-be) convert foreign fighters are fewer still.¹² The relative scarcity of empirically-supported research on convert radicalisation emphasises that much of the currently available information on this phenomenon should be treated as speculative.

3. Convert Radicalisation – What Do We Know

Since most Western states do not register their citizens' religious affiliation, reliable information regarding the size of the Muslim community and the total number of converts within them is scarce, fragmented and frequently out of date. Where possible, the authors relied on data produced by the reputable Pew Research Center. But especially when it comes to estimates for the number of converts, the quality and sometimes impartiality of the source material could frequently not be ascertained. The authors stress that Table 1 provides a *rough estimate* of the number of converts in several Western countries.

The percentages in Table 1 were calculated by matching, per country, the lowest and highest estimates for the number of converts to the lowest and highest estimates for the total Muslim population respectively. In most cases this yielded a percentage range. This should be taken as an estimate for the percentage of converts in the time period covered, *not* as an indication for the growth or decline of that population during the years given. The limitations of the currently available data are further underlined by outliers such as the United States, which boasts 23% converts among its Muslim population whereas other Western states in Table 1 do not reach a figure higher than 5.1%. Again it is emphasised that these figures are solely intended to provide an *indication* of the percentage of converts in Western countries.

and Society, 2014), pp. 1-19, http://tsas.ca/tsas_library_entry/tsas-wp14-06-misunderstanding-muslim-converts-in-canada-a-critical-discussion-of-muslim-converts-in-the-contexts-of-security-and-society/.

¹² Van San, "Lost Souls", (2015); D. Weggemans, E. Bakker and P. Grol, "Who Are They and Why Do They Go? The Radicalisation and Preparatory Processes of Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighters", *Perspectives on Terrorism* 8, no. 4 (2014), pp. 105-106; E. Bakker and P. Grol, "Motives and Considerations of Potential Foreign Fighters from the Netherlands", (International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2015), pp. 9-11, <http://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/ICCT-Bakker-Grol-Motives-and-Considerations-of-Potential-Foreign-Fighters-from-the-Netherlands-July2015.pdf>.

Country	Estimated Number of Converts to Islam	Estimated Number of Muslims	Estimated % Converts in Muslim Population
Belgium	2007: 10,000 ¹³ 2015: 56,000 ¹⁴	2007: 500,000 ¹⁵ 2010: 630,000 ¹⁶	2.0 – 8.8%
Canada	Unknown	2004: 579,640 ¹⁷	Unknown
Denmark	2010: 2,800 ¹⁸	2010: 200,000 ¹⁹	1.4%
France	2009: 50,000 – 100,000 ²⁰ 2015: >215,000 ²¹	2009: 3,554,000 ²² 2010: 4,710,000 ²³	1.4- 4.6%
Germany	2004: 12,000 – 100,000 ²⁴ 2015: >215,000 ²⁵	2009: 4,026,000 ²⁶ 2010: 4,760,000 ²⁷	0.3 – 4.5%
Spain	2006: 20,000 ²⁸ 2015: 50,000 ²⁹	2006: 800,000 ³⁰ 2010: 980,000 ³¹	2.5 – 5.1%
The Netherlands	2006: 12,000 ³² 2015: 17,000 ³³	2006: 850,000 ³⁴ 2010: 1,000,000 ³⁵	1.4 – 1.7%

¹³ For numbers from 2012 see: Karagiannis, "European Converts to Islam", (2012), pp. 99-100.

¹⁴ <http://www.stichtingbekeerling.nl/aantal-bekeerlingen-in-nederland-en-belgie/>.

¹⁵ Karagiannis, "European Converts to Islam", (2012), pp. 99-100.

¹⁶ C. Hackett, "5 Facts About the Muslim Population in Europe", (Pew Research Center, 2015),

<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/11/17/5-facts-about-the-muslim-population-in-europe/>.

¹⁷ D. Janhevich and H. Ibrahim, "Muslims in Canada: An Illustrative and Demographic Profile", *Our Diverse Cities* 1 (2004), p. 50.

¹⁸ Karagiannis, "European Converts to Islam", (2012), pp. 99-100.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ <http://www.stichtingbekeerling.nl/aantal-bekeerlingen-in-nederland-en-belgie/>.

²² Pew Research Center, "Mapping the Global Muslim Population", (Pew Research Center, 2009).

<http://www.pewforum.org/2009/10/07/mapping-the-global-muslim-population14/>. Last visited 31 May 2016.

²³ Hackett, "5 facts about the Muslim population", (2015).

²⁴ Karagiannis, "European Converts to Islam", (2012), pp. 99-100.

²⁵ <http://www.stichtingbekeerling.nl/aantal-bekeerlingen-in-nederland-en-belgie/>. Last visited 22 April 2016.

²⁶ Karagiannis, "European Converts to Islam", (2012), pp. 99-100.

²⁷ Hackett, "5 facts about the Muslim population", (2015).

²⁸ Karagiannis, "European Converts to Islam", (2012), pp. 99-100.

²⁹ S. Kern, "Spain in the Eye of the Storm of Jihad", (Gatestone Institute, 2015),

<http://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/5888/spain-jihad/>; G. Pingree, "In Spain, Dismay at Muslim Converts Holding Sway", *Christian Science Monitor*, 7 November 2006, <http://www.csmonitor.com/2006/1107/p04s01-woeu.html>.

³⁰ Karagiannis, "European Converts to Islam", (2012), pp. 99-100.

³¹ Hackett, "5 facts about the Muslim population", (2015).

³² Karagiannis, "European Converts to Islam", (2012), pp. 99-100.

³³ <http://www.stichtingbekeerling.nl/aantal-bekeerlingen-in-nederland-en-belgie/>. Last visited 22 April 2016.

³⁴ Karagiannis, "European Converts to Islam", (2012), pp. 99-100.

³⁵ Hackett, "5 facts about the Muslim population", (2015).

United Kingdom	2001: 63,000 ³⁶ 2010: 100,000 ³⁷	2001: 1,600,000 ³⁸ 2010: 2,869,000 ³⁹	3.5 – 3.9%
United States	2007: 552,000 ⁴⁰	2007: 2,400,000 ⁴¹	23.0%
Sweden	2006: 6,000 ⁴²	2006: 300,000 – 350,000 ⁴³	1.7 – 2.0%

Table 1: Number of converts to Islam in several Western countries

Although the figures in Table 1 should be treated with a healthy degree of scepticism, they do underline one important conclusion. Converts form a (small) minority within the Islamic communities of the Western countries covered. This is important in order to establish whether converts truly are as overrepresented in Islamist extremism and terrorism as is often reported.

3.1 Converts in Homegrown Jihadist Plots

The study of convert radicalisation focuses mainly on the involvement of converts in so-called “homegrown” jihadism.⁴⁴ But just as the data collected in Table 1 needed to be treated with scepticism, so does the available information on converts’ involvement in this form of political violence. As Mullins argued as recently as 2015 regarding this issue, “there has been relatively little in the way of systematic research”.⁴⁵ Little is known about the number of converts involved in homegrown jihadism in Western countries. Using anecdotal and largely unverifiable information, however, does lead to some interesting preliminary findings. Table 2 suggests that converts are indeed overrepresented in homegrown jihadist plots in Spain and the United Kingdom, but it presents a more nuanced set of findings with regard to the United States. Whereas converts appear to be overrepresented in homegrown jihadist plots in 2015, their involvement in such activities prior to roughly 2013 does not support a similar conclusion.⁴⁶

³⁶ Karagiannis, “European Converts to Islam”, (2012), pp. 99-100.

³⁷ K. Brice “A Minority Within a Minority: A Report on Converts to Islam in The United Kingdom”, (Swansea University, 2010), <http://faith-matters.org/images/stories/fm-reports/a-minority-within-a-minority-a-report-on-converts-to-islam-in-the-uk.pdf>.

³⁸ Karagiannis, “European Converts to Islam”, (2012), pp. 99-100.

³⁹ Hackett, “5 facts about the Muslim population”, (2015).

⁴⁰ Numbers on converts from the United States are uncertain. Information taken from: “How Many People Convert to Islam?”, *Economist*, 29 September 2013, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/economist-explains/2013/09/economist-explains-17>.

⁴¹ “How Many People Convert to Islam?”, (2013).

⁴² Karagiannis, “European Converts to Islam”, pp. 99-100.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ M. Crone and M. Harrow, “Homegrown Terrorism in the West”, *Terrorism and Political Violence* 23, no. 4 (2011).

⁴⁵ Mullins, “Re-Examining the Involvement of Converts”, (2015), p. 72.

⁴⁶ R. Simcox and E. Dyer, “Al-Qaeda in the United States: A Complete Analysis of Terrorism Offenses”, (The Henry Jackson Society, 2013), p. IX. <http://henryjacksonsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Al-Qaeda-in-the-USAbridged-version-LOWRES-Final.pdf>.

Country	Estimated % Converts in Muslim Population	Number of Homegrown Jihadists	% Converts among Homegrown Jihadists
Belgium	2.0 – 8.8%	Unknown	Unknown
Canada	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown
Denmark	1.4%	Unknown	Unknown
France	1.4 – 4.6%	Unknown	Unknown
Germany	0.3 – 4.5%	Unknown	Unknown
Spain	2.5 – 5.1%	Unknown	14.0% ⁴⁷
The Netherlands	1.4 – 1.7%	Unknown	Unknown
United Kingdom	3.5 – 3.9%	2001 – 2013: 288 ⁴⁸ 1980 – 2001: 139 ⁴⁹	2001-2013: 12% ⁵⁰ 1980-2001: 9% ⁵¹
United States	23.0%	2015: 56 ⁵² 2001 – 2013: 223 ⁵³ 1980 – 2001: 143 ⁵⁴	2015: 40.0% ⁵⁵ 2001 – 2013: 23.0% ⁵⁶ 1980 – 2001: 17.0% ⁵⁷
Sweden	1.7 – 2.0%	Unknown	Unknown

Table 2: Converts' involvement in homegrown jihadism

3.2 Converts among Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq

Foreign (terrorist) fighters – seen here as individuals who have left (Western) countries to join jihadist terrorist groups overseas – have drawn considerable attention from policy makers and academics over the past several years. Perhaps owing to this fact, there appears to be slightly more data available on the number of converts among this particular segment of the militant Islamist population. For instance, a recent report by the ICCT, which looked at foreign (terrorist) fighters from several European countries, concluded that 6 – 23% of those who had travelled to Syria and Iraq were converts to

⁴⁷ F. Reinares and C. García-Calvo, "Terroristas, Redes y Organizaciones: Facetas de la Actual Movilización Yihadista en España", (Real Instituto Elcano, 2015), p.18, <http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/wcm/connect/d4164c804a9125f4813f8f207bacc4c/DT17-2015-Reinares-GarciaCalvo-Terroristas-redes-organizaciones-facetass-actual-movilizacion-yihadista-Espana.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CACHEID=1447668810772>

⁴⁸ Mullins, "Re-Examining the Involvement of Converts in Islamist Terrorism", (2015), p.74.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Vidino and Hughes, "ISIS in America", (2015).

⁵³ Mullins, "Re-Examining the Involvement of Converts in Islamist Terrorism", (2015), p.73.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Vidino and Hughes, "ISIS in America", (2015).

⁵⁶ Mullins, "Re-Examining the Involvement of Converts in Islamist Terrorism", (2015), p.73.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

Islam.⁵⁸ Using the available data, Table 3 breaks this number down to show the estimated number of converts among foreign fighters for several Western countries. Again, the available information tentatively supports the notion that converts are overrepresented in Islamist extremism and terrorism.

Country	Estimated % Converts in Muslim Population	Estimated Number of Foreign Fighters ⁵⁹	% Converts among FF in Syria / Iraq
Belgium	2.0 – 8.8%	420 – 516	6%
Canada	Unknown	100 ⁶⁰	Unknown
Denmark	1.4%	125	Unknown
France	1.4 – 4.6%	>900	23.0%
Germany	0.3 – 4.5%	720 – 760	12.0 – 16.0% ⁶¹
Spain	2.5 – 5.1%	120 – 139	Unknown
The Netherlands	1.4 – 1.7%	200 – 250	11.8 – 18.4% ⁶²
United Kingdom	3.5 – 3.9%	700 – 760	Unknown
United States	23.0%	Unknown	Unknown
Sweden	1.7 – 2.0%	300	Unknown

Table 3: Number of converts among foreign fighters

3.3 Overview: Convert Involvement in Homegrown Jihadism and Foreign Fighting

Bringing Tables 1 through 3 together yields the following overview. Table 4 first of all illustrates that there is little (publicly accessible) “hard” data on the number of converts involved in Islamist extremism and terrorism. The second conclusion to draw from Table 4 is that, even if these data limitations are taken into account, converts to Islam in Western countries *do indeed* appear to be overrepresented in homegrown jihadist plots and participation in overseas conflicts as foreign fighters. As Table 2 showed, such overrepresentation was not necessarily the case in all countries at all times; in the United States this appears to be a post 2013 development. Yet in general the available information supports the overrepresentation hypothesis.

⁵⁸ B. Van Ginkel and E. Entenmann, eds., “The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon in the European Union. Profiles, Threats & Policies”, (International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2016), p. 23, <http://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/ICCT-Report-Foreign-Fighters-Phenomenon-in-the-EU-1-April-2016-including-AnnexesLinks.pdf>.

⁵⁹ Unless stated otherwise, data is drawn from: *ibid*.

⁶⁰ P.R. Neumann, “Foreign Fighter Total in Syria/Iraq Now Exceeds 20,000; Surpasses Afghanistan Conflict in the 1980s”, (International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, 2015), <http://icsr.info/2015/01/foreign-fighter-total-syriairaq-now-exceeds-20000-surpasses-afghanistan-conflict-1980s/>.

⁶¹ N. Busse, “Arbeitslose und Straftäter Ziehen in den Heiligen Krieg”, *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, 27 November 2014, <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/dschihad-in-deutschland-zieht-arbeitslose-und-straftaeter-an-13287950.html#elections>; F. Flade, “Mehr als 800 ‘Dschihad-Reisende’ aus Deutschland”, *Die Welt*, 23 February 2016, <http://m.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article152534510/Mehr-als-800-Dschihad-Reisende-aus-Deutschland.html>.

⁶² A. Kouwenhoven and B. Blokker, “Terrorismdeskundige: Aanpak Radicalisering Gedoemd te Mislukken”, *NRC*, 21 September 2015, <http://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2015/09/21/terrorismdeskundige-westerse-aanpak-radicalisering-gedoemd-te-mislukken>; Data supplemented with figures collected on Dutch situation by second author.

Country	Estimated % of converts in Muslim Population	% Converts among FF in Syria / Iraq	% Converts among Homegrown Jihadists
Belgium	2.0 – 8.8%	6%	Unknown
Canada	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown
Denmark	1.4%	Unknown	Unknown
France	1.4 – 4.6%	23%	Unknown
Germany	0.3 – 4.5%	12 – 16%	Unknown
Spain	2.5 – 5.1%	Unknown	14.0%
The Netherlands	1.4 – 1.7%	11.8 – 18.4%	Unknown
United Kingdom	3.5 – 3.9%	Unknown	2001-2013: 12% 1980-2001: 9%
United States	23.0%	Unknown	2015: 40% 2001-2013: 23% 1980 – 2013: 17%
Sweden	1.7 – 2.0%	Unknown	Unknown

Table 4: Overview of converts involved in foreign fighting or homegrown jihadism

4. Explaining Convert Radicalisation

All of the publications utilised for this Policy Brief stress that there is no universal “key factor” that leads to the radicalisation of converts. Instead, several authors emphasise the importance of individual processes and group-level factors as harbouring the mechanisms that can lead converts to involvement in extremism and terrorism. Some scholars argue that these factors play a *larger* role in the radicalisation processes of converts than explanations found at the structural level of analysis, such as discrimination or reaction to international conflicts.⁶³ This final part of the Policy Brief begins by discussing some commonly-encountered explanations for convert radicalisation before turning to the more empirically robust studies, which are discussed in more detail. While none can yet address the overrepresentation of converts to Islam in Islamist militancy and foreign fighting, the studies discussed below do offer several useful starting points to begin exploring this phenomenon.

4.1 Commonly-Found Explanations for Convert Radicalisation

Over the past several years, numerous articles have mentioned factors thought to bring about converts’ involvement in Islamist extremism and terrorism. Because the empirical basis for these commonly-encountered hypotheses is frequently unclear, their explanatory value cannot always be ascertained. One such hypothesis holds that converts are more vulnerable to radicalisation because they lack knowledge of Islam.⁶⁴ Others see converts’ proneness to radicalisation as stemming from “converts’ zeal”: the desire to show dedication to a newfound faith by embracing it in a particularly fanatical

⁶³ Kleinmann, “Radicalization of Homegrown Sunni Militants”, (2012), p. 279.

⁶⁴ M. Uhlmann “European Converts to Terrorism”, *Middle East Quarterly* 15, no. 3 (2007), p. 33; Ahmed, “Why Converts to Islam”, (2016); Krishna, “Radicalisation of Muslim Converts”, (2015).

and literal fashion.⁶⁵ More generally, several authors make the point that convert radicalisation may stem from their problematic backgrounds, such as a history of abuse or addiction, family problems, a criminal record or time spent in prison.⁶⁶

Interesting though these latter findings are, they do not provide a conclusive answer to why some converts become involved in radicalism and militancy. It is crucial to note that there are many people who share a similar background yet never become involved in such activities. Moreover, data collected by the third author has indicated that most converts, radicalised or not, are disillusioned to some degree with modern or Western life and have displayed some form of anti-social or stigmatised behaviour, such as alcohol or drug abuse, before converting. Such background factors therefore do not appear to be discriminating variables when it comes to accounting for how and why some converts to Islam embrace extremism and militancy.

4.2 Empirical Insights

Based on eight case-studies of Dutch and Belgian Muslims (and recent converts to Islam) who have joined the Islamic State that Van San describes in her study, there appears to be a considerable degree of truth to at least some of the above observations.⁶⁷ Most of the converts in her study do indeed have a problematic background, have little knowledge of Islam and appear to be easily influenced. However, the small sample size means that care must be taken not to generalise these findings to all radicalised converts. All the more so since it remains unclear what set apart these eight cases from the many other individuals with similar backgrounds who do not radicalise. In general, as Kleinmann points out, care should be taken not to overemphasise a convert's life prior to conversion as holding the answers to their subsequent radicalisation.⁶⁸

Bartoszewicz is most clearly opposed to some of the more commonsensical explanations for convert radicalisation. She disagrees with the notion of "convert's zeal", the image of converts as "disaffected and often troubled young people" and the suggestion that a lack of "cultural bearings or a sound religious grounding" makes an individual more vulnerable to radical interpretations of Islam is dismissed as erroneous.⁶⁹ Bartoszewicz states that "such conceptual errors can lead to a false and misleading perception of the causality between European converts to Islam and terrorism".⁷⁰ These differing points of view illustrate just how difficult it is at this point in time to arrive at broadly-shared, empirically supported explanations for converts' involvement in Islamist extremism and terrorism.

The following paragraphs further discuss recent empirical research on convert radicalisation. This discussion is broken into three parts. The first looks at research that studies convert radicalisation from an individual-level perspective. The second incorporates studies with a broader analytical focus that includes group and structural-

⁶⁵ Benjamin, "The Convert's Zeal", (2007); Uhlmann "European Converts to Terrorism", (2008), p. 33.

⁶⁶ Van San, "Lost Souls", (2015), pp. 48-49; Krishna, "Radicalisation of Muslim Converts"; R. Barrett, "Foreign Fighters in Syria", (The Soufan Group, 2014), <http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/TSG-Foreign-Fighters-in-Syria.pdf>.

⁶⁷ Van San, "Lost Souls", (2015), p. 54.

⁶⁸ Kleinmann, "Radicalization of Homegrown Sunni Militants", (2012), p. 290.

⁶⁹ Bartoszewicz, "Controversies of Conversions", (2012), pp. 17-18.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 18.

level factors. In the final subsection, research is discussed that looks at the process of conversion itself as a potential source of answers for why some converts radicalise.

Explanations focusing on the individual characteristics of converts

Bartoszewicz argues in her 2013 study, which is based in part on 30 interviews, that factors at the individual level of analysis are key to understanding convert radicalisation. She stresses the importance of identity and belonging: "Individuals feeling at ease with their hitherto prevailing identity and who embrace Islam not as the essence of "the other" but as something that completes the wholeness of their personality (acceptance) are far less inclined to proceed to activities that aim at destroying the culture in which they were brought up as opposed to those who, in order to embrace Islam, feel the need to discard in an act of rejection all that they were before [converting to Islam]."⁷¹ On the other hand she argues that, "when someone not so much embraces Islam, but rejects the West and everything it represents (...) they make themselves more vulnerable towards radicalisation."⁷²

In other words, Bartoszewicz makes the case that a convert's likeliness for radicalisation is related to his or her pre-existing image of self and society. Someone who is at ease with their own sense of identity is argued to be less vulnerable to the adoption of radical or extremist views after conversion. The same applies with regard to such individuals' views of society; those who embrace Islam out of a negative attitude toward Western values and culture are more susceptible to radicalisation than those who experienced no such hostility or tension. For Bartoszewicz, the likeliness of convert radicalisation is thus closely linked to the personality of said individuals.

In her 2015 study, Van San looks at eight cases of Belgian and Dutch converts who joined the Islamic State. She concludes that most female converts in her sample who have joined the Islamic State turned to Islam as a result of behavioural issues or traumatic events in their youth, such as being abandoned by parents.⁷³ Regarding their conversion, Van San states that "it was their way of leaving the past behind and seeking forgiveness."⁷⁴ However, she also notes the influence of a more mundane factor; some female converts travelled to the so-called Islamic State because they fell in love with a foreign fighter.⁷⁵ As for the men in Van San's sample, "previous disappointment" in life, a period of religious seeking and an interest in Islam appeared to be key factors in their subsequent radicalisation.⁷⁶ Valuable as these findings are, they raise a point made previously; namely, that many people, converts or otherwise, have similar experiences yet never turn to radicalism or violence. Studying convert radicalisation using a control group of non-radical converts is essential to better understand what processes or characteristics set those who do radicalise apart.

Kleinmann's 2012 study of 83 Sunni militants in the United States includes 36 converts. Looking at the post-9/11 period, Kleinmann finds that "individual or internal forces, such as identity issues or cognitive function and style, play a much greater role in radicalizing converts than they do for those raised as Muslims". Similar to Van San and in line with Wiktorowicz' 2005 study on Muslim extremism in the West, Kleinmann

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 25.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Van San, "Lost Souls", (2015), p. 54.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

points to the importance of “cognitive openings” prior to radicalisation – (traumatic) personal experiences that can set into motion an introspective period of “religious seeking”.⁷⁷ Kleinmann also notes a higher incidence of mental health issues among the Sunni militants in his sample than among the general population.⁷⁸

Interestingly, Kleinmann is careful to emphasise that convert radicalisation is not solely attributable to individual-level factors. He stressed that “for both converts and non-converts, radicalisation is largely the result of recruitment by militant movements or radical friends and family. Internal mechanisms alone are not sufficient for radicalisation.”⁷⁹ This underlines that convert radicalisation should not be understood as solely the result of individual-level factors and draws attention to scholars who have utilised a wider array of analytical perspectives, in particular social movement theory and social identity theory, to study this phenomenon.

Explanations utilising multiple analytical perspectives

In his 2015 comparative study, Mullins compares jihadi converts in the United Kingdom and the US to non-converts, looking at the situation both before and after 9/11. Mullins finds that the post-9/11 subset of American converts more frequently suffered from mental health issues than the non-convert population.⁸⁰ This interesting finding reinforces the emphasis that previous paragraphs have placed on convert’s personal characteristics as encompassing explanations for why some of them become involved in Islamist militancy. However, Mullins’ study also broadens this analytical focus by drawing attention to the role of socio-demographic variables.

Mullins finds that the same subset of converts conformed “perhaps more than any other group, to the notion that people are drawn to Islamist terrorism as a result of being marginalized in society.”⁸¹ The role of relative socioeconomic deprivation as a factor that may contribute to convert radicalisation has also been noted by other authors.⁸² Interestingly, Mullins’ research shows converts in the United Kingdom to be a less distinct group of individuals. Rather than socioeconomics or mental health related issues, Mullins hypothesises that British converts’ involvement in Islamist violence “might be due to the fact that they are more likely to come into contact with, and/or deliberately targeted for recruitment by extremist networks.”⁸³ Mullins also offers a speculative explanation for the recent increase in convert radicalisation in the United States, which he sees as tied to the growing importance of social media as a “vehicle for terrorist propaganda and recruitment”.⁸⁴ In short, Mullins’ research points to the importance of a combination of individual, group and structural-level (socioeconomic deprivation, social media) factors.

In his study of European jihadi converts, Karagiannis also mentions individual-, group- and structural-level processes as contributing to the radicalisation of at least *some* European jihadi converts. Karagiannis finds that some converts in his sample radicalised as a result of political grievances related to, for instance, the Israeli-

⁷⁷ Kleinmann, “Radicalization of Homegrown Sunni Militants”, (2012), p. 286; Q. Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising: Muslim Extremism in the West* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), pp. 20-21.

⁷⁸ Kleinmann, “Radicalization of Homegrown Sunni Militants” (2012), pp. 287-288.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 279.

⁸⁰ Mullins, “Re-Examining the Involvement of Converts in Islamist Terrorism”, (2015), p. 73.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 76.

⁸² Uhlmann “European Converts to Terrorism”, (2008), pp. 33-34; Krishna, “Radicalisation of Muslim Converts”, (2015).

⁸³ Mullins, “Re-Examining the Involvement of Converts in Islamist Terrorism”, (2015), p. 77.

⁸⁴ Ibid., pp. 77-78.

Palestinian conflict, whereas others were set on the path toward involvement in extremism by experiences with discrimination or the influence of friends and partners with radical views.⁸⁵ His findings also emphasise the role that “inspirational preaching” can play in the radicalisation process, pointing to the potential influence of authority figures with radical or extremist convictions.⁸⁶

The process of convert radicalisation

The research mentioned in the previous paragraphs looked at converts’ personality and background, their social networks and the influence of broader structural or macro-level factors to understand convert radicalisation. As Bartoszewicz argues, however, “conversion to Islam, has an immense impact on the subsequent “being a Muslim”. Therefore, in an attempt to investigate converts’ radicalisation, one needs to look at the conversion stories.”⁸⁷ Thus, improving our understanding of convert radicalisation may be as much about looking at the individuals themselves as the process that was their conversion experience. All the more so since, as Flower and Kleinmann noted in 2013, “how the mechanisms of conversion correlate and intersect with radicalisation is not yet well understood.”⁸⁸

Despite this general lack of insights into whether and how the conversion experience relates to the likeliness of convert radicalisation, two aspects of this debate need to be noted. The first is the absence of evidence for a clear relationship between conversion and radicalisation. Although perhaps an obvious point, it deserves to be emphasised here as several authors stress its absence.⁸⁹ For instance, in their 2014 study involving 25 cases of Canadian converts, Flower and Birkett conclude “that conversion to Islam alone is not a valid or reliable predictive indicator of whether a person is likely to radicalize.”⁹⁰

Secondly, it is as of yet unclear whether those converts who radicalise do so immediately after (or during, or even before) their conversion to Islam. Research findings support different conclusions on this topic. Flower argues that “there is generally a lag phase between the time of religious conversion, a rise in religiosity, the manifestation of radical Islamist inclinations, extremism and finally terrorism.”⁹¹ Contrary to these findings, the cases of female Belgian and Dutch converts who joined the Islamic State imply that conversion and radicalisation were much more closely linked in time. Looking at the women in her sample, Van San concluded that “conversion and subsequent departure for Syria were more often of an impulsive nature.”⁹² If nothing else, these contrarian findings do underline just how difficult it is to speak of convert radicalisation as a singular process or mechanism.

⁸⁵ Karagiannis, “European Converts to Islam”, (2012), p. 112.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Bartoszewicz, “Controversies of Conversions”, (2012), p. 20.

⁸⁸ Kleinmann and Flower, “From Convert to Extremist”, (2013).

⁸⁹ S. Flower and D. Birkett, “(Mis)Understanding Muslim Converts in Canada”, *TSAS Working Paper Series* (Canadian Network for research on Terrorism, Security and Society, 2014), pp. 1-19.

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 13.

⁹¹ Flower, “Muslim Converts and Terrorism”, (2013), p. 9.

⁹² Van San, “Lost Souls”, (2015), p. 54.

5. Conclusion

This Policy Brief set out to provide an introduction to the topic of convert radicalisation by addressing two questions: are converts to Islam disproportionately involved in Islamist extremism and militancy, and what explanations have been put forward for convert radicalisation? Data on the number of converts in Western countries and their involvement in homegrown jihadism and foreign fighting is often lacking, out of date and marred by numerous serious concerns with regard to reliability and impartiality. Nevertheless, the available information does *generally* support the hypothesis of convert overrepresentation in these activities. This is especially so in the case of foreign fighters. What little data was found on converts' involvement in homegrown jihadism provided a more nuanced picture, emphasising that overrepresentation may not be the norm in all Western countries and that it may be a relatively recent development.

Research on why some converts to Islam become involved in Islamist extremism and terrorism stresses the influence of a multitude of factors. Some authors have underlined the importance of distinct personal characteristics and backgrounds. These include a higher likeliness of mental health issues than is found among the general population and a history of problematic or even traumatic life experiences. To some of these individuals, involvement in Islamist extremism and even terrorism appears to offer a newfound sense of identity and belonging as well as a clear sense of purpose that was lacking in their "previous" lives.

Complementing this focus on converts' personalities and backgrounds, other empirical research has drawn attention to group and structural-level explanatory variables. For instance, several authors found that radicalised converts were more likely to have experienced (relative) socioeconomic deprivation. Others highlighted experiences with discrimination and political grievances. At the group-level of analysis, findings pointed to the importance of group dynamics, such as pre-existing social ties to radical or extremist individuals and the role of extremist authority figures. It should come as little surprise that how and why some converts to Islam become involved in radicalism and militancy is as complex and multifaceted a topic as understanding participation in radicalism and terrorism in general.⁹³ One of the questions this raises is how the experiences of converts are *different* from non-converts similarly involved in Islamist militancy. Perhaps most urgently, the present findings underline the need to compare radicalised with non-radicalised converts to see what makes the former stand out.

Finally, the conversion process itself deserves our attention as a potential source of answers for why some converts radicalise. Relatively few studies have looked at this particular aspect and the currently available findings cannot yet provide a clear answer on what factors might make it more likely that the conversion experience leads to the adoption of radical or extremist views. Yet it forms an analytical perspective that deserves more attention, as it complements current efforts to understand convert radicalisation from a personal, social and situational perspective with one that takes a process-oriented approach. It would be very useful to conduct further studies on how the conversion experience of converts who radicalise differs from those who do not. This again underlines that control groups of non-radicalised converts are needed to

⁹³ T. Bjørge, "Conclusions", in T. Bjørge, ed., *Root Causes of Terrorism: Myths, Reality and Ways Forward* (London / New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 257; J. Horgan, "Understanding Terrorist Motivation: A Socio-Psychological Perspective", in M. Ranstorp, ed., *Mapping Terrorism Research: State of the Art, Gaps and Future Directions* (New York / Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), pp. 111-114.

assess what sets those who *do* become involved in Islamist extremism and militancy apart. Hopefully, future research will be able to delve into this particular aspect in more detail.

In general, the studies referred to in this Policy Brief emphasise that understanding convert radicalisation requires a multifaceted analytical approach and a nuanced conceptualisation of the issue. Most converts never become involved in radicalism or militancy. The minority of converts that do radicalise do so for a wide variety of reasons. Rather than seeing radicalised converts as stereotypically damaged persons or as individuals seeking meaning who were preyed upon by recruiters, available insights paint a heterogeneous picture of the processes that can lead to involvement in Islamist militancy. To improve our understanding of this phenomenon, future research should not only be empirically robust but also analytically diverse enough to study the influence of a range of factors present at the individual, group and structural levels of analysis – as well as in the process of conversion itself.

More specifically, the findings discussed in this Policy Brief allow four recommendations for future research to be formulated. These are:

- (I.) Collating more up-to-date and reliable information about the number of converts in Western countries and about the size of the Muslim populations in most countries;
- (II.) Gaining more accurate information (per country) regarding the involvement of Western converts in jihadi related offence and an (ongoing) monitoring of the number of converts among foreign fighters;
- (III.) Developing and empirically testing theories with regard to convert radicalisation as they relate to various levels of analysis;
- (IV.) Assessing how the factors and processes that can lead to converts' involvement in Islamist militancy are *different* from those experienced by non-convert militants in similar settings.

There is an urgent need for more work on this topic. Hopefully, this Policy Brief can make some contribution toward accomplishing that goal.

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The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT) is an independent think and do tank providing multidisciplinary policy advice and practical, solution-oriented implementation support on prevention and the rule of law, two vital pillars of effective counter-terrorism.

ICCT's work focuses on themes at the intersection of countering violent extremism and criminal justice sector responses, as well as human rights related aspects of counter-terrorism. The major project areas concern countering violent extremism, rule of law, foreign fighters, country and regional analysis, rehabilitation, civil society engagement and victims' voices.

Functioning as a nucleus within the international counter-terrorism network, ICCT connects experts, policymakers, civil society actors and practitioners from different fields by providing a platform for productive collaboration, practical analysis, and exchange of experiences and expertise, with the ultimate aim of identifying innovative and comprehensive approaches to preventing and countering terrorism.

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