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Understanding Dutch converts to Islam: On turbulent trajectories and (non-) involvement in jihadist movements

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This study focuses on increasing our understanding of the different pathways converts take during conversion to Islam. It looks specifically at the following research question: “How do the pathways of converts involved in jihadist movements differ from those of converts who are not, in terms of their life prior to Islam, their conversion experience and the form of involvement with the Islamic community after conversion?” This question is addressed using semi-structured interviews with a diverse group of 26 Dutch converts to Islam. Results show that there are many similarities, yet also some differences in the pre-conversion lives of the converts we studied, in how they experienced the conversion itself and their involvement with Islamic communities after their conversion. The differences we found, emerged largely from how the respondents shaped and experienced their lives as Muslims. Here we noted not just the important role of the social milieu in which the converts find themselves, and how their surroundings react to their new identities, but also the influence of their own agency in terms of their reactions (or lack thereof) to perceived injustice and their efforts at self-study. Importantly, our study also highlights the fluidity and heterogeneity of the post-conversion experience. Just as Muslims should not be seen as a homogenous group, so too should care be taken to realise that converts’ outlook on their religion can and does change over time, sometimes showing quite dramatic fluctuations from Salafi-Jihadist to non-believer. We hope that our study provides insights into conversion to Islam in general, that it helps address why some converts become involved with jihadist movements, but also that it underlines the importance of treating converts to Islam not as a potential security threat, but as a diverse group of individuals with different and evolving perceptions of their religion and their roles within it.

Introduction

Converts to Islam form a minority of the Muslim population in Western countries, yet conversion to Islam can no longer be considered an exceptional phenomenon. Schuurman, Grol, and Flower assert that the estimated percentages of converts, as total proportion of the Muslim population, vary greatly per country. These estimated percentages range from 0.3 to 4.5 percent in Germany and 1.4 percent in Denmark to 23 percent in the United States. In the Netherlands, converts are estimated to represent 1.4 to 1.9 percent of the total of approximately one million Dutch Muslims.¹

Although religious conversion, including conversion to Islam, is obviously not a new topic of study within the sociology and psychology of religion, converts to Islam have attracted increasing research attention in recent years. This increase of attention can especially be witnessed in the field of radicalisation studies due to the apparent overrepresentation of converts to Islam in jihadist movements such as the Islamic State (IS).² On the basis of open source data, it is estimated that converts make up 6 to 23 percent of the foreign fighters from various Western European countries. In total, these foreign fighters number approximately 5,000 and allegedly constitute up to 40 percent of the known homegrown jihadists in the US.³ In the Netherlands, it is estimated that 12.9 percent of the 310 Dutch foreign fighters are converts.⁴ The overrepresentation of converts in jihadist movements, both as foreign fighters and 'homegrown' extremists, has raised concerns about converts to Islam as constituting a potential security threat.⁵ Various authors have attempted to explain this overrepresentation, yet despite the numerous explanations that have been offered from a micro- to a macro-level, Schuurman, Grol,

¹ Reinier Bergema and Marion van San, "Waves of The Black Banner: An Exploratory Study on The Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighter Contingent in Syria And Iraq," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 42, no. 7 (2017): pp. 636-61; Bart Schuurman, Peter Grol and Scott Flower, "Converts and Islamist Terrorism: An Introduction," *ICCT Journal* 7, no. 3 (2016).

² See for example Randy Borum and Robert Fein, "The Psychology of Foreign Fighters," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 40, no. 3 (2017): pp. 248-66; Sam 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. 72-85; Schuurman, Grol & Flower, "Converts and Islamist Terrorism."; Lorenzo Vidino and Seamus Hughes, "ISIS in America: From Retweets to Raqqa", Program on Extremism, George Washington University, 2015.

³ Bergema and van San, "Waves of the Black Banner."; Mullins, "Re-Examining the Involvement Of Converts."; Schuurman, Grol & Flower, "Converts and Islamist Terrorism."; Julien van den Elzen. "Radicalisation A Subtype of Religious Conversion?" *Perspectives on Terrorism* 12, no. 1 (2018): pp. 69-80; Vidino and Hughes, "ISIS in America."; Anton Weenink, "De Syriëgangers," *Woerden: Politie – Landelijke Eenheid*, 2019; Gilles Kepel, *Terror in France: The Rise of Jihad In The West* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

⁴ Bergema and van San, "Waves of The Black Banner.". These authors base the estimation of the number of converts among foreign fighters on a sample of 217 Dutch foreign fighters; according to the AIVD the total number of Dutch foreign fighters is 310, see

<https://www.aivd.nl/onderwerpen/terrorisme/dreiging/uitreizigers-terugkeerders-en-thuisblijvers>.

⁵ Janny Groen, "Jihadgangers Zijn Relatief Vaak Bekeerling; 45 Procent Is Van Marokkaanse Komaf," *De Volkskrant*, 5 July 2017; Emmanuel Karagiannis, "European Converts To Islam: Mechanisms Of Radicalization," *Politics, Religion, And Ideology* 13, no. 1 (2012): pp. 99-113; Michael Noonan and Phly Khalil, "North American Foreign Fighters," *Journal For Deradicalization* 1 (2014): pp.66-96; Robin Simcox and Emily Dyer, "The Role of Converts in Al-Qa'ida-Related Terrorism Offenses in the United States," *CTC Sentinel* 6, no.3 (2008): pp. 20-24; Milena Uhlmann, "European Converts to Islam," *Middle East Forum* 15, no. 3 (2008): pp. 31-37; Milena Uhlmann, "France's Challenges for Working Out a Coherent Strategy Against Violent Radicalization and Terrorism. A Broad (and Incomplete) Outline," *Sicherheitspolitik-Blog.de*, 1 January 2016; Martijn Van Beek, "Bekeerling is Extra Gevoelig voor Jihad," *Trouw*, 16 August 2017; Tom Van Ham, Lieselot Scholten, and Anton Van Wijk, *Radicalisering in de Gemeente Arnhem: Resultaten van Onderzoek onder Mentoren, Welzijnswerkers en Jongeren* (Arnhem: Bureau Beke, 2016); Note also the prevalence of converts recorded Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, Seamus Hughes, and Bennett Clifford, "American Jihadists in Syria and Iraq," *The George Washington University Program on Extremism*, February 2018.

and Flower call for a better understanding and hence more research on the overrepresentation of converts in Jihadi groups by using primary data.

Apart from raising questions, focusing on converts from the perspective of radicalisation has justly raised some critical eyebrows, mainly due to the generalisations and the negative stereotyping that can follow from it. As Bartoszewicz argues, there is no ‘the convert’, but there are many different converts with diverse perspectives on Islam. Radical converts are only a very small minority within a minority. As a result, she rightly asserts that focusing on converts as a security risk obstructs viewing the possibilities for converts as allies in countering extremism.⁶ Similarly, stereotypical images of converts as ‘the other’ can stand in the way of the bridge that converts could form between non-Muslims and Muslims from Muslim families.⁷ While keeping these critical notes in mind, this study aims at increasing our understanding of the different pathways in Islam that converts take by answering the following research question: How do the pathways of Dutch converts to Islam involved in jihadist movements differ from those of Dutch converts who are not, in terms of their life prior to Islam, their conversion experience and the form of involvement with the Islamic community after conversion?

This question will be answered on the basis of semi-structured interviews with a diverse group of Dutch converts. Before elaborating on the research methodology, the next section offers an overview of the terms used and the available research on involvement in jihadist and extremist movements in relation to converts to Islam in Western countries; thereby, pointing at the void that this study aims to fill. Thereafter, the focus shifts to the results of this study, after which the conclusions will be presented.

Divergent pathways within Islam

What is already known about involvement in extremist and jihadist movements? And how has the involvement of some converts in jihadist movements been explained? This section addresses these questions, but will first elaborate on the central concepts in this study on the basis of relevant literature.

Converts, pathways and involvement in jihadist movements

The central concepts in this study are converts, pathways, and (non)involvement in jihadist movements. Regarding the concept ‘convert’, studies on conversion acknowledge the evident fact that conversion is not only reserved for turning from no or one religion to another religion, but that an intra-faith reorientation can also be considered conversion, for example, if one changes from Sufism to Salafism.⁸ This study, however, takes a narrow view of conversion and defines a ‘convert’ to Islam as a person who turns to Islam while having been raised without religion or in another religious tradition other than Islam.

⁶ Monika Gabriela Bartoszewicz. “Controversies of Conversions: The Potential Terrorist Threat of European Converts to Islam,” PhD diss., University of St. Andrews, 2013b.

⁷ Thomas Sealy, “Making the ‘Other’ from ‘Us’: The Representation of British Converts to Islam in Mainstream British Newspapers,” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 37, no. 2, (2017): pp. 196-210.

⁸ Thomas Precht, *Home grown terrorism and Islamist radicalisation in Europe: From conversion to terrorism: An assessment of the factors influencing violent Islamist extremism and suggestions for counter radicalisation measures* (Copenhagen: Danish Ministry of Justice, 2007); van den Elzen, “Radicalisation a Subtype of Religious Conversion?”

In the study of political radicalisation, violent extremism, and terrorism, it has become commonplace to speak of 'pathways to participation', thus emphasising the heterogeneity of factors and processes at play, rather than focusing on particular ideological, personal, or socioeconomic characteristics of individual terrorists as explanatory 'profiles'.⁹ Similarly, in this contribution the term 'pathways' refers to the many paths that converts can take throughout their lives, towards their discovery of Islam, within Islam as well as away from Islam. A pathway can involve any direction on a scale from linear to circular. The term pathway thus allows for a more dynamic perspective of the life stories of converts and the place of conversion to Islam in their lives.

Finally, this study speaks of '(non-) involvement in jihadist movements' rather than 'radicalisation' (or a lack thereof) as a nuanced way of circumventing some of the problematic issues that we encountered during our fieldwork and that are discussed in literature on radicalisation and violent extremism. Ideological radicalisation does not always lead to participation in actual acts of violence and even joining extremist or terrorist organisations does not necessarily mean that all participants will themselves (directly) participate in the commission of violent offenses.¹⁰ Therefore, various scholars distinguish between radicalisation of beliefs and the radicalisation of actions.¹¹ Moreover, it should be emphasised that violent extremism can also take place in absence of radical beliefs.¹² Hence, the variety of beliefs, motivations, and actions of those respondents that either supported violent extremist groups such as IS, actively participated in them (or tried to), or travelled to Syria and Iraq, is better captured by the description 'involvement in jihadist movements' than it is by 'radicalisation'. This is so because the former does not necessarily point to extremist beliefs as a motive and because, besides the possibility of actively taking part in violent extremist actions, 'involvement' is also broad enough to include supporting violent extremist groups and expressing radical thoughts and actions.

In sum, in this study the respondents will be categorised as 'involved in jihadist movements' (IIJM), when they have been, or still are, involved with such movements, out of conviction or for other reasons, whether actively or in a merely supportive role. While most of the other converts in this study could—generally from an outside (etic) perspective, and in some cases even from an insider (emic) perspective—be characterised as 'moderate' Muslims, some respondents have a more orthodox, Salafi orientation. Still,

⁹ Borum and Fein, *The Psychology of Foreign Fighters*; John Horgan, "From Profiles to Pathways and Roots to Routes: Perspectives from Psychology on Radicalization into Terrorism," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 618, no. 1 (2008): pp. 80-94; John Horgan, "Psychology of Terrorism: Introduction to the Special Issue," *American Psychologist* 72, no. 3, (2017): pp. 199-204; Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, "Understanding Political Radicalization: The Two-Pyramids Model," *American Psychologist* 72, No. 3 (2017): pp. 205-216; Stijn Sieckelinck et al., "Transitional Journeys into and out of Extremism. A biographical approach," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 42, no. 7 (2017): pp. 662-682; Basia Spalek, "Disconnection and Exclusion: Pathways to Radicalisation?" in *Islamic Political Radicalism: A European Perspective*, ed. Tahir Abbas (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), pp. 192-206;

¹⁰ Bart Schuurman and Max Taylor, "Reconsidering Radicalization: Fanaticism and the Link between Ideas and Violence," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 12, no. 1 (2018): pp. 3-22; Paul Gill and John Horgan, "Who Were the Volunteers? The Shifting Sociological and Operational Profile of 1240 Provisional Irish Republican Army Members," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 25, no. 3 (2013): pp. 435-56.

¹¹ See for instance: Mohammed Hafez and Creighton Mullins. "The Radicalization Puzzle: A Theoretical Synthesis of Empirical Approaches to Homegrown Extremism," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 38, no. 11, (2015): pp. 958-75; McCauley and Moskalenko, "Understanding Political Radicalization."; Michael Zekulin. "Endgames: Improving Our Understanding of Homegrown Terrorism," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 39, no. 1 (2016): pp. 46-66.

¹² John Horgan. "Discussion point: The end of radicalization?" START, 28 September 2012.

due to the variety in their religious perspectives we have chosen to simply coin them as 'non-involved in jihadist movements' (NIJM).

Explaining (non-)involvement

Research on radicalisation and involvement in jihadism and violent extremism such as terrorism has produced a wide range of factors to understand and explain involvement in jihadist and other radical or extremist groups.¹³ A common distinction is made between, on the one hand, push factors, and on the other hand, pull factors. Whereas push factors push people away from their previously held beliefs, pull factors relate to what lures them into radical and extremist groups.¹⁴

Push factors can be located on the individual, group, and societal level. On the individual level, experiences of personal problems (e.g. problems at home, or school and mental health issues), personal exclusion, existential questions, and a search for meaning, identity, or a thrill, economic or relative deprivation, and frustration are regularly mentioned as push factors. Factors that could push an individual towards involvement on a group level, principally involve in- and outgroup processes, such as perceptions of stereotyping, group exclusion, and discrimination. On a societal level, wars, injustice, and governmental violence or suppression are considered major factors that can form a push towards involvement in radical and extremist groups.¹⁵

On the pull side, factors have been identified on the same three levels: the individual, group, and societal levels. Regarding the individual level, being involved in radicalism and extremism can offer a sense of meaning or a sense of 'significance'.¹⁶ On the group level, important pull factors are the sense of belonging that a radical or extremist group can offer and the felt need to defend this group,¹⁷ and charismatic leaders.¹⁸ On a societal level, important pull factors are propaganda of jihadist groups, which is spread by the

¹³ Bart Schuurman, *Becoming a European Homegrown Jihadist: A Multilevel Analysis of Involvement in the Dutch Hofstadgroup, 2002-2005* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018).

¹⁴ Marita La Palm, "Re-Purposing the Push-Pull Model to Describe Signature Patterns of Terrorist Disengagement by Group: A Validation Study," *Journal for Deradicalization* 12, (2017): pp. 85-118.

¹⁵ See for example: Tore Bjørgo and John Horgan, *Leaving Terrorism Behind: Individual and Collective Disengagement* (New York: Routledge, 2009); Allard Feddes, Lars Nickolson, and Bertjan Doosje, *Triggerfactoren in het radicaliseringsproces* (Amsterdam: Expertise-unit Sociale Stabiliteit, Universiteit van Amsterdam, 2015); Mohammed Hafez and Creighton Mullins, "The Radicalization Puzzle: A Theoretical Synthesis of Empirical Approaches to Homegrown Extremism," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 38, No. 11, (2015) pp. 958-975; Horgan, "Psychology of Terrorism."; Alex Schmid, "Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review," *ICCT Journal* (March, 2013); Tinka Veldhuis and Jorgen Staun, *Islamist Radicalisation: A Root Cause Model* (The Hague: Clingendael, 2009);

¹⁶ Lorne Dawson and Amarnath Amarasingam, "Talking to Foreign Fighters: Insights into the Motivations for Hijrah to Syria and Iraq," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 40, no. 3 (2016): pp. 191-210; Fiore Geelhoed, *Striving for Allah: Purification and Resistance among Fundamentalist Muslims in the Netherlands* (The Hague, NL: Eleven Publishing, 2014); Arie W. Kruglanski et al., "To the Fringe and Back: Violent Extremism and the Psychology of Deviance," *American Psychologist* 72, no. 3, (2017): pp. 217-30.

¹⁷ Borum and Fein, "The Psychology of Foreign Fighters."

¹⁸ See for example: Quintan Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising: Muslim Extremism in the West* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005); Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

internet and through social media channels,¹⁹ and the cultural context of late modernity that can foster nostalgic desires for lost securities.²⁰

Studies that explicitly explain non-involvement in jihadist movements are relatively rare. This seems to be largely due to the fact that most studies on radicalisation and terrorism explain why (some) people do radicalise and do not seek to explain what prevents or stops radicalisation. Moreover, radicalisation studies generally fail to include non-radicalised individuals as a 'control group'. Nonetheless, there is a body of work evolving that focuses on 'resilience' and 'protective' and 'promotive' factors to radicalisation in general, and that draws lessons from studies on 'disengagement'.²¹

Recent studies on protective factors point out that these factors are not always simply the opposite of the factors contributing to radicalisation.²² Instead, protective factors foster resilience by forming "buffers or mechanisms against undesirable behaviour", as Gielen and Sieckelinck argue.²³ Similar to the factors identified to explain the occurrence of radicalisation and terrorism, protective factors include factors on the individual, group, and societal level and can offer protection against radicalisation in terms of attitudes or behaviour as presented by Lösel et al. through a systematic review of quantitative studies.²⁴ On the individual level, the previous studies in their review have identified certain personal values and practices, personal traits and circumstances as offering protection against religious radicalisation. These personal values and practices entail value complexity, acceptance of police as a legitimate state actor, commitment to the law, attributing little importance to religion (in an Indonesian study), or conversely, showing piety (in a study from the UK). Personal traits that have been identified as protective factors are self-control and being empathetic. Personal circumstances that can form a buffer against adopting religiously radical attitudes are illness or depression, a higher educational level, and adverse life events.²⁵

On the group level, the protective factors regarding religious radicalisation identified range from having parents with an appreciative parenting style to having family members in militant groups, owning a house, and having an extensive social network. On the societal level, Lösel et al. mention integration into society, low social capital, and being a first-generation migrant as protective factors.²⁶ As a response to acknowledging

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¹⁹ Fiore Geelhoed et al., "Hoe IS-glossy Dabiq harten van westerse moslims wint," *Tijdschrift over Cultuur en Criminaliteit* 7, no. 2, (2017): pp. 81-98.

²⁰ Jock Young, *The Vertigo of Late Modernity* (London: SAGE Publications, 2016); Fiore Geelhoed, *Striving for Allah: Purification and Resistance among Fundamentalist Muslims in the Netherlands* (The Hague, NL: Eleven Publishing, 2014).

²¹ Amy-Jane Gielen and Stijn Sieckelinck, *Protective and Promotive Factors Building Resistance against Violent Radicalisation* (RAN Issue Paper: RAN Centre of Excellence, 2018); Lösel, King, Bender, and Jugl, "Protective Factors against Extremism and Violent Radicalization," *International Journal of Developmental Science*, 2018.

²² Ibid.

²³ Gielen and Sieckelinck, *Protective and Promotive Factors* (RAN Issue Paper: RAN Centre of Excellence, 2018);

²⁴ Friedrich Lösel et al., "Protective Factors against Extremism and Violent Radicalization: A Systematic Review of Research," *International Journal of Developmental Science* 12, no. 1-2 (2018) distinguish between individual, family, school, peer group, and community factors.

²⁵ Lösel et al., "Protective Factors against Extremism and Violent Radicalization: A Systematic Review of Research." See also Geelhoed, *Striving for Allah*.

²⁶ Lösel et al., "Protective Factors against Extremism and Violent Radicalization: A Systematic Review of Research." The conclusion that low social capital is a protective factor forms a contrast with a qualitative study on radicalisation among Turkish Dutch youngsters by Richard Staring et al., *Ontwikkelingen in de maatschappelijke positie van Turkse Nederlanders. Risico's op criminaliteit en radicalisering?* (The Hague: Boom/Lemma, 2014). These authors assert that forms of social capital associated with being part of the

the importance of such protective factors, Gielen and Sieckelinck argue that resilience can be fostered by strengthening non-radical forms of religious knowledge, chances to participate in society, contributing to family support, finding autonomy, developing better social coping skills and democratic ways to express (critical) opinions.²⁷

Explaining (non-)involvement among converts to Islam

In addition, there is an emerging body of work that focuses on explaining the involvement of converts in jihadist movements. Schuurman, Grol, and Flower distinguish between theoretical and empirical work on this matter and provide an overview of recent empirical studies. In this section we follow their lead, since their review is still largely up to date. Most of these studies are exclusively focused on radicalised groups. The studies of Bartoszewicz form exceptions, because she includes non-radicalised and radicalised converts to Islam.²⁸

With regard to the individual level of analysis, several studies on radicalised converts point to the troubled, and sometimes even traumatic, pasts of these individuals and how that appears to have pushed them towards radicalisation.²⁹ Kleinmann, for example, compared converts and non-converts in a sample of 83 cases of Sunni militants in the US. He argues that multiple personal problems such as traumatic experiences and identity issues contributed to a cognitive opening and radicalisation, more so for the converted than for the non-converted militants in his sample.³⁰ Similarly, Mullins concludes in his comparative study that the converts he studied in the US had more mental health issues than the non-converted Muslims in his sample. The identity, belonging, and meaning that jihadist groups offer, have been used to lure radicalised converts, making up for lack of these feelings in their troubled pasts,³¹—even sometimes offering a redemption for these pasts.³²

On the group level, one particular aspect of group processes has been discussed in recent studies to explain the radicalisation of converts; namely, contact with members of

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 Turkish-Dutch community appear to explain the underrepresentation of this group in jihadist movements and could thus be seen as a protective factor against radicalisation.

²⁷ Gielen and Sieckelinck, "Protective and Promotive."

²⁸ Monika Gabriela Bartoszewicz. "Controversies of Conversions: The Potential Terrorist Threat of European Converts to Islam," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 7, no. 3, (2013a): pp. 17-29; Bartoszewicz. "Controversies of Conversions," 2013b; Similarly: Fiore Geelhoed, *Purification and Resistance: Global meanings of Islamic Fundamentalism in the Netherlands*, PhD diss., (Rotterdam: Erasmus University Rotterdam, 2012); Geelhoed, *Striving for Allah* includes these two different groups of converts, but her study also involves 'born-again' Muslims in Islam – individuals from Muslim families who turned to orthodox, radical or extremist interpretations of Islam – and this study speaks of 'radical conversion' for both groups, while offering similar conclusions concerning what inspires converts and born-again Muslims to radicalize.

²⁹ Brian Gibson, *In Bad Faith: The Link between Religious Conversion and Violent Extremism*, PhD diss., (Monterey, CA: Naval Postgraduate School, 2018); Marion van San, "Lost Souls Searching for Answers? Belgian and Dutch Converts Joining the Islamic State," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 5, (2015a): pp. 47-56; Marion van San, "Striving in the Way of God: Justifying Jihad by Young Belgian and Dutch Muslims," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 38, no. 5, (2015): pp. 328-42.

³⁰ Mullins, "Re-Examining the Involvement of Converts", 2015 conducted a comparative study of 365 individuals in the US, of which 75 are converts, and 427 individuals in the UK, of which 47 are converts.

³¹ Monika Gabriela Bartoszewicz. "Controversies of Conversions: The Potential Terrorist Threat of European Converts to Islam," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 7, no. 3, (2013a): pp. 17-29. See also: Wim Meeus, "Why do Young People Become Jihadists? A Theoretical Account on Radical Identity Development," *European Journal of Developmental Psychology* 12, No. 3, (2015): pp. 275-81 for a theoretical paper for this argument.

³² van San, "Lost Souls Searching for Answers? Belgian and Dutch Converts Joining the Islamic State."; Marion van San, "Striving in the Way of God: Justifying Jihad by Young Belgian and Dutch Muslims."

jihadi networks. These studies come to different conclusions as to whether this contact affects converts more than non-converts, depending on the specific country (USA vs. UK), and seemingly on how such “contact” has been operationalised and the particular sample of cases. On the basis of these UK and USA samples of both converts and non-converts involved in Islamist terrorism, Mullins concludes that the UK converts appear to be especially influenced by a distinctive feature of the context in the UK: the “jihadi subcultures” and networks, that Mullins argues to be largely concentrated around four “regional hotspots”.³³ However, for his USA sample Mullins did not find such distinctive group processes for converts and non-converts. Similarly, Kleinmann emphasises the importance of recruitment processes and charismatic leaders for USA converts, yet concludes that in the 83 cases he studied, these group processes were equally important for explaining the radicalisation of the non-converts.³⁴ Looking at previous ties with radical groups, however, Gibson argues that for his sample of 38 radicalised USA converts such previous ties with radical groups did prove to be a significant factor in explaining their radicalisation.³⁵

On the societal level of explanation, deprivation, the internet, and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict have been presented as major explanations for the radicalisation of converts. Socio-economic deprivation, relative or absolute, came forward as a factor that especially helped to explain the radicalisation of the US converts in Mullins’ 2015 study. Another explanation that he presents for the radicalisation of converts in the USA concerns the relative absence of radical hotspots, due to which a relatively larger proportion of the radicalisation processes takes place online, although this appears to be the case for both converts and non-converts.³⁶ Finally, grievances over the conflict between Israel and Palestine seemingly contributed significantly to radicalisation in the cases of converts that Karagiannis studied.³⁷

Bartoszewicz brings individual, group level, and societal factors together in a somewhat different manner with a central focus on the nexus of identity and belonging. She conducted 30 in-depth interviews with non-radicalised and radicalised European converts to Islam and participant observations in Scotland. On the basis of the conversion narratives that she gathered, she concludes that (the interpretation of) experiences during the process of ‘becoming a Muslim’—such as reactions to their conversion and the perception of the position of Muslims in broader society – seem to explain the path that the converts in her study take to ‘being a Muslim’. This study indicates that a radical path becomes more likely when conversion coincides with a rejection of the convert’s former identity, social environment and culture, and a sense of not belonging and being rejected by the society they live in.³⁸

Besides these empirically validated explanations, Schuurman, Grol, and Flower present a number of literature-derived explanations that appear to lack a (solid) empirical basis, but that are nonetheless presented as potentially insightful ways for understanding convert radicalisation. One of such explanation concerns the higher vulnerability of

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³³ Mullins, “Re-Examining the Involvement of Converts,” p. 77.

³⁴ Scott Matthew Kleinmann, “Radicalization of Homegrown Sunni Militants in the United States: Comparing Converts and Non-Converts,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 35, no. 4, (2012): pp. 278-97.

³⁵ Gibson, “In Bad Faith,” 2018; conducted a study of 38 radicalized converts in the US who put their radical beliefs into radical action.

³⁶ Mullins, “Re-Examining the Involvement of Converts,” p. 77.

³⁷ Karagiannis, “European Converts.”

³⁸ Bartoszewicz, “Controversies of Conversions.”; Monika Gabriela Bartoszewicz, *Controversies of Conversions: The Potential Terrorist Threat of European Converts to Islam*, PhD diss. (University of St. Andrews, 2013b). A question that remains, however, is how these experiences relate to the experiences of non-converted Muslims who radicalize.

converts due to their usually low (initial) knowledge of Islam and the so-called “converts’ zeal” that Schuurman et al. define as “the desire to show dedication to a newfound faith by embracing it in a particularly fanatical and literal fashion”.³⁹

A critical note on the explanatory power of the factors at hand

These potential explanatory factors for involvement in jihadist movements in general, and for converts in particular, raise a couple of important issues. First of all, many of the factors presented are common factors that touch the lives of many people, such as personal problems and socio-economic deprivation⁴⁰. Yet, most people who deal with such problems and feelings of deprivation do not become involved in jihadist movements. In addition, and possibly as a consequence of the common nature of these factors, some of them, such as personal problems, are also mentioned as explanatory factors for conversion in general,⁴¹ for crime⁴², and for several other social issues.⁴³ Moreover, some factors that have been presented as fostering radicalisation have equally been put forward as protective factors, such as adverse life events and low social capital. Therefore, it is necessary to remain critical of the explanatory power of these factors, and instead be aware of the contextual nature and complexity of processes of radicalisation (and conversion, crime, etc.) and hence the necessary complex interplay of a variety of factors that can bring radicalisation and/or involvement in jihadist movements about in particular social contexts.⁴⁴

Moreover, the overview of factors purportedly relevant to understanding converts’ involvement in jihadist movements implies that there are few explanations which are truly specific to converts to Islam. This makes one wonder if efforts to understand the involvement in jihadist movements of converts and non-converts should draw on specific explanatory frameworks to begin with. The claim of various scholars that radicalisation could be viewed as a form of ‘radical conversion’ and that lessons could be learned from studies of conversion⁴⁵ appears to further argue against seeing a strict distinction between converts and non-converts when it comes to extremist and terrorist movements.

A second observation that can be made, following earlier work by Schuurman, Grol and Flower, is that only one of the above-mentioned studies has made an explicit comparison between non-radicalised converts to Islam and radicalised converts. Similarly, there is little research in which non-radicalised populations are compared with radicalised

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³⁹ Borum and Fein, “The Psychology of Foreign Fighters,” pp. 10-1.

⁴⁰ Ibid, also make this argument.

⁴¹ See also John Lofland and Rodney Stark, “Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective,” *American Sociological Review* 30, no. 6 (December, 1965): pp. 862-75; Lewis Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993); Fenggang Yang and Andrew Abel, “Sociology of Religious Conversion,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, eds. Lewis Rambo and Charles Farhadian (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2014) pp. 140-63.

⁴² Staring, et al., “Ontwikkelingen in de Maatschappelijke Positie van Turkse Nederlanders.”; Feddes, Nickolson, and Doosje, *Triggerfactoren in het Radicaliseringsproces*.

⁴³ See: Staring et al., “Ontwikkelingen in de Maatschappelijke Positie van Turkse Nederlanders.”; Feddes, Nickolson and Doosje, *Triggerfactoren in het Radicaliseringsproces*;

⁴⁴ See for instance: Geelhoed, *Striving for Allah*; Staring et al. “Ontwikkelingen in de Maatschappelijke Positie van Turkse Nederlanders.”

⁴⁵ Neil Ferguson and Eve Binks. “Understanding Radicalization and Engagement in Terrorism through Religious Conversion Motifs,” *Journal of Strategic Security* 8, no. 1 (2015): pp. 16-26; Geelhoed, *Striving for Allah*, 2014; Van den Elzen, “Radicalisation.”

populations in general.⁴⁶ It is this latter deficiency in particular which the current study aims to help address. By comparing converts who are, or have been, involved in jihadist movements with those who are not, a better understanding of any 'convert-specific' explanations for involvement in jihadist militancy can be garnered.

Methodology

This study is based on unique comparative research in which converts who are not involved and those who are or have been involved in jihadist movements are compared in terms of their lives prior to conversion to Islam, their conversion experiences, and their involvement in the Islamic community after conversion. This is done through a qualitative approach, centred on in-depth life-history interviews which are subsequently transcribed and analysed. This research design provides detailed, first-hand perspectives on converts to Islam and their potential involvement in militancy that, given research on extremism and terrorism's enduring reliance on literature reviews, allows it to provide unique insights into this emerging topic of research.⁴⁷

Semi-structured interviews

For this study, semi-structured interviews were held with 26 converts to Islam in the period between February 2017 and May 2018. The interviews were guided by a topic list based on the research question, and inspired by previous research by Geelhoed and Staring, as well as by Flower and Birkett.⁴⁸ The topics covered the personal backgrounds of the respondents, their youth, their discovery of Islam, the reactions of their social environment to their conversion, their experience of being a Muslim in the Netherlands, their religious development as a Muslim, the meaning that Islam has (had) for them, and their views on radicalisation and the alleged overrepresentation of converts among Western foreign fighters.

All interviews were conducted on a completely voluntary basis and with verbally-given informed consent. The interviews took place at the homes of the respondents, in offices, and meeting rooms at universities, or in public places such as coffee shops. No fee was offered. Usually, these interviews took place one-on-one with the exception of two conversations where two researchers were present. The average length of the interviews came to a little over three hours. Although one interview per respondent was the norm, a number of respondents were interviewed twice to accommodate their agenda's or because the conversation became especially lengthy. All interviews have been tape-recorded and have been transcribed ad verbatim. To ensure the privacy and safety of all respondents, none of their names are used in this study, nor are any other identifying characteristics.

⁴⁶ See Frank Buijs, Froukje Demant, Atef Hamdy. "Strijders van eigen bodem. Radicale en democratische moslims in Nederland," (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006).

Dawson and Amarasingam. "Talking to Foreign Fighters."

and Geelhoed, *Striving for Allah*; for some exceptions regarding radicalization of Muslims.

⁴⁷ Schuurman, Bart, "Research on Terrorism, 2007-2016: A Review of Data, Methods, and Authorship," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 1, no. 16 (2018).

⁴⁸ Geelhoed, *Striving for Allah*; Fiore Geelhoed, and Richard Staring, 'Nooit Nederlander genoeg': Turks-Nederlandse jongeren over hun sociaal-culturele posities, wereldbeelden en attitudes ten opzichte van (religieus geïnspireerd) geweld (Den Haag: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2015), pp. 164-224; Scott Flower and Deborah Birkett, "(Mis)Understanding Muslim Converts in Canada: A Critical Discussion of Muslim Converts in the Contexts of Security and Society," TSAS Working Paper Series, No. 14-06, 1-20 (July, 2014); personal communication between Bart Schuurman and Scott Flower.

Selection and overview of the respondents

The aim was to select a diverse group of converts in terms of orientation within Islam and involvement with jihadist movements, as well as gender, and age and moment of conversion. The 26 respondents were approached in different ways. Twelve of them were contacted through networks of the principal researchers (Geelhoed and Staring) and the initiator of this project (Schoorman). The introduction to five of them ran through the convert network of a mosque that is known as being a Salafi mosque. Fourteen other respondents were approached in the field: one through courts, one in a youth centre, one in a shop, three on a convert day, five in two different mosques, and three through snowballing.

Among the respondents were twelve men and fourteen women. Their ages at the time of the interview varied between 21 and 52 years. The age of conversion varied between the ages 12 or 13⁴⁹ and 31, and between 1995 and 2017.

Nine of the respondents, among them both men and women, fall within the category 'involved in jihadist movements'. Six of them were so at some point in the past, while three still called themselves Salafi-Jihadists⁵⁰ at the time of the interviews; although, none of them said that they had (fully) supported the so-called Islamic State (IS). Their involvement took different forms: from being (a like-minded partner of) an active supporter or facilitator of jihadi movements—such as in Syria and Iraq and al-Qaeda—to having been part of a group that has been convicted due to its jihadist character, actively promoting a jihadist discourse online and/or in social settings, or actively engaging in jihadist violence oneself. Two of the respondents had travelled to Syria and came back after spending time there with Jihadist groups. Another one of these nine respondents travelled as far as Turkey, but had a change of heart before crossing the Syrian border and came back.

Sixteen respondents had not been involved in jihadist movements. From an etic perspective, they could be labelled as mainstream or moderate Muslims; a couple of them could be considered to be or have been orthodox 'Salafis'.⁵¹ The one remaining respondent of the 26 that were interviewed, occupies a position somewhere in between these two groups. While he admits to having been a Salafi and very close to becoming radicalised and traveling to Syria in the early days of the civil war that erupted there in 2011, he never actually became fully radicalized nor involved with jihadist groups and now presents himself as a moderate Muslim.

It should be noted that these etic classifications are – despite their functionality for this study – somewhat artificial and not wholly unproblematic. From an emic perspective, that is, as seen by the respondents themselves, the dominant self-label is simply 'Muslim' and, in addition, the respondents used the term 'convert' to characterise themselves. While probing did reveal an identification or sympathy of some for orthodox interpretations of 'Salafism', 'involved in jihadist movements', is a fully etic label that we constructed on the basis of our analysis.

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⁴⁹ CM2, CF7, CF9, CF13, CF20, CM22, CM24, CM25 and CM26 mentioned their current age and how long they have been Muslim or they estimated their year of conversion, due to which the exact age at the time of conversion remains unclear.

⁵⁰ For a detailed analysis of this term, see: Shiraz Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea* (London: Hurst, 2016).

⁵¹ Ibid.

Table 1 offers an overview of the respondents and their main characteristics as seen by the researchers. The label 'CF' denotes 'Convert Female', whereas 'CM' means 'Convert Male'. No precise age at the time of the interview and conversion date is given to enhance the anonymisation of the data. The table further records whether the respondents can be classified as 'involved in jihadist movements' (IIJM) or 'non-involved in the jihadist movements' (NIIJM), both before the interview took place and at that particular point in time. For additional clarity, the IIJM-respondents have been made bold.

Responder	Age at interview	Age at conversion	IIJM/NIIJM in the past	IIJM/NIIJM at time of interview	Conversion period
CF1	Early 20s	18	NIIJM	NIIJM	2012-2015
CM2	Early 30s	12-13	IIJM	NIIJM (ex-Muslim)	Pre 9/11
CM3	Late 20s	19	IIJM	IIJM	2008-2011
CF4	Early 20s	21	NIIJM	NIIJM	2012-2015
CM5	Early 20s	18	In between	NIIJM	2012-2015
CF6	Mid 20s	15	IIJM	IIJM	2004-2007
CF7	Early 30s	13-14	IIJM	NIIJM	Pre 9/11
CF8	Late 20s	21	NIIJM	NIIJM	2008-2011
CF9	Early 20s	15-16	NIIJM	NIIJM	2008-2011
CF10	Early 20s	19	NIIJM	NIIJM	2016-2018
CF11	Early 20s	22	NIIJM	NIIJM	2016-2018
CF12	Late 20s	27	NIIJM	NIIJM	2012-2015
CF13	Early 30s	27-28	NIIJM	NIIJM	2012-2015
CF14	Early 30s	29	NIIJM	NIIJM	2016-2018
CM15	Early 20s	16	IIJM	NIIJM	2008-2011
CM16	Late 20s	26-27	NIIJM	NIIJM	2016-2018
CM17	Early 20s	15	NIIJM	NIIJM	2008-2011
CM18	Late 20s	17	IIJM	NIIJM	2004-2007
CM19	Mid 20s	17	IIJM	IIJM	2008-2011
CF20	Mid 20s	13-14	IIJM	NIIJM	2004-2007
CF21	Early 20s	17	IIJM	NIIJM (ex-Muslim)	2012-2015
CM22	Mid 40s	22-23	NIIJM	NIIJM	Pre 9/11
CF23	Early 50s	31	NIIJM	NIIJM	Pre 9/11
CM24	Late 20s	28-29	NIIJM	NIIJM	2016-2018
CM25	Early 20s	21-22	NIIJM	NIIJM	2016-2018
CM26	Late 30s	37-38	NIIJM	NIIJM	2016-2018

Table 1. An overview of the respondents

Data analysis and limitations

The interview transcripts have been analysed in the ATLAS.ti software package by applying different coding strategies. Prior to the analysis, a modest number of overarching thematic codes have been developed on the basis of theory as well as the topic list. When useful, these thematic codes have been further refined during the process of analysis. In addition, open codes have been used to be able to also work in a more inductive way. This resulted in hundreds of codes that have been grouped and, if necessary, merged to come to a more abstract overview of the respondents' narratives, experiences with, and lives prior to Islam.

The research design of this qualitative study has limitations that had to be taken into consideration when conducting the interviews, analysing the data, and writing this paper. First of all, this being a qualitative study that focuses on twenty-six converts to Islam in the Netherlands, leads to the obvious limitation that the findings cannot simply be generalised to all Dutch converts, let alone those in other countries and cultural contexts. Nonetheless, theoretical generalisations can be made on the basis of this study that could lead to new questions or hypotheses for future comparative and/or possibly quantitative research.

Secondly, by focusing solely on converts themselves and on semi-structured interviews as a method, there was no room for triangulation, other than researcher triangulation.⁵² Ideally, we would also have spoken to people in the respondents' close environment, such as parents or (former) partners, and used a variety of research methods, such as a combination of interviews with observations or the content analysis of court files.⁵³ Such an extensive research design was at this point in time not feasible. Choices had to be made and we opted for speaking with more respondents to be able to capture a fuller image of the various pathways that converts to Islam take.

Nonetheless, this sole focus on interviewing converts themselves may have affected the validity of the research findings. This is less of a problem for the parts where we are primarily interested in the respondents' own experiences (such as regarding their conversion experience and the meaning that Islam and their Islamic community have for them) because for those matters, their stories and perceptions are the very thing that we are after. However, when it comes to their life prior to Islam and their involvement in the Islamic community, the lack of triangulation could contribute to less valid answers. This could occur, on the one hand, because research on religious conversion has confirmed that converts tend to present an overly grim picture of their past lives due to the contrast that they experience in relation to their life after conversion.⁵⁴ On the other hand, especially regarding their involvement in Islamic groups, the respondents could give socially desirable answers; for example, by downplaying their role in jihadist movements. Both of these potentially problematic issues point to the necessity of not simply taking all answers at face value.

We have tried to resolve the issues raised by the lack of triangulation by carefully probing the respondents and through spending time on the interviews. By taking the time to tease out the respondents' full stories and by asking for more information and concrete

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⁵² Triangulation as a result of having multiple researchers working on the same project. See: Jeanine Evers, *Kwalitatieve Analyse: Kunst én Kunde* (Amsterdam: Boom Lemma uitgevers, 2015), p. 138.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Meredith B. McGuire, *Religion: The Social Context* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2002).

examples of what the respondents were telling us, we obtained concrete information that helped us to substantiate most answers that we were receiving. In the next paragraphs, we present our findings and assess them in light of the research question guiding our study.

Backgrounds and life prior to Islam

In order to come to an understanding of (radical) conversion and the involvement of converts in jihadist movements, previous studies on these phenomena have dedicated considerable attention to the background and life stories of converts and individuals involved in jihadist movements. To further this understanding, this section presents the respondents' backgrounds and how they viewed their life prior to finding Islam. An explicit comparison is made here, as throughout this study, between the group of converts who are not involved with jihadist movements and the group that is or has been involved with jihadist movements.

Family background

The family background of our respondents in terms of socio-economic position, ethnicity, religious orientation, and the family situation during their childhood, is a diverse one.

Regarding socio-economic circumstances, some of the converts' parents had well-paid jobs on a university level, whereas parents of other respondents had low-skilled jobs and were (or became) unemployed during the converts' childhood. In most cases, both parents had a job. In other cases, the mother stayed at home when the children were little and started working part time when they were older. In addition, there are respondents with a native Dutch background, while others have one or two parents who were born in former Dutch colonies (Surinam, Indonesia, or the Dutch Antilles), or a parent from another (non-)Western country.

Similarly, the religious orientation of the converts' parents differs: some parents called themselves Christians, but with few exceptions, most of them were not attending church and some had turned their backs on some stricter forms of Protestantism. In a couple of cases, the respondents had an absent biological parent or a (temporary) stepfather who were non-practicing Muslims. Furthermore, some parents were atheist. Finally, in some cases close and less close family members expressed negative opinions of Muslims and Islam. Overall, the respondents argued that religion played a minor part in their upbringing. Nonetheless, a considerable number of the converts in this study attended Christian primary schools, and to a lesser extent secondary schools where they learned the basics of Christianity.

Even though the respondents gave equally diverse accounts of their family situation, apart from the fact that they all had one or more siblings, it is striking how many of the respondents are from broken homes. The majority of the respondents reported that their parents divorced somewhere between the first year of their life and their adolescent years. Several other respondents lived in broken homes as a result of their parents not having been allowed to get married by family or from their parents wanting to live in different countries. For many of these respondents, the separation of their parents meant less to no contact with their father, and getting one or more stepparents, some of whom they accepted as a real parent. In a couple of cases, however, the

stepparent resembles – from the respondents’ stories – the archetypical image of the bad stepparent. CF20, for example, shared a memory of her stepfather ignoring her for a year after she ran away from home with her younger half-sisters at age 15, a memory that brings her to tears. She explained her problematic relation with her mother and stepfather as follows:

“Well, my sisters simply got all the attention and new clothes, new everything, and I would get [clothes] from my niece. My niece is one year younger than I am, but she is somewhat chubbier than I am, so I would get her clothes. Yes, they simply got way more love, attention and then I obviously started asking it in a negative way, so I got into a lot of fights with my mother and stepfather.” (CF20, IJIM)

In addition, several respondents had to deal with issues such as problematic siblings or the illness and death of close relatives in their childhood or young adulthood. Most of these respondents lost one of their parents or a sibling after a period of serious illness. Another respondent experienced trouble with the amount of attention that a problematic sister demanded. Such experiences fostered, on the one hand, feelings of grief and guilt, such as for CF14 who felt bad about what she saw as the selfish phase in her life that she was in when her mother died. For those who had problematic or sick siblings, feelings of being deprived of attention or even being neglected by their parents were dominant. CF4 explained her problematic adolescence and unpleasant youth with the bad adolescence of her sister which occupied her parents:

“Because my sister also had a really bad puberty. And of course, I was the younger child, so I felt a bit ignored, so to speak. And that is something that I have resented my parents for, for a long time, due to which the relation has been strained for years.” (CF4, NIJM)

In addition to these issues, some respondents also reported strained relations with biological parents as a result of what could be labelled as dysfunctional family situations. Such situations occurred for respondents who have or had one or more alcoholic parent(s), experienced domestic violence between their parents, or towards themselves, a perceived lack of support and connection due to what some respondents characterised as a ‘cold’ family climate, self-absorbed parents, and the absence of trust or communication. In one case, the respondent was placed under foster care. Whereas these situations have seriously strained the relations of some respondents, other respondents still feel positive about one or both of their parents and their relation with them, while simultaneously acknowledging the impact that these experiences have had on their own emotional life, such as explained by CM5 as follows:

“Well, it was no pretty divorce. In itself I am not very affected by it, I did not care that much. It was unpleasant that they argued so much, but yes, that affected me less. What did affect me, was that my mother was emotionally broken, so she was especially struggling with herself, so she could be of less support to me. At that time, I thought it did not affect me, but in hindsight, when I got older, I noticed that it did, in fact. That I simply blinded myself to it. (...) In hindsight, I see that it was not a very healthy way to grow up. I can remember quite a few occasions that I came home when my mother was crying, so badly.... (...) It made me shut off. (...) When I

had problems, I could have gone to her, but I didn't, because I saw she was in pain. (...) It toughened me up, I became a bit emotionless." (CM5, in between NIJM and IJIM)

Notwithstanding all the family troubles reported by many of the respondents, several of them speak of warm ties with at least one of their parents during their youth. Moreover, one of the older respondents (CM22), whose parents are still together, has only positive things to say about his youth and family relations. He characterizes his family situation as follows: "I am from a very warm family. A family in which, let's say, enjoyment, happiness, family, are simply very important. That is the heart of the story." (CM22, NIJM).

In sum, the family background of the respondents varies greatly, although in the vast majority of cases these situations can be characterised as unstable or even seemingly unhealthy from a pedagogic point of view.

Personal life and lifestyle prior to discovering Islam

The respondents also shared what their personal lives and lifestyles looked like before they discovered Islam. Topics that were covered include their educational and work careers, their social contacts, and the personal troubles that they experienced.

Educational and work careers

Considering, on the one hand, that the respondents' age of conversion varies from 12 or 13 years to 31 years and, on the other hand, the current focus on the converts' life prior to Islam, the educational careers of some of them had hardly started and even less had begun their working lives.

Although all of them had at least started secondary school, their stories nonetheless show considerable diversity in terms of the level of education achieved prior to their raised interest in Islam. The levels varied from attending a high school that allows access to university to doing lower vocational training. A recurrent theme for a considerable number of the respondents is educational underachievement, as expressed by being set back to a lower educational level after one or two years or by dropping out altogether. Yet, some of these respondents compensated for underachieving at a later time by slowly working their way upwards to a university or a university of applied sciences level, which are known as 'HBO' in Dutch. The respondents who converted in their mid-twenties and the respondent who converted in her early thirties, had already been building up rather successful careers. These findings again underline the considerable variety found within our sample.

Social relations

The respondents' accounts about their social contacts demonstrate both positive and negative relationships with peers and non-family members.

Some respondents reported tight friendships that lasted throughout their youth and they felt to be at least somewhere in the middle when it comes to popularity at school. An additional group of respondents felt less at ease when manifesting themselves in their youth's peer groups, because they qualify themselves as 'loners' who did not really 'fit in'. Yet, they did have friends and were generally not socially excluded by peers.

Several respondents had much more troublesome relationships with peers at school in at least a considerable part of their youth. For some respondents, this meant being bullied. Another respondent was discriminated against because of her ethnic background. Yet another respondent stated that she did not fit in with her gothic style and that her peers consequently ignored her in secondary school, which she felt to be worse than being bullied.

For a minority of the respondents, problematic relations with others manifested outside the school. On the peer level, this included bullying for not fitting in with the neighbourhood, being mentally abused by a partner, and sexual abuse, in the sense of being taken advantage of or being coerced, by colleagues or a so-called boyfriend and his friends. In addition, a couple of female respondents had been seduced or raped by older men that were friends of their mothers when they were still minors.

Variation: From minor tensions to troubled lives

The things the respondents shared about their perception of their childhood, their lifestyle and behaviour, are just as diverse as their family experiences, school careers, and social relations.

When asked to characterise their youth, some of the respondents looked back on a pleasant, carefree childhood, in some cases, with some short less pleasant periods. For other respondents, their youth started out nicely, but took a turn for the worse when they grew older and encountered some of the negative experiences presented above. Finally, there is a group of respondents who valued their youth as predominantly negative. On this negative side of the spectrum, CM18 offers an illustrative example. His first memories reflect the general sentiment he shared about his youth with an alcoholic, angry parent and being bullied by kids in the neighbourhood:

“And well, at one moment my mother has a carry-potty, I will never forget that. And I had to take a dump on it. And I thought ‘I can do it on it that is very average. What if I do it next to it?’ I did and my mother got furious. That is one of my first memories. Plus, a less pleasant one, that [neighbourhood kids] threw my t-shirt in a pit. So, [neighbourhood kids] bullied me at quite a young age. (...) And then my mother also got angry, so she did not have the understanding of ‘how did that happen, was it your fault?’ It was all my fault. (...) And that my mother secretly drinks beer from a kitchen cabinet. (...) In a squat, looking at my father in the living room, quickly guzzling and I ratted her out. Then it became a discussion between those two. Those are my first three memories. Thus, we have bullying, shit and pee, and booze. Starts out well.”
(CM18, IJIM)

On the opposite side of the spectrum is CM22 who is probably the most positive about all areas of his youth. The only pressure he reported to have experienced is the pressure to achieve success at school, a pressure that caused him to struggle to succeed at the lyceum he attended.

Some of the respondents displayed more or less problematic behaviour, such as building up debts, fighting with peers, rebelling against their parents, lying about their identity,

and getting involved in crime, for which one of them has also been convicted. In a couple of cases the problematic behaviour of the respondents led them to being temporarily placed in an institution. Several other respondents appeared to internalise their problems, as reflected by the feelings of depression that some of them report, and as evidenced by the eating disorder and thoughts of suicide that one of them expressed as having had. For one respondent, depressive feelings were accompanied by a diagnosis of borderline personality disorder and multiple suicide attempts. Another thing that various respondents reported is a sensitivity to the opinions of others and being susceptible to group pressure.

Various respondents adhered to a quite common and somewhat hedonistic lifestyle revolving around going out with friends, drinking, and partying. Some female respondents said that they already stopped doing so years before they developed an interest in Islam, such as CF13:

“Well, when we were talking about university and then classmates would come and they would go like: ‘O, yesterday I went there and there’ and that I then said: ‘I used to do that in the past.’ (...) That has nothing to do with Islam or something, but actually when I started at the University of Applied Science. From the first, second year I quit doing that. The first year was really going on, only going out, that sort of stuff. And from the second year onwards not anymore. (...) I did not feel the desire to do that anymore. I did not enjoy it anymore. You start to feel awkward. (...) I did no longer feel at home like I used to. Before then you go dancing nicely and at one point I thought: okay, what am I doing here? Only drinking, drinking, drinking. For what? I started looking at it very differently.”
(CF13, NIJM)

In brief, the respondents have different perceptions of their life prior to Islam and have taken different paths in terms of their lifestyles and behaviour prior to discovering Islam.

Reflections

When combining the findings concerning the respondents’ family situation, educational and career paths, their social relations, and their personal lives prior to Islam, a general picture emerges characterised by turbulence and instability. While some did report having had a happy and carefree youth, this group is a minority and even these respondents report one or more destabilising instances.

Regarding these experiences, there is, in most regards, no clear distinction visible between the different groups of converts in this study. That is, the respondents who are or have been involved with jihadist movements, and those who have not. One observation that can be made, however, is that the NIJM respondents account for some of the most intense destabilising experiences that were reported, especially abuse, and/or report having left their parental home while still being a minor and prior to their interest in Islam. These respondents had either been evicted by (one of) their parents, were dropped with other relatives, were institutionalised or – for a respondent with a less troubled youth – simply left their parental home on their own account. Among the non-NIJM respondents in our study, abuse and a (temporary) separation with both parents at a young age was the case for only one respondent.

Despite this particular overall difference, this study problematises previous studies that have presented troublesome childhoods in general as being accountable for radical conversion.⁵⁵ Simultaneously, these findings confirm an observation made in Section 2: that many of the factors that have been presented as explanations for involvement in jihadist movements lack specificity and could equally explain conversion in general, crime in a broader sense, or other social issues. This implies that of itself, an unstable youth does not explain anything sufficiently. Nonetheless, the intensity of problems of the IIJM-respondents is certainly striking, and it could be that experiences in the respondents' lives prior to Islam contribute to a 'cognitive opening' to or 'resonance' with the various messages that different currents in Islam provide.⁵⁶

A final note has to be made about the explanatory value that their life prior to Islam might have according to the respondents themselves. Although the respondents were not directly asked this question, a couple of them gave their opinion on this topic on their own initiative. When discussing his youth, CM18 (IIJM) dismisses attempts to understand his previous radical turn through his youth as a desire of academics and the media to apply 'Freudian models'. Another critical respondent is CF12 (NIJM), who initially did not feel like participating in this project because she feared her youth experiences would be used as an explanation for her conversion, whereas she is convinced that this choice has nothing to do with her youth and everything with the religion itself.

"I really do see that as separated (...) Maybe it's funny, but I know that some people have a hard time in dealing with that, but for me: these kinds of things just make me stronger. Make you independent, and more autonomous..." (CF12, NIJM).

Trajectories to Islam

In this section, the focus is on how the respondents discovered Islam and why they chose to convert to this particular religion. In looking backwards at the life stories of the respondents, several motivating factors and triggers that lead our respondents to converting to Islam can be distinguished. For some, the conversion to Islam was an effort to make a fresh start in life with the ambition to do things better. Many respondents somehow wanted to 'give meaning to life'. Respondents also mentioned a perceived lack of 'consolation' or 'comfort' in their lives before becoming a Muslim. In addition, the search for an appropriate positive identity was a main motivating factor for converting to Islam, as well as reacting to perceptions of injustice. In addition, respondents referred to different kinds of emotions that they encountered through becoming a Muslim, such as internal peace of mind, feelings of being accepted, appreciated, and admired. Some respondents referred to the immediate kick of an adrenaline boost they got while listening to a sermon in a mosque or on YouTube. These numerous motivations are sometimes difficult to distinguish from each other as they are related to and build upon each other.

Unsurprisingly, respondents did not see their conversion as arising from a single motivating factor. Indeed, their life histories generally revealed the presence of several

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⁵⁵ Gibson, "In bad faith."; Kleinmann, "Radicalization of Homegrown Sunni."; Mullins, "Re-Examining The Involvement Of Converts."; van San, "Lost Souls Searching for Answers?"; van San, "Striving in the Way of God."

⁵⁶ See for instance: Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising.*; Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad*, for radical and extremist messages, and Geelhoed, *Striving for Allah*, for conversion and radical conversion to Islam.

of the above-mentioned elements simultaneously.⁵⁷ Some of the motivating factors are more important in the initial stages of getting interested in Islam, whereas others are more relevant later on in the process of conversion. Sometimes these conversions took place in a rather small time-span, whereas other converts took several years before actually choosing Islam. It also turned out to be rather difficult to make a distinction between the different inducements towards Islam and the degree of involvement in Jihadist movements. In the following sections, we will first describe these motivations and events which triggered conversion to Islam in more detail and, secondly, we will describe the major explanations for how these motivations direct to Islam and not to other religions or other actions.

Trigger events and existential questions

In the life stories of the respondents, many events (incl. the death of a parent, sibling or friend, the separation of parents, bullying or being bullied, neglect or physical abuse) can be labelled as trigger events that lead respondents to questioning oneself and the meaning of life. However, events outside of the context of discontentment can also function as a trigger for asking oneself similar existential questions. CM25, for instance, participated in a group of friends as a young adult, who on a daily basis, both during and after school, really enjoyed discussing fundamental issues of life. Responding to a question about how these conversations came about, he answered:

“I had these issues on my mind and I would tell these guys ‘I have seen this movie’ or ‘I have read this article; did you know that in the Quran or in the Bible this or that is written’. And then somebody else would argue that ‘the Jews for example believed this. That is a much better religion because this really is the truth’. So, you meet other perspectives. There are other guys who would state that ‘if a God would exist, how can a child with leukemia be born? That is not a loving God’. These kinds of conversations. (...) so I encountered time after time completely different perspectives I never thought about. Yes. And then you continue your search.”
(CM25, NIJM)

These events subsequently led respondents to question their lives, who they were, what they should do, and where to go. As with many of the factors that contribute to conversion, these trigger events always interact with other factors. In the case of CM25, for instance, he had some Muslim friends around him, but also some former Muslims whose experiences encouraged CM25 to further research Islam. Moreover, he also felt discontent with his self-centred lifestyle and was attracted to Islam for several reasons including its perceived simplicity and clarity:

“There is only one God and Mohammed is a prophet. It’s that simple. As simple as that. Then in fact you are a Muslim. You only have to testify, the *shahada* and then you are a Muslim. Nobody can tell you that you are not a Muslim. And in principle you go to paradise. That’s how we see it.” (CM25, NIJM)

⁵⁷ This implies that the ideal-typical distinction between identity, status, revenge and thrill seekers demonstrates to be much more fluid categories in practice (cf. Borum and Fein, “The Psychology of Foreign Fighters”; Feddes, Nickolson, and Doosje. Triggerfactoren in het radicaliseringsproces).

Spiritual experiences also functioned as a trigger to further delve into and research Islam as a possible religion and way of living. Respondents described having such experiences through dreams or moments in which the divine showed itself or was felt by them. These respondents somehow were already surrounded by Islam or by other Muslims, but Islam as such only became meaningful during or immediately after what they label as these spiritual encounters. One of the respondents who converted to Islam at age twelve or thirteen recalled his first visit to a mosque during the month of Ramadan and first of all compared churches (rather dark, bad acoustics, cold, distanced, cemetery-like) with mosques (good lighting, carpets, warm atmosphere, small, appealing and lively houses of prayer) and continued by describing his spiritual experience:

“During prayers, people [sit] shoulder to shoulder, ankle next to ankle. In other words; it is much more inviting, much warmer, and more special. As I went for the first time, it was during Ramadan, so it was packed. It was so crowded that people had to pray outside as not everyone could get in. And as I felt this for the first time, it was as if I had a kind of spiritual experience at that moment. At that time, I described it as an angel floating up”. (CM2, IJIM)

Others described a similar spiritual experience, for instance while giving birth to a child:

“The take-over literally of the body that I experienced at that time. There is a power at work within you, and you only, you have to hand yourself over. And for me it worked. For me that was God. (...) At that time I didn’t pronounce the *shahada*, but I knew as I held my baby in my arm that I would pray from now on...” (CV23, NIJM)

These spiritual experiences and the strong positive feelings that came along with them were important parts of these respondents’ ultimate decisions to convert to Islam.

Making a fresh start and the ambition to do things better

For some respondents, the decision to become a Muslim can principally be understood as a wish to leave their past behind and to make a fresh start. For these respondents, Islam was the vehicle through which to accomplish this desire. The wish to start with a clean slate can have many different reasons. Some of the respondents were fed up with a criminal lifestyle whereas others blamed themselves ultimately for having been far too hedonistic. Sometimes these lifestyles resulted from the many problems respondents faced while growing up at home within the family, or at school with teachers, pupils, or friends. Whatever the reasons behind these lifestyles were, respondents became discontented with them, and increasingly perceived them as meaningless, wrong, or amoral, and expressed their wish to start all over again.

A good example of this dynamic is given by a young mother of thirty (CF14) who in retrospect defines her lifestyle before becoming a Muslim as selfish. After her mother died of cancer while she was in her early twenties, she quit school, started dating, delved into nightlife, and got pregnant in a troublesome, dead-end relationship with a Muslim man. Her father could not deal with her being pregnant and kicked her out of the house, while she also lost her job due to her pregnancy. At that point in time, she decided to make a fresh start and converted to Islam with the prophet Muhammed as her guide, replacing her family with her new-found sisterhood.

A second example is presented by a male convert who started drifting after his mother also passed away at a young age and his father lost sight of him:

“During day-time I was this nice student, this nice guy at school. But I was also smoking weed with these guys in the evenings and stealing scooters until early in the morning. (...) we were only in it for the money but it did not bring much, only problems with the police (...) at a certain moment I grew up and got fed up with it.” (CM16, NIIM)

After getting tired of his criminal lifestyle, CM16 started searching for meaning in religion and found this within Islam.

This highlights another important pull-factor that conversion to Islam is seen as offering. Several respondents were drawn to Islamic conversion as they saw it as a way to achieve forgiveness of all sins they had committed in the past. This kind of primary knowledge of Islam is often acquired through self-study or through Muslim friends. An instance of this is recalled by CF11:

“I started reading the Quran rather soon and thought: ‘this is actually a rather nice belief’. Then I started reading more books and, but every time I postponed it [conversion to Islam] and I thought ‘I am not good enough for that religion, naturally because I did all these things’. And then my friend told me about how your sins will be forgiven and I thought ‘You know what, I am going to do it right now and then, I am going to improve my life’. (...) It feels like a big relief. (...) It feels good that hopefully my sins are forgiven and that I can just start all over.” (CF11)

It was striking to note that respondents were not only eager to leave behind a lifestyle they had become disenchanted with, but that they simultaneously wanted to reinvent themselves in a more positive way. Take for instance CM25, who had spent much of the day hanging out in the streets with his friends and smoking marijuana and who stated: “If I saw, for example, a middle-aged construction worker entering a coffee shop. (...) Then I also thought, I do not want to be like him at that age”. This ambition ‘to do better’ came along with a curiosity and wondering about existential questions such as “does God exist?” and “if there is an almighty creator, which creator and which religion is the true religion?” As a consequence of, or alongside these existential questions, respondents started searching for something that could, in their turbulent lives, be expressed in terms of acceptance, meaning, mental peace, and guidance.

Searching for acceptance

For some, the conversion to Islam was a search for a suitable identity and acceptance in order to deal and cope with the outside world. This was for instance the case with CF21 who was socializing with Moroccan Dutch youngsters. In order to be fully accepted within the circles of Moroccan Dutch she opted for the identity of a Muslim girl and converted to Islam.

Some converts were introduced to Islam through Muslim partners. In order to be able to marry, these respondents subsequently converted to Islam. Take the case of CM26 who

met a Dutch girl with a Moroccan background somewhere in late 2014 and converted to Islam in November 2017.

“I discussed it with her and she told me ‘I cannot marry... or I am allowed to marry but only with a convert or with a Muslim’. And at that time, I thought ‘but why? It is okay if you love each other’. (...) At a certain moment in time I somehow put up with it, we saw each other more frequently and we started moving to each other. (...) In the beginning I thought ‘I am really not going to convert, are you insane or something?’” (CM26, NIJM)

This convert lacked a history of searching for meaning and happiness within other religions but entered the world of Islam through meeting his future Muslim wife and her family who introduced him to a mosque where he acquired Islamic knowledge, and ultimately, recited his *shahada*.

Although CM25 initially also converted to be able to be with his Muslim fiancée three years ago, it turned out that he had other reasons to convert to Islam as well, stating that he would also “like to become happy in a new religion”; this was in reference to his troublesome past, one characterised by being bullied, being rejected by others and especially girls, and a having only a small social circle of close relatives and friends. Islam gave him a feeling of being accepted for who he was. CM25 described mosque visits as: “I just felt at ease (...) I had been there to talk with these people. And no Muslim, old or young looked at me in a strange way. (...) So, that was a nice feeling.” For CM25 the direct trigger for converting to Islam was his intended marriage with a Muslim woman. As time passed, it turned out that by becoming a Muslim, he could also fulfil the basic need of being accepted for who he was.

Searching for guidance, mental peace and meaning

While explaining the road to Islam for these converts, it is important to realise that different motivations, trigger events, and personal characteristics can coincide, strengthen each other, and lead to a conscious move towards Islam. Yet, a recurrent theme in the conversations was the respondents’ longing for guidance and meaning in life. The life story of CM2 illustrates both these points. He did not recall the divorce of his parents at the age of 10 as a very problematic or negative phase in his life. In fact, he argued that with this divorce the quarrels and arguments in the house ended. It led him, however, to move to another city with his father where lots of Muslim migrants lived, and who showed him another way of living and thinking. While recalling his youth, he also mentions his personal search for existential issues that he recalled to have started when he was 7 years old:

“You could say, clarity or something like that, clear frameworks, clear moral cadres, clear rules, clear orders. I was really in need for these kinds of things while I was young. I did not feel that in Christianity. On the contrary, the confusion constantly became bigger.” (CM2, NIJM)

In addition to his rehousing and his need for strict and clear rules, CM2 also added a “crucial detail” as he expressed it. This crucial detail referred to a dream he had at the age of eight in which he was sitting amidst a huge fire while being burned. “I felt that my skin was dripping off me” and “I remember that I was crying and screaming in this dream

and hysterically shouted: ‘God please save me from this, guard me to the right path because I do not want to go to hell’”. Even after more than two decades, this nightmare still is very vivid in his mind and is used by CM2 as explanation for his urgent drive to find the right path.

Why Islam?

In many cases, the respondents’ quest started with scanning more familiar religions, such as Christianity, that they knew from their childhood and the educational system they participated in. As one of the respondents who converted to Islam in 2017 stated: “At that time I had literally explored all great religions and I arrived at Islam” (CM25). Sometimes this familiarity coincides with old or new social contacts who are already deeply involved in the religion they would like to explore. Ultimately, all respondents, for divergent reasons, became disappointed with Christianity, Buddhism, or Judaism. Some of them had difficulties with the Christian concept of the holy trinity (“there is only one God and Mohammed is the prophet, it is that simple”), or in Buddhism, the absence of a creator (“there is a creator”) and the condemnation of material possession (“I am not convinced that that is reasonable”). Others were disappointed with what they saw as the half-heartedness of Christians claiming a religion but only practicing it on Sundays. Many respondents vouched these rejections of other religions in terms of (ir)rationality:

“Islam especially is very rational (...) whereas within Christianity there are many theses that you have to accept for true. (...) I do understand the explanation of the trinity, but to a large extend you just have to accept it. It is also a structure that is not completely logical or understandable.” (CM3, IIJM)

For many respondents, Islam’s apparent “rationality”, and its straightforward or even “logical” (and thus, understandable), precepts were precisely what made it attractive in comparison to other religions, even those that they had (nominally) grown up in. Some respondents remarked not only on the perceived irrationality of religions other than Islam, but also on what they saw as a lack of community, or the lack of peers with similar religious interests. The following account from CM16 is illustrative in this regard. At one point prior to his conversion, CM16 got into a relationship with a foreign girl who was an ardent Catholic. This motivated him to similarly delve into this religion and discover the bible. While speaking about his involvement with Christianity, CM16 remarked:

“I also went here to church. It always gave me a good feeling, but... I was always sitting among the seniors [laughs] (...) There really is a young community [within Islam] which I can level with. I only sat there among the elderly. I didn’t feel it really, something was missing.” (CM16, NIIM)

More generally, several respondents expressed their discontent with other religions they flirted with during their search for meaning in terms of a “lack of clarity”, “too little structure”, “no clear rules”, “too little guidance”, “lack of answers”, or simply “missing something” and, as CM16 vividly expressed, the absence of believers that one can directly relate with.

Another crucial element for understanding the respondents’ conversion to Islam, concerns their contacts with other Muslims. While searching for meaning and answers

to their existential questions and flirting with different religions, many of the respondents have other Muslims in their immediate social environment who somehow play a role in their journey towards Islam. Some of the respondents are children of parents with different ethnic and/or religious backgrounds, sometimes resulting in having a Muslim father or a Muslim mother. Many others lived in ethnically-diverse urban environments that made them more likely to have Muslim acquaintances or friends.⁵⁸ These Muslim friends or relatives often played a role in the conversion of our respondents by asking them religion-related questions, presenting information on Islam, or actively or passively guiding the respondents further in their search for meaning and/or Islam.

Interestingly, however, among the respondents, the role of *dawah*—the required invitation by Muslims to non-Muslims to join Islam—seems rather minimal in their conversion to Islam. There are hardly any stories from the converts about direct or active invitation to convert to Islam by other Muslims. Instead, the Muslim friends and acquaintances in our converts' social circles asked questions, gave information, or guided the respondents much more indirectly towards Islam. Some of the respondents even stress that their decision to come to Islam was theirs alone, not a process in which others played an important role.

The more indirect, but still important, role of Muslims friends can also be captured in the image of role models. This is illustrated most clearly by CF23 who characterised her role model as embodying dignity and serenity despite occupying a marginal and undocumented position in society:

“I came across Y[.]. He was a religious person and he allowed me also his peace. That was something that intrigued me in this man. That he, in spite of his difficult situation, away from home, the economic backlog and discrimination...That he would stand up straight and proud. That he would stand firm in such a way that I thought ‘where do you get this from’... At a certain point in time I suspected that to some extent it was the result of him knowing that God exists, that there will be justice in the end. That he in the eyes of God is as valuable as I.” (CF23, NIJM)

For CF23, her meetings with Y further pushed her towards Islam. For others, Muslim friends or relatives were important for lifting them over the threshold of becoming Muslim or as witnesses during their *shahada*. It is also important to note that respondents felt accepted amidst their Muslim friends and other Muslims in general; a fact that also turns out to be relevant for their search within Islam, which is covered in the next section.

The mostly negative image of Islam, Muslims, and Islamic terrorism in (Dutch) society emerged as a third important motivational element in the conversion of our respondents to Islam. For many, the negative portrayal of Islam in the media made them sceptical, and led them to do their own research which consequently made them embrace a positive view of Islam. An example is presented by CF10, who recalled the following:

⁵⁸ Steven Vertovec, “Super-diversity and its implications,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 30 no. 6 (2017): pp. 1024–54.

“My family also said that foreigners are bad and that Islam oppresses. Just all biases one could think off, they were there. That was also the case on that school, foreigners were not beloved. And I thought ‘what exactly is that supposed to mean?’ [...] my best friend I had at that time and still have; she is not that way. ‘She is not like you say all foreigners are’. So, that has triggered me to have a look in the sense from what is really going on?’ Because is it the way [her family and school mates are] all saying? The media says it, you all say it, but [my friend] shows something different. What exactly is going on? In that sense... so school as well as the family have contributed a lot to [my conversion to Islam]”. (CF10)

Another example of the relevance of negative images surrounding Islam, which ultimately push the respondents toward the religion, is given by a recent convert:

“It was especially in 2016, the year of the attacks and so forth. Almost every week you could see it. And I was just sitting here watching TV and I just couldn’t believe it. I thought ‘I know so many Muslims from school and I see them here. And they are always very nice and friendly people and on TV they are being pictured as if they are only blowing up people and this kind of stuff. So, I do not know, but because TV wanted me to hate these Muslims so much, at least that’s the way I experienced it, I myself wanted to know more about it. Then I ordered a Quran at bol.com and started reading. (...) I don’t always believe the news, so I always want to search for my own truths”. (CM16)

The final element that led some of the respondents to Islam deals with the perceived attractiveness of Islam. As the previous description already illustrated, the pull of Islam can be manifold. Clear structures, a sense of being a straightforward and “rational” religion, and the provision of much-needed guidance are among the major attractions. Many also experienced and valued the warmth within the Muslim community. Combined, these factors offered respondents a sense of happiness and internal peace. Interestingly, although many respondents explained their conversion as the “rational” outcome of an individual search for meaning and answers, the role of positive emotions should not be underemphasised. CF4, a converted young woman recalled her feelings during her first Ramadan:

“During the day, you are constantly busy with your faith and that’s why you feel a very strong connection with Allah. That was the first time that I felt it that way. That someone was watching over me... [it felt] very secure. For the first time very secure. Yes, yes. And very quiet in a sense that whatever happens, it will be all right. So that was very emotional for me...I had never thought that I could feel that happy (...) a feeling of quietness and happiness, I had never experienced before.” (CF4, NIJM)

In their search for information on different religions and Islam, the converts in our sample used the internet intensively. According to many respondents, Islam is much better represented on the internet and through social media than all other religions. It is offered in divergent ways and through means that match the interests of these young converts:

“I went to YouTube and that’s full with movies and lectures and so forth. Just very amusing. I found Hassan Ali from the UK very funny.⁵⁹ He has a good way of telling a story in a funny way and I could listen for hours. And I literally watched for hours in a row. Solely stories on the history or the storyline of the Prophet. (...) I started searching for tutorials on how to pray, and I started writing these tutorials down on paper, put them on my door and so I started praying. (...) If you click on a movie [on YouTube] then you always have related movies. And I started searching for preachers and at a certain moment I stumbled on ‘jihadist preachers’ [...] as they call them and they were talking about the war against the Arabic Spring that had just started and a very emotional sermon telling that we now should stand up for ourselves, for our country, for this and that. And I really enjoyed watching it. It really does something with you. It is almost as if you go to war and you are being warmed up by a commander. You have to see it like this; before I went breaking into someone’s [home], I listened to rap music. If I listen to rap, I always get excited because it has a certain tone, it builds up the beat in such a way that you feel tenser, more adrenaline. It does something with your brain... (...) That is a sermon too, it does something with you emotionally. It excites you...” (CM19, IJIM))

It thus turns out that for some respondents, YouTube not only functioned as a serious and accessible source for improving knowledge on Islam but also resonated on a much more emotional level with the converts, one where pleasure, excitement, and adrenaline are centre stage.

Towards the profession of faith

During their movement towards Islam and becoming a Muslim, the majority of the respondents did not share their preoccupations with their relatives or the people they shared their daily lives with. They often feared the reactions of those standing close to them. Generally, parents, as well as brothers or sisters and friends, only learned of this newfound interest in Islam after the *shahada* had already taken place.

In order to be a Muslim, the *shahada* or Islamic creed has to be recited. The *shahada* is the first of the five pillars of Islam and has to be said in the presence of another Muslim: “[I testify that] there is no god, but Allah, and [I testify that] Muhammad is the messenger of Allah”. Seen from a Christian background, one would perhaps expect the *shahada* to be of great importance and a central ritual of inclusion into Islam that has to be celebrated with family and friends. However, for many respondents, the *shahada* was a much more a dutiful act than a meaningful one. Often there was hardly any preparation and in many cases the respondents gave hardly any meaning to their *shahada*. Some of them even recited the *shahada* twice, the first time alone or with a Muslim friend at home and afterwards—often months later—in a mosque with other Muslims. However, there were also converts in our sample for whom the *shahada* was much more meaningful and loaded with personal emotions.

⁵⁹ CM19 refers to Shaykh Hasan Ali, see for instance <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ma7E-QZk7Zo> (last accessed on 30 July 2018).

Reflections

Several general observations with respect to the conversion trajectories and experiences can be made. First, we have to conclude that it is difficult to make a clear distinction between the conversion trajectories, triggers, and motivations of those who are not involved with jihadist movements and those that have been, or still are. Secondly, a central motivation for most of the respondents appears to revolve around existential questions regarding the meaning of life. The converts we interviewed felt that, in Islam, they had found the most logical and satisfying answers to these questions.

Contemporary scholars such as Zygmunt Bauman⁶⁰ frame modern society as a liquid society characterised by its fluidity, insecurities, complexities, and fears. It seems that many of our respondents were challenged by the demands of modern society and were looking for solid and clear answers to the insecurities and fears that arose as a consequence of such. At the same time, this picture that reduces conversion to an antidote for discontent and insecurity does not do full justice to the respondents. There are many positive and attractive elements experienced by this study's respondents during their conversion, such as the perceived rationality, clarity, comfort, security, and guidance offered by Islam.

Finally, it is important to underline the impossibility of discerning a single trigger or motivation that leads people to Islam. There are many and they come in many different combinations, except perhaps for the recurring importance attached to the proximity Muslim contacts who directly or indirectly support the choice to convert.

Pathways in Islam: Being a new Muslim and involvement in Islamic communities

After converting to Islam, the journey for many of the respondents had only just begun. Although they had already gained some knowledge of the religion prior to their conversion, their conversion was for all of them a reason to deepen this knowledge, from basic things such as learning how to pray to studying Islamic religious texts and, for some, learning Arabic. Similar to the methods used for their initial acquaintance with Islam, they found this knowledge in (translated) books, mosques, on the internet, through peers, Muslim partners and/or their families, older Muslim acquaintances, as well as scholars. In addition, although a couple of respondents had already experimented with Islam (e.g. participating in Ramadan and starting to wear a hijab prior to their conversion), for most of the respondents their conversion formed the starting point for acting upon their newfound Muslim identity and showing it to the outside world. How Islam became an integral part of their lives, is the central theme of this section. This is done by considering the meaning that the respondents attributed to their newly-found religion, and the impact that being a Muslim had on their lives. This section also deals with the variety in the respondents' orientations within Islam and their multifaceted forms of involvement in Islamic communities, including, for some, involvement in jihadist movements.

⁶⁰ See for instance: Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2000); Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Fear* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2006).

It is important to realise that how the respondents defined themselves post-conversion (and can be defined by outsiders) towards Islam, changed over time. As an example, figure 1 illustrates the different positions within Islam (Y-axis) that the first five respondents occupied from their conversion until the moment they were interviewed for this research (X-axis). The different positions within Islam range from being no longer Muslim to being involved in jihadi movements such as Salafi-Jihadism, and traveling to Syria and Iraq.

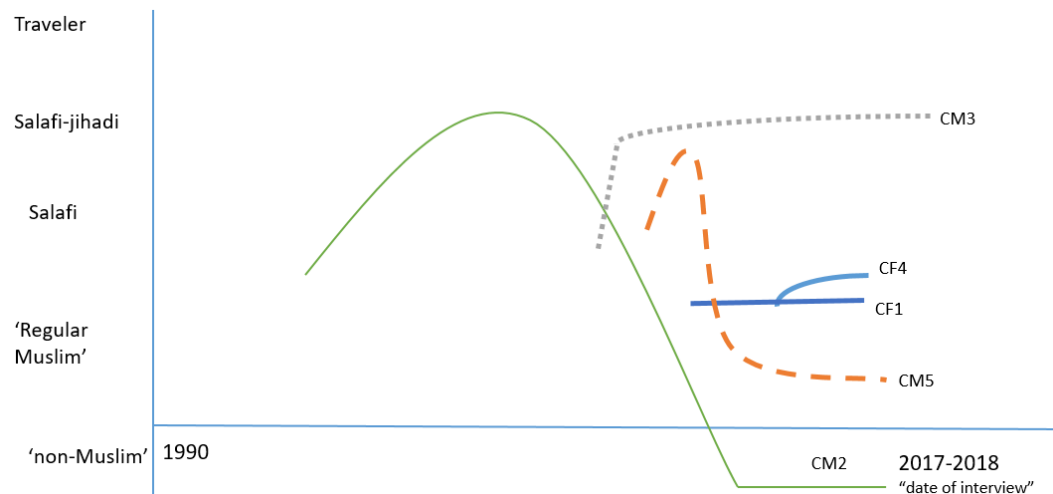


Figure 1. Religious development of CF1-CM5 over time

Take for instance the line of CM2 in Figure 1. This respondent began his journey in Islam as a 'regular Muslim', then grew into a Salafi-Jihadi, and ultimately lost his faith entirely some years before we interviewed him. While generally less dramatic in nature, most respondents' religious development had similarly taken them through various 'phases', which implies that they shift from one Islamic current to the other over time. This finding underlines the importance of not seeing 'conversion to Islam' as singular endpoint, but as a dynamic and heterogeneous process that can lead converts to occupy a range of divergent positions over time. This can equally apply to those who are commonly thought of as extremists or terrorists.

Meanings and expressions of being a Muslim

"In general, it simply means a lot to me, that without a doubt. Yes, it simply organises my life, a lot of structure. I also have the idea that there is an answer to everything, and I really like that... So, it gives a lot of answers to my questions, unlike with Christianity. And I increasingly come to discover, because I gain more knowledge, that there truly is an answer to every question. And that I find very beautiful. (...) It simply has become a part of my life and a piece of my identity I guess, yes. (...) That I can simply be myself, so to speak. I really found myself in [Islam]. (...) I simply feel good with it, so yes, when I get up, I simply think – well, you don't consider it every day, like 'oh, I became a Muslim', but it simply gives me a good feeling, happy, I am simply happy. (...) Well, the reactions, that is less nice about becoming a Muslim. But apart from that, in terms of Islam, no. It is purely the responses from the environment that are not nice. Of family, people in the street." (CF10, NIIJM)

This quote from CF10 sums up the principal message of the respondents with regard to what it means to be a Muslim in the Netherlands. Being a Muslim has different dimensions. On the one hand, one can distinguish the more personal dimensions of growing within Islam in terms of gaining knowledge, the internalisation of beliefs, the associated emotions, and the practical changes in life that come with a Muslim identity. On the other hand, being a Muslim has a social meaning and evokes social responses, such as by family, friends, people one encounters in the street, and other Muslims. In addition, respondents also stressed that being a Muslim implies ongoing efforts to grow in religious terms and become a better Muslim.

Personal dimension of meaning

Regarding the personal dimension, the meanings that the respondents attribute to their Islamic identity are largely positive. A general image that the respondents share is of Islam meaning ‘a lot’ or ‘everything’ to them. On a more cognitive level, respondents reported that Islam and being a Muslim came to define all areas of their lives by colouring their general outlook on life, their sense of purpose in life, and the things they experience. More concretely, respondents became convinced that they held ‘the truth’, that life on earth is preparation for an afterlife, that being a true Muslim paves the path to a place in Paradise, that the only true task of a Muslim is to serve Allah, and that any hardship that they encounter in life is a ‘test’ of God that—if successfully passed—will help them to earn *hasanat* (credit) for the afterlife.

On an emotional level, Islam provides them with a variety of positive feelings. Feelings that the respondents regularly mention involve peace or ‘serenity’, comfort in case of grief, certainty, safety, protection, redemption, happiness, and togetherness. A sense of peace was the most-heard feeling that the respondents derived from Islam. CM24, a recent convert at the time of the interview, said that he had completely surrendered to the will of Allah, and that the meaning he found in Islam is emblematic for its ability to allow the converts in our sample to overcome existential anxieties, allowing them to manage or even overcome their fear of death.⁶¹

“It, how can I describe it? Look, it even goes that deep, that you don’t even worry anymore about dying. It gives, let’s say, a certain peace in your head (...) There is something hereafter, there is an afterlife and if I die, then it isn’t finished yet. There is more. And if that is settled in your heart really well, that idea, if you don’t worry about that anymore, there are so many things you don’t worry about anymore. Yes, you can’t describe this in any other way than simply a good feeling. Because of that, so much pressure falls from your shoulders and so much stress falls away. (...) I am of course in a world⁶² in which things can go like this [makes an upward gesture], but also very quickly like this again [makes a downward gesture]. And in the beginning, you think, ‘yes, but what if it is over in three years’, well, then I have to start all over again. [He contrasts this to his current feeling that he does not care about going downward as long as he can pay for the basic necessities in life.] A

⁶¹ See also: Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg, and Tom Pyszczynski, “A Terror Management Theory of Social Behavior: The Psychological Functions of Self-Esteem and Cultural Worldviews,” *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 24 (1991): pp. 93-159.

⁶² Due to his career.

lot of important things, things that used to be important, no longer are important anymore. So, that takes away a very big societal pressure of how you want to position yourself towards everyone and now (...) I simply do my own thing.” (CM24, NIIJM)

On the practical level being a Muslim means for the respondents that they adopt Islamic behavioural rules that provide them with the frequently heard term ‘structure’ and that help to internalise their new Muslim identity. As CM3 (IJJM) stated, for example: “[Islam] is what my life revolves around. Yes, it comes back in every facet and it keeps you occupied the entire day.” CM3 and other respondents argued that Islam is tightly interwoven into their daily life, due to following Islamic rules; such rules include praying five times a day, saying a *du’a* every time one undertakes certain actions (e.g. leaving the house), being aware of what is halal and haram when shopping for groceries, and reflecting on how they should dress, raise their children, and decorate their home. CF8 (NIIJM) described this structure by Islamic rules as a bodily experience by saying that Islam is something that is “totally interwoven with your body or in your entire lifestyle.”

Another aspect that becomes interwoven with Islam, is one’s identity. The respondents agree that being a Muslim is a very important aspect of who they are. In their view, Islam has made them morally better people. For example, CM2 (no longer a Muslim at the time of the interview) said about in his extremist days that Islam strengthened his self-image, gave him a sense of being chosen, of moral superiority, purity, and pride. Furthermore, various respondents described their development as a Muslim as being a reflective and continuous process, in a way that is reminiscent of Giddens’ (1991) description of identity in late modernity as a life-long, reflective project; CM5 described such a process as his “passion to continuously improve myself”, and as CF14’s words illustrate as follows:

“Islam (...) really gives me the strength to become who I want to be. What I didn’t succeed at at first, it now gives me the strength, the tools to, to look in the mirror, not once, but to keep looking in the mirror. And sometimes that is hard, but it does bring happiness.” (CF14, NIIJM)

Social dimension of meaning

The respondents’ conversion implies that they have become part of the Islamic community. In a couple of cases, the respondents reported having trouble finding a place within the Islamic community. Especially in the beginning, some of them encountered distrust and distancing from non-converted Muslims, in particular those from older generations, who question their seriousness about becoming a Muslim and their knowledge of Islam; this becomes clear, for example, by these Muslims explaining the meaning of basic Arabic terms, such as ‘salaam aleikum’. Yet, in other cases converts feel a lack of acceptance because other Muslims consider them too strict. Some respondents continue to not fully feel at home with Muslims from Muslim families and instead principally bond with fellow converts. Over time, the Islamic contacts of the respondents have changed considerably. Various respondents were no longer in touch with the Muslims that introduced them to Islam.

Contrary to the sense felt by some respondents of not being at home among their new co-religionists, most respondents did feel the ‘warm bath’ offered by the Islamic community, either from the start or later on, which matches the experience of belonging

that has been described in previous studies.⁶³ In the words of CF7 about how she was received shortly after her conversion:

“Everybody welcomed me really warmly, all those mothers and fathers, well (...) I was simply it. Everybody wanted to know my story and yes, simply, that I would come. Always inviting me. Come have dinner. Come do this, come do that. Yes. I missed that sense of family.” CF7(IIJM)

CM18 even argued that converts are placed on a pedestal. In line with this claim, several respondents stated that converts make popular marriage partners and are approached by female family members of eligible men and by Muslim men on the street who offer themselves for marriage. CF10 (NIJM) said this is due to the perception that converts take their faith especially seriously, an image that corresponds with what previous studies have coined as the ‘convert’s zeal’.⁶⁴

Becoming part of the Islamic community also implies finding brotherhood and sisterhood. The respondents described brother- and sisterhood as a deep and special kind of familial relationship, through which Muslims are automatically connected with other Muslims and are supposed to help each other out. However, feeling connected to Muslim brothers and sisters also implies feeling the suffering of those who are oppressed. The reactions of the respondents to this sensation varied. On one end of the spectrum, CF11 argued that suffering and dying are tests, and Muslims who die will go to Paradise anyway, thus she does not bother. On the other end of the spectrum, an intense sense of the suffering of brothers and sisters in Islam inspired a call for action by other Muslims. While a couple of respondents donated to Islamic charities, others decided to enter the battlefield. CM2 explained this as follows:

“Interviewer: To what extent did you experience this? This brotherhood?” CM 2: “Oh, extremely close, absolutely and certainly later on at, yes, the time of extremism, [it] is that you really feel that you are in the trenches together against a communal enemy, that you also really have to trust each other, that if someone is a traitor, you simply go to jail or something. You know, you have some sort of relation, a deep, deep relation with others that is simply incomparable to anything. [That] is totally incomparable to how you have friends now or something.” (CM2, IIJM)

In short, it appears that while almost all converts greatly valued the new-found sense of communal identity that conversion to Islam bestowed upon them, their varying reactions to the perceived injustices suffered by co-religionists in warzones (e.g. in Iraq and Syria) was clearly related to the likelihood of their embracing militant jihadist views or heeding calls to action.

The costs of converting to Islam

Becoming a Muslim comes at certain costs to the convert’s previous lifestyle, social contacts, and position in society. In terms of lifestyle, several respondents report that

⁶³ E.g. Bartoszewicz. “Controversies of Conversions.”; Geelhoed. “Purification and Resistance.”; Geelhoed, *Striving for Allah*.

⁶⁴ E.g. Borum and Fein, “The Psychology of Foreign Fighters.”

they—often gradually—let go of “worldly matters” that they used to value, such as having boyfriends or girlfriends, doing certain sports, listening to popular music, and having hobbies and jobs that they cannot reconcile with Islamic rules. CM5 (in between IIJM and NIIJM) is most explicit about these losses and even describes it as having lost almost everything he likes, of which he found letting go of girls and sports to be the hardest.

Another cost involves the negative reactions from their close social environment, especially if their Muslim identity becomes visible in clothing or behaviour. For most respondents, the family response to their initial conversion is negative. Out of fear of such a negative reaction, some of the respondents had not yet told their parents about their conversion at the time of the interview. In some cases where the converts in this study did tell their parents, these parents initially thought the conversion of their child was a whim that would pass by soon. Once the conversion becomes more visible, either because of changing looks (e.g. men starting to wear a beard and women starting to wear a hijab) or when the respondents' Islamic norms lead to behavioural adaptations (e.g. no longer shaking hands with the opposite gender or not taking part in birthday parties) most parents increasingly considered the conversion problematic. In several cases this has led to a (temporary) break of contact between the respondents and their parents. A couple of the respondents who got involved in jihadist movements mentioned continuous swearing and name-calling by their closest parent and a break of contact with their close family. In other cases, parents and/or siblings are more supportive, yet they generally refrain from any actual interest and conversations about the respondents' motivations for conversion.

Besides the (temporary) distance between the respondents and their close family, the conversion process often coincides with a distancing from former non-Islamic contacts. This distancing occurs especially in the case of respondents who are visibly Muslim, when their former non-Islamic friends do not accept their Muslim identity, or when their friendships were built around a lifestyle that clashes with respondents' newly adopted Islamic life style, such as going out and drinking.

The respondents also faced negative responses from people less close to them. For some, this occurred at work and on the street, reactions that are often new to them. This is especially the case for women who dress as a Muslim. Various female respondents reported being called names such as ‘traitor’. CF7 related of a violent attack by a man when she was wearing her niqab. A more typical example of the general experience is offered by CF12 who is fully covered and who wears a niqab. She described the contrast between walking the streets as a blond and blue-eyed woman wearing make-up prior to her conversion and her current situation as follows:

“I have experienced what it is like, let’s say, to not wear all this, to not be a Muslima (...) No, you can - for example - not know how bad you [are] discriminated when you are born like this, then if you only later see both sides. That is really an observation that you make and that makes you think: well, wow, that is quite an extreme difference. So, you come from being very Dutch. (...) Yes, it is a very big difference.” (CF12, NIIJM)

CM5 argued that, due to such social reactions, being a Muslim fosters a sense of identity crisis, though in a different way than is commonly described in literature: ⁶⁵

“Not so much because you have difficulties with your identity, but because other people have difficulties with your identity, because (...) you’re not a Moroccan nor a Turk, but sometimes some Muslims think so, as if you suddenly have to live in accordance with their culture. So, you have an identity crisis within the Islamic community. (...) But also in Dutch society your identity is taken away from you. (...) When you start with Islam, you suddenly are someone else, even though you aren’t.” (CM5, in between NIJM and IJIM)

In the cases of many IJIM-respondents, the distance to families and former social contacts took a physical form due to them moving away, for example to another city and/or due to a marriage with a (convert) partner.

Pathways and involvement in jihadist movements

What are the perspectives of the respondents on the involvement of converts, and for some of them on their own involvement, in jihadist movements? Considering the fact that part of the respondents are (or have been) involved in jihadist movements, one might expect different answers from this group. Nonetheless, the IJIM-respondents largely gave similar reports as the NIJM-group, except in terms of how the three respondents who still call themselves Salafi-Jihadi speak of this jihadism, namely as a necessary strategy of Muslim activism. The resemblance between the two groups seemingly results from, on the one hand, the fact that six of the nine IJIM-respondents have disengaged from jihadist groups and reflected quite critically on their own reasons and experiences in the past. On the other hand, even those who consider themselves Salafi-Jihadi express their criticism of IS, the level of violence, and the *fitna*⁶⁶ IS creates among Muslims. Hence, the respondents might have spoken of somewhat different groups when they spoke of Muslims who are on the wrong side of jihadism, but their perspectives on what it takes to go too far, are very much alike.

Converts’ perspectives on involvement in jihadism

The respondents mentioned various reasons for why they believe that converts are overrepresented in jihadist movements. In some cases, respondents based their ideas of these reasons on personal experiences, either because they were or are involved with jihadist movements, or because they know other converts who became involved these movements. In other cases, they simply gave their perception based on common sense. Interestingly, all of the reasons that were put forward on the basis of common sense, were confirmed by the respondents who did have personal experiences.

First, a claim that was made in the interviews is that converts generally take their religion more seriously than Muslims from Muslim families do, which brings along the risk of

⁶⁵ E.g. Koning, *Zoeken naar een 'Zuivere' Islam: Geloofsbeleving en Identiteitsvorming van Jonge Marokkaans-Nederlandse Moslims*; Buijs, Demant, and Hamdy, *Strijders van eigen bodem. Radicale en Democratische Moslims in Nederland*.

⁶⁶ *Fitna* meaning here ‘internal divisions and quarrels’.

‘overdoing it’ and adopting extreme, jihadist viewpoints. This supports the ‘converts’ zeal argument encountered in the literature.⁶⁷

Secondly, several respondents point to the sources that converts have to gain knowledge. Given the relative absence or scarcity of classes for Dutch-speaking Muslims in traditional mosques, many converts resort to books and online information about Islam. According to these respondents much of the available information of this kind has a Salafist nature, including the Jihadi-Salafi variety. In other words, self-study among converts appears to be a pathway that is relatively more likely to lead to encounters with radical or extremist materials.

Thirdly, the Muslims that converts get involved with appear to have a major influence on the ideas they embrace. The reports of the IJIM-converts in this study indicate that becoming involved with jihadist movements coincides with no or diminishing contacts with more ‘moderate’ Muslims, whether peers or imams. Instead, they become more involved with radicalised or radicalising Muslims who present themselves as knowledgeable, or at least more knowledgeable than the convert. CF7 has experienced this and said she came to see these jihadist peers as “guru’s”, who in her perception “brainwashed” her. Other respondents argued that it matters who one’s partner is; if a convert’s partner has jihadist sympathies, the convert is more likely to adopt similar sympathies. Yet, it is also possible that convert couples push each other towards involvement in jihadism, such as occurred for CF20, who summarised her and her partner’s experience as follows:

“This is how everything started. We started reading and he went to the mosque and met brothers and well, eventually those took him to another more extreme one, me as well of course, because I went along with it. But anyway, that is how our journey began, so really reading books and yes, gain knowledge by ourselves, especially that. (...) Not with an imam, not with a supervisor. That was really our pitfall I think and that is the case for many converts who eventually start self-studying. And in itself self-study is not bad, but you have to know what you are going to study and with whom and so on. (...) Every person that starts practicing [Islam] goes through such a phase that you start to teach yourself stuff. Then you get arrogant and start to think that you know everything even though you might have read one book and know it a little bit by heart.”
(CF20, formerly IJIM)⁶⁸

These findings on the importance of social ties when it comes to explaining involvement in radical and extremist groups matches similar conclusions found in the broader literature on how participation in terrorism occurs.⁶⁹

Fourthly, several respondents argued that compared to Muslims from Muslim families, converts are more susceptible to extremist messages for different reasons, including the lack of a solid religious basis or “the buffer of culture” (CM18, formerly IJIM) due to which

⁶⁷ Borum and Fein, “The Psychology of Foreign Fighters.”

⁶⁸ In this section, the classification ‘formerly’ has been added to give the reader a better sense of who is saying something, because someone who still can be considered IJIM is likely to have a different opinion from someone who has disengaged from jihadist movements.

⁶⁹ Clark McCauley and Mary Segal, “Social Psychology of Terrorist Groups,” in Jeff Victoroff & Arie W. Kruglanski, eds., *Psychology of Terrorism: Classic and Contemporary Insights* (New York, NY: Psychology Press, 2009), pp. 331-346; Mullins, “Re-Examining The Involvement Of Converts.

they could more easily be convinced by jihadists who claim to hold the truth. In addition, the very fact that converts ‘are searching’, means that they might be more open to jihadist messages if these messages appear to provide an answer to their search. Moreover, their Muslim identity often instigates negative reactions and fosters feelings of not being accepted by society nor by their families, which could raise feelings of insecurity that make them more susceptible to radical beliefs. Some respondents suggested that the jihadist message matches the ‘rational’ outlook on life or the personality of themselves or other converts who became involved in jihadist movements.

Becoming a mujaheed: Or travelling to Syria/Iraq and joining IS

When the respondents discussed their views on (the desirability of) participating in a violent jihad, some of them distinguished the initial situation in Syria from the period in which IS proclaimed the Islamic state in Syria and Iraq. CM5 recalled a much more supportive attitude towards the fight against the Assad regime at the start of the war (2011–present), not only among Muslims, but also within the broader Dutch society. CM5, who had been flirting with the thought of joining the fight in the earlier days of the war in Syria, illustrated this point when comparing the period prior to IS’ Caliphate with the period thereafter:

“I even remember that back then (...) a sort of comparison was made with people who went to Spain in the past. Hence, it was not considered negatively yet. It was a bit weird, but somewhere, this old general of the armed forces had said: ‘I have kind of respect for those dudes’, you know. (...) [The emergence of IS] totally changed the image of the battle; literally, that a boy with a very long beard held the head of another person with also a very long beard. Well, when ISIS proclaimed its Caliphate, everybody was still kind of happy in the beginning. But then, when they started fighting against al-Nusra, then this romantic illusion was entirely gone for everything and everyone. This put a brake on everyone who went there as a sort of freedom fighter, that was immediately gone.”
(CM5, formerly in between NIJM and IJIM)

One potential and four ‘validated’ reasons for travelling to Syria or Iraq can be deduced from the interviews. The potential reason is mentioned by one of the respondents who used to dream of becoming a mujahid in the early 2000s.⁷⁰ This respondent claimed that becoming a martyr in battle is attractive to converts, because martyrs will earn a place in Paradise for themselves and their entire family. This could appeal to converts, in particular, because they believe that their non-Muslim family is destined for hell, unless they decide to become a Muslim before they die. Fighting on behalf of their new-found religion would thus offer converts a way of saving their loved ones. Although the respondents who did travel to Syria did not mention this reason, several of the non-IJIM respondents became emotional when the topic of the afterlife of their family members was brought up in the interview, which at least confirms that this is an issue that some converts struggle with.

The ‘validated’ reasons to travel to Syria and Iraq stem largely from the narratives of the three respondents who actually went there. These reasons involve the adoption of a jihadist ideology, the attraction of the warrior identity, group pressure, utopian ideas about the situation that awaits them in Syria or Iraq, and the ability to escape problems in the Netherlands. The extent to which these three respondents claim to have adopted the jihadist ideology varies.

One of the respondents still uses the self-label of a Jihadi-Salafi, but said to have left to become a foreign fighter prior to the emergence of IS. Despite a continued conviction that one should fight against suppression, the respondent also believes that one should be good to people who do not fight. Besides sketching this version of the jihadi conviction, the respondent said to have felt attracted by the image of the videos on Facebook about warriors that inspired an “urge” of being tough, to “be that person, you know, I come in with a Kalashnikov and you are quite something”. While having tried to travel to Syria, the respondent returned to the Netherlands from Turkey when the contact that would help them to cross the border could not be reached.

Another respondent was also part of a jihadist group and travelled to Syria prior to the rise of IS. Having come back and left jihadism behind, the respondent does not feel to have ever been fully convinced of the jihadist ideology. The respondent described himself as having been a naive follower who was vulnerable to group pressure and believed the image that others painted of Syria (i.e. not having to fight, and the war being almost over). This respondent’s motivation for travelling to Syria was to start a new life in an Islamic environment that meant an escape from problems, such as debts, in the Netherlands.

Similarly, a third respondent hoped to escape from personal problems in the Netherlands by travelling to IS territory. Another attraction was the utopian dream that life would become better there and belief in a conspiracy theory about Illuminati forming a threat in the Netherlands, whereas—according to this version of the theory—the antichrist would not be able to come to the Islamic State. In retrospect, from the position of having abandoned Islam altogether, this respondent argued to never have really been convinced of jihadism, although this person certainly had to pretend to agree with IS while living in the Caliphate.

Reflections

There is a striking thematic connection between this section and the previous one. Many of the things that the respondents said to have sparked their interest in Islam and their conversion, also return when they shared their stories of what Islam means to them post-conversion. On the one hand, this raises questions concerning the validity of this congruent image, because people tend to create congruent stories for themselves that do not fully reflect actual complexities and nuances. From this perspective, it could be that to explain their own choices to themselves, our respondents have come to accept a self-narrative that aligns their life prior to Islam with what they are seeking and what they found in Islam. It is necessary to keep this human tendency in mind when trying to understand the pathways that the respondents took as Muslims.

On the other hand, there is also some lack of congruity visible regarding how the respondents perceived Islam when they first became interested in the religion, and how they actually experienced life as Muslims following conversion. In practice, Islam certainly offered the converts in our sample numerous positive things, such as a sense

of meaning, a sense of peace, safety, happiness, comfort, structure, sister/brotherhood, and so on. However, the respondents acknowledged that there are downsides to being a Muslim, such as not being fully accepted in the Muslim community while being simultaneously excluded from Dutch society. Another less congruent aspect concerns the fluctuation between various Islamic currents that some respondents have identified with at some point, and as illustrated in Figure 1.

Considering the overlap with the previous section, it is hardly surprising that in this section, late modernity again seems to be at play, such as in the descriptions that some respondents give of their identity, as being themselves Muslims and working to become a better person, which resembles Giddens' ideas of late modern identity projects.⁷¹

The principal question to be addressed here, however, concerns whether there are any visible differences in terms of 'being a Muslim' between the converts who were or still are involved with jihadist movements, and the respondents who were not. In terms of the meaning that Islam has to the two groups, we received similar responses. There is, moreover, no indication that this is related to the fact that most respondents who have been involved with jihadist movements have turned away from a jihadist path which might have coloured their responses.

The image that can be derived from the interviews is that the respondents that were or are involved in jihadist movements tend to miss a close Muslim network when they start practicing Islam, either in the sense of a Muslim partner or very close Muslim friends who hold non-jihadist views. In addition, the IIJM-respondents appear not to have taken their lessons in mosques or from imams, but have relied more heavily than most other respondents on the internet for information, where jihadist messages are readily available. Often through the internet they came in touch with like-minded Muslims who—sometimes in mutual interaction—fuelled their jihadist ideas. Moreover, some of the IIJM-respondents faced some of the harshest negative responses on their conversion to Islam by their close family. Finally, the jihadist-minded converts appear to have been among those who experienced the strongest reactions of outrage to images of perceived injustice being experienced by co-religionists.

This seems to indicate that, together, a sense of alienation and/or disconnection (from one's immediate family, former environment, from mainstream Muslims, and from Dutch society), in combination with an independent search online for information about Islam, a strong identification with the victims of injustice, and developing contacts with jihadist groups, appear to form the principal ingredients for an increased likelihood of converts becoming involved in jihadist movements.

Putting the similarities and differences into perspective

Overall, this study points to both similarities and differences between the non-IIJM converts and the IIJM converts. The question that remains is how we can account for the similarities and the differences that we found.

The image that has arisen from our findings is altogether rather diffuse. In line with the message of previous studies that highlight the difficulties of finding simple answers to why people radicalise, there is no clear-cut, univocal way to distinguish between the IIJM

⁷¹ Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991); see also Geelhoed, *Striving for Allah*, for how turning to (radical interpretations of) Islam can be part of an identity project.

and the non-IIJM respondents when it comes to their lives prior to Islam, the conversion experience, and their involvement in the Islamic community after conversion. The respondents' stories reveal many similarities, and that there is no single factor that is exclusive to any one of the groups. Regarding the similarities, these are to be expected in view of the similarities between the explanatory factors that conversion studies and radicalisation studies bring forward. With respect to distinctive factors, we discovered some general patterns, but there were always exceptions in our data. Thus, the image that emerges is, as has been argued by many researchers before, one of a complex interaction of various factors prior to discovering Islam, the conversion experience itself, and post-conversion involvement with the Islamic community.

Yet, this study also offers some more detailed insights that help to tie together some of the findings of previous research on radicalisation of converts. While this study confirms the relevance of the experiences of 'becoming a Muslim' for 'being a Muslim', as noted by Bartoszewicz, this study also finds a link with the converts' lives prior to Islam and their social contacts, such as is pointed out by Kleinmann, Mullins, and Gibson, and on the societal level, concern with injustices committed against Muslim brothers and sisters.⁷²

Concerning the respondents' lives prior to Islam, the stories of troubled childhoods, cases of abuse, separation from both parents, and troubled relations with parents at a young age are particularly present among the IIJM-respondents. This corresponds with previous studies that identified a troubled youth as an explanatory factor.⁷³ The nuance that this study adds to previous work is that a troublesome youth in itself does not offer sufficient ground to distinguish between the IIJM and the non-IIJM respondents, but that in the case of our respondents, the most intense troubles and greatest distance between parents and children were indeed concentrated among the IIJM-respondents, with a couple of exceptions. It seems, therefore, that these experiences could at least 'resonate with' or contribute to a 'cognitive opening' to radical ideas.

In addition, this study offers empirical support to the importance of the interaction with one's social environment, one's family in particular, but also broader society when individuals are becoming Muslims. In accordance with Bartoszewicz, this study found that negative reactions of—in this case especially family members—can contribute to a sense of alienation, which can raise the attraction of jihadist messages that present an alternative form of belonging and a rejection of those who reject Muslims.⁷⁴ Other than Bartoszewicz concludes, however, a key finding of our study is that the trajectory our respondents took in Islam, also seems to be related to troubles in their life prior to Islam.⁷⁵

This paper agrees with Bartoszewicz that identity and belonging are key in understanding the involvement of converts in jihadist movements, but we would argue that how the converts in our study interpret and cope with negativity and a lack of acceptance from their social environment, seemingly depends on experiences in one's life prior to Islam. To be more concrete: in the case of our respondents a perceived lack of acceptance and even alienation from their former social environment and from Dutch society during and especially after conversion, appears to be related to experiences of not being accepted,

⁷² Bartoszewicz, "Controversies of Conversions." Kleinmann, "Radicalization of Homegrown Sunni."; Mullins, "Re-Examining the Involvement of Converts."; Gibson, "In Bad Faith."

⁷³ Gibson, "In Bad Faith."; Kleinmann, "Radicalization of Homegrown Sunni."; Mullins, "Re-Examining the Involvement Of Converts."

⁷⁴ Bartoszewicz, "Controversies of Conversions."

⁷⁵ Ibid.

seen, or treated accordingly prior to the respondents' embracing of Islam, which appears to resonate with jihadist messages fuelling resentment towards the injustices done to fellow Muslims around the world.⁷⁶

Yet, this still does not fully help to understand the different paths that the respondents in our study took, as there are still some exceptions to these patterns. A final distinction between the IIJM and the non-IIJM respondents concerns their involvement in Muslim communities after conversion. The pattern that becomes visible among the IIJM-respondents is one of a greater reliance on online sources of knowledge, not taking classes or knowledge in and from conventional mosques, and the lacking presence of significant Muslim others—such as a spouse—that guides the convert to non-jihadist interpretations of Islam. On the contrary, in a number of cases our respondents formed convert couples that fuelled each other's radical thoughts or could at the minimum not introduce each other to an alternative point of view. Hence, the claim that converts lack a decent Islamic basis that, Bartoszewicz dismisses as erroneous, does actually seem to hold some merit.⁷⁷

These findings can be better understood in light of previous studies that focused on non-involvement in jihadist movements. While Gielen and Sieckelinck mention strengthening non-radical forms of religious knowledge and chances to participate in society as two possible roads to take to increase resilience against radicalisation, Geelhoed and Staring highlight precisely these elements in a resume of two studies on Turkish-Dutch youngsters.⁷⁸ They tentatively conclude that Turkish Dutch youngsters seem to be more 'resilient' against radicalisation and hence, are underrepresented in jihadist movements; this is a result of the alternative paths for identity, belonging, and political activism, the institutionalised Islam and hence way to get to mainstream religious information that Turkish-Dutch communities offer.⁷⁹ In this respect, the situation of the IIJM-converts in this study forms an almost one-on-one contrast due to the alienation, the lack of a religious basis, and logical place to acquire this basis.

Conclusions

This study aimed to increase our understanding of the different pathways converts take during conversion to Islam, by answering the following research question: "How do the pathways of converts involved in jihadist movements differ from those of converts who are not, in terms of their life prior to Islam, their conversion experience and the form of involvement with the Islamic community after conversion?" This question was addressed on the basis of semi-structured interviews with a diverse group of 26 Dutch converts to Islam. This study does not offer a representative sample of converts, nor did it aim to do so. Instead, we intended to gather as diverse a sample as possible. We did discover,

⁷⁶ See also: Geelhoed. "Purification and Resistance."; Geelhoed, *Striving for Allah*, who compares non-radicalized and radicalized Muslims, both converts and 'born-again', and concludes that the radical and extremist Muslims in her study express a greater – yet sometimes temporary – sensitivity to social exclusion and desire to stand out from the crowd, a sensitivity and desire that appear to resonate with experiences in their lives prior to turning to a radical or extremist interpretation of Islam and for which jihadist narratives seem to provide a suitable answer.

⁷⁷ Bartoszewicz, "Controversies of Conversions." See also Schuurman, Grol, and Flower, "Converts and Islamist Terrorism: An Introduction."

⁷⁸ Gielen and Sieckelinck, "Protective and Promotive."; Fiore Geelhoed and Richard Staring. "Wereldbeelden en weerbaarheid van Turks-Nederlandse jongeren. De twee gezichten van een sterke interne gerichtheid," *Justitiële Verkenningen* 2, no. 49-65 (2016).

⁷⁹ Geelhoed and Staring, "Wereldbeelden en weerbaarheid van Turks-Nederlandse jongeren."

however, that respondents who converted in their twenties are overrepresented in this project, whereas the analysis demonstrates that the converts in this study who became involved in jihadist movements turned to Islam when they were still in their teens.

While formulating an answer to the research question, it is first necessary to reflect on the distinction between converts who have never been involved in jihadist movements and those who have been or are still involved in jihadist movements. Despite the fact that this distinction can resolve some of the problems of the principal alternative terms ‘radicalisation’ and ‘violent extremism’, the term ‘involvement in’ is a broad term that could encompass different kinds of involvement—e.g. active or passive, etcetera—and various reasons and motivations. In the case of our respondents, we compared converts who became involved in jihadist movements a decade ago with converts who did so in the past couple of years. Moreover, we compared converts who only accepted jihadist ideas whereas others also acted upon these ideas and converts who had already let go of jihadist ideas with those who still accepted such views. One thus could wonder how fair this comparison is.

With these critical notes in mind we would like to formulate five conclusions regarding the central research question.

1. Overall, this study once again confirms that there are no single causes, motivations, or triggers that result in conversion to Islam or involvement in Jihadist movements. It is always a matter of co-occurring events that enforce and build upon each other.
2. When looking at the period of time preceding the conversion processes, there are no clear differences visible between those who (once) were involved in a jihadist movement (IIJM) and those who are not/have never been (NIIJM). What does stand out, is that the pre-conversion lives of all the converts studied here show many similarities. These similarities involve relatively turbulent pasts for nearly all of the converts, especially the experience of growing up in a broken home or one typified by pedagogical problems, that seem to have fostered a feeling of being adrift and—for some—a lack of belonging that demonstrates parallels with the ontological insecurity in late modern, liquid times.
3. Regarding their discovery of Islam, a similar picture emerges. Again, the NIIJM converts and the IIJM converts seem to have much in common. Principally, existential questions and a search for truth, desire for support and belonging, the perception that they should keep their initial exploration of Islam hidden for their non-Muslim families, the support they experienced from Muslim friends and contacts who directly and indirectly supported the respondents’ quest towards Islam, and, sometimes, an interest in Islam that was triggered by a sceptical attitude towards the mostly negative portrayals of the religion in Dutch media and society.
4. Regarding the conversion experiences themselves, several positive aspects stood out as being especially important for the respondents. These include gaining a clear sense of identity, through finding comfort and a sense of belonging that Islam and its community of believers provides. On the negative side, many respondents faced negative reactions from family, society, especially when their Muslim identity becomes visible in their appearance and behaviour. Moreover, the in itself positive experience of a sense of belonging for some converts also fostered a sense of connection with the suffering of other Muslims and a desire to right these injustices. This appears to contribute to the likelihood of a convert’s identification with radicals and extremists, who

are seen in this light as the Muslim brothers who dare to act on behalf of the oppressed.

5. In terms of Muslim contacts and involvement in Islamic communities post-conversion, several interesting differences between the (once) radicalised and non-radicalized respondents were noted. Those respondents, especially, who have headed into a radical direction seem to have been disconnected from the mainstream Islamic community. They took an independent route to learning Islam, rejecting scholars and imams of mainstream mosques and instead opting for self-study of more radical literature, often found online, in interaction with like-minded peers and partners. On the contrary, none of the respondents who did have close connections to more traditional Islamic communities, such as through having a Muslim partner or taking lessons from other, more experienced Muslims, became involved in jihadist movements. Finally, this study confirms convert's zeal as a factor that—in interaction with other factors—appears to contribute to the likeliness of some new Muslims embracing radical or extremist positions.

In sum, there seem to be no clear differences in terms of the experiences of respondents prior to their conversion. With respect to the conversion experience, the IIJM respondents seem to have experienced a stronger sense of alienation and simultaneously, in their sense of belonging, they focus on the injustice done to Muslims worldwide, which is fostered by the information they independently gather online with like-minded peers, at a distance from mainstream Islamic communities.

In addition to these conclusions this study has brought forward a number of tentative conclusions that require a more solid foundation and could thus be formulated as questions for future research.

A first question relates to the link between close contacts of converts and their involvement in jihadist movements. Firstly, it appears that the respondents who experienced alienation inspired by negative reactions to becoming Muslim from family and peers, or a lack of connection with non-jihadist Muslim communities and/or feelings of exclusion from society at large were more strongly involved with Islam and seemingly in jihadist movements. Secondly, it appears that having a mainstream Muslim partner or having mainstream Muslim relatives acted as a buffer against involvement with jihadist movements in case of some of the respondents. These impressions raise the following question: How does the close, social environment of converts – in terms of reactions to conversion and in terms of Islamic beliefs – relate to the involvement in Islamic communities of converts?

In sum, there seem to be many similarities and differences in terms of the experiences of respondents prior to their conversion. The IIJM-converts in this study overall had some of the most turbulent pasts and most of them (temporarily) left their parental home, willingly or unwillingly, when they were still a minor. With respect to the conversion experience, the IIJM respondents seem to have experienced a stronger sense of alienation from their personal environment and Dutch society and simultaneously, in their sense of belonging, they focus on the injustice done to Muslims worldwide, which is fostered by the information they independently gather online with like-minded peers and partners, at a distance from mainstream Islamic communities.

Understanding if and to what degree converts who become involved in jihadist movements differ from the majority who do not, requires teasing apart the conversion process. As we have shown, there are many similarities, yet also some differences in the

pre-conversion lives of the converts we studied, in how they experienced the conversion itself and their involvement with Islamic communities after their conversion. The differences we found, emerged largely from how the respondents shaped and experienced their lives as Muslims. Here we noted not just the important role of the social milieu in which the converts find themselves, and how their surroundings react to their new identities, but also the influence of their own agency in terms of their reactions (or lack thereof) to perceived injustice and their efforts at self-study.

Importantly, our study also highlighted the fluidity and heterogeneity of the post-conversion experience. Just as Muslims should not be seen as a homogenous group, so too should care be taken to realise that converts' outlook on their religion can and does change over time, sometimes showing quite dramatic fluctuations from Salafi-Jihadist to non-believer. We hope that our study provides insights into conversion to Islam in general, that it helps address why some converts become involved with jihadist movements, but also that it underlines the importance of treating converts to Islam not as a potential security threat, but as a diverse group of individuals with different and evolving perceptions of their religion and their roles within it.

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