

Controversies of Conversions: The Potential Terrorist Threat of European Converts to Islam

by **Monika G. Bartoszewicz**

Abstract

This article summarising some findings from a doctoral dissertation discusses European converts to Islam. It explores the conditions under which conversion leads to radicalisation and terrorist violence; it analyses recrudescence concomitances of causal mechanisms of this phenomenon. Furthermore, it explores possible pathways existing between conversion, radicalisation and terrorist violence; identifies key variables pertaining to causal pathways and processes; provides hypotheses regarding the radicalisation pathways, and establishes a typology that can serve as a basis for further studies. By dispelling stereotypes on European New Muslims (ENM) this research note offers a new, contextual approach to the issue under consideration. In doing so it invites the reader to reconsider the concepts of “convert”, “radicalisation” and “potential”- concepts crucial for questioning the widely expressed assumptions that European converts to Islam are a homogenous “risk group” and a security threat.

Introduction

Conventional wisdom regarding European converts to Islam and branding them as a security threat is based on the premise that the majority lack the necessary religious knowledge and are therefore unable to discern between the various interpretations of Islam - thereby constituting easy prey for radicals.[1] Moreover, the idea of “convert’s zeal” contributes to the belief that being ready to prove their dedication to the new faith and community, converts are prepared and willing to do anything, including perpetrating the most atrocious acts of political violence.[2] There are two prevailing pictures of European converts to Islam taken from a security perspective. One presents converts as operational assets for the jihadist circles, whereby the instrumental value of European New Muslims (ENM) is underlined not only in terms of proselytising, logistics or support, but also for planning and carrying out terrorist attacks.[3] Official reports and analyses indicate that radical groups recruited converts because of their ability to cross borders with greater ease or serve as front men for renting accommodation or for providing other logistical support. There is also the notion that many recent converts are women; a factor further complicating establishing a standard profile.[4] The second picture, prevalent in the media, presents converts as disaffected and often troubled young people, who perceive the current wave of Islamic terrorism as the new revolution and join an idealist fight against the evils of the world, against the rich, the powerful, and the unjust.[5] From this perspective, the *Quran* appears as the new *Das Kapital*.

This partially explains why, in spite of the small numbers of converts attracted to terrorism, security services are stubbornly focusing on converts, perceiving them as a serious and growing terrorist threat. From such an angle, the supposed road from convert to jihadist is remarkably short and simple and the terrorist potential is immense. It is also suggested that someone new to Islam does not have the cultural bearings or a sound religious grounding to resist radical interpretations of Islam. Such conceptual errors can lead to a false and misleading perception of the causality between European converts to Islam and terrorism.

The Study

In view of such problems and perceptions, I undertook a study aimed at examining which factors determine converts' non-violent (ideological) and violent (with subsequent engagement in terrorism) radicalisation. Consequently, the research explored what the radicalisation mechanisms are that may lead to such an activity, to determine possible regularities and to analyse viable implications pertaining to countering them. Providing a precise assessment of the potential threat of European New Muslims and a thorough analysis of their conversion processes as well as a typology that can help counter their radicalisation is timely as converts are now viewed by many policy makers, as well as representatives of academia, think-tanks and society at large as remaining at the heart of the terrorist threat which looms over Europe.

The methodology of the research developed over the course of study. It started with a deductive approach based on the available academic literature on European converts to Islam. A majority of experts treats converts as a homogenous group; broad generalisations are conducted whereby converts are presented as gullible individuals, easy to influence and prone to fall into an outbidding spiral when trying to prove their worth to their new brethren. Thus, for the purposes of the research, the working hypothesis assumed an "outbidding spiral" with converts wanting to prove their true "Muslimness" and show without any doubts that in spite of being newcomers to religion they truly belong to the community of believers.[6] The working hypothesis stipulated that converts want to prove that they left behind everything that in their view the West stands for: moral emptiness, hedonism, secularism, shallow consumerism and even a perception of a Western conspiracy against Muslims. During the field work, this claim proved to be erroneous and thus a deductive approach was abandoned in favour of the inductive one. Consequently, the cases were examined to uncover what causal pathways might operate in them and what radicalisation processes are triggered under what conditions. Such combination of cross-case (through a comparative case study) and within case (through process tracing) analysis reduced to a high degree the risk of inferential errors that can arise from using a single method. The typology, on the other hand, sought to group the various kinds of causal mechanisms and pathways that link the independent variables of each type with its outcome. The ultimate aim was therefore to develop a comprehensive typology through a series of case studies and process tracing methods.[7]

Due to my desire to avoid prior assumptions about what constitutes “radical Islam” and a willingness to circumvent the heated debate on the nature of fundamentalist religious ideology and practices as well as due to the nature of the research, radicalisation needed to be conceptualised in the broadest of possible terms. While the criminal nature of terrorism is widely accepted, it is very difficult to find a consensus as to what kind of extremist views should be outlawed and which ones should still be permissible under the premises of the free speech. In other words: being a terrorist is a crime, being a radical is most definitely not. On the other hand, just because some people decide to take things into their own hands and perpetrate terrorist acts, this does not mean that they are more radical in their beliefs than those whose choice of method was different. One’s radicalism cannot be measured in one’s proneness to violent action.[8] Hence, radicalism as an advocacy of, and commitment to, bringing about a sweeping social, political or religious change and a total, political and social transformation is not necessarily violent. In terms of means used, radicalism can be a perfectly legitimate challenge to the established norms or policies. It does not by itself constitute a terrorist threat and does not necessitate violence. Thus, I understand radicalisation as a process of turning away from mainstream society and a rejection of its norms and values through advocating a way of life that challenges the status quo and rejecting the core fundamentals of liberal democracy with a possible but not necessary engagement in illegal and/or violent activities. Being radical can be described as a desire to have the monopoly over the way life should be lived and society organized. The ultimate marker of deepening radicalisation is not the inclination towards the use of violence but progressing *totalism* whereby the individual moves from everybody “can”, through “should” to “must” live my way of life. Terrorist violence is understood in the study as an active engagement in the implementation of a terrorist act or the planning of such an act (even it foiled by the interception of the plot preparation or execution by law-enforcement agencies).

Data

Since my research relied entirely on causal stories, which rest on different chains of complex causal relations, I argue that small-n analysis has much higher efficacy for the purposes of the study. It can discover regularities through qualitative analysis and juxtaposition of similar cases. This facilitates addressing the question of causal processes as well as the pathways within each case. The indispensable data reflects the qualitative nature of the research and consisted of four main pillars. The first one was academic literature on various forms of radicalisation and on European converts to Islam. The second group consisted of materials acquired through sustained and systematic archival work with open sources: magazines, newspapers, and Internet websites. This allowed for a surprisingly comprehensive documentation of converts’ background, biographical data, and individual characteristics, including statements and narratives of those converts who were inaccessible for direct interviews. Thirdly, given the nature of the research, primary sources are extremely difficult to acquire and sometimes simply impossible to obtain. As

a consequence, official policy reports published by governments, think tanks, research centres and other publicly available governmental analyses were the best source of information for those cases where a direct interview was not possible due to the demise of an individual under investigation and/or due to national security concerns. The final tier were fieldwork notes from participant observation sessions, reflective diary, and in-depth interviews with European converts residing in the UK, the Netherlands and Poland. These were collected between May 2009 and April 2011. In this respect, the research moved between the theoretical avenues of academia to state documents (reflecting the official discourse on terrorism), and from media accounts to individuals' own statements.[9]

The study consisted of thirty in-depth, oral interviews, following a flexible but comparable set of open-ended questions. These offered the respondents a certain flexibility that allowed digressions, yet kept them within the perimeter of the study's interests. Nevertheless, an effort was made to retain maximum consistency across the cases to provide a profound understanding of particular contexts and trajectories of conversion. In addition to interviews, participant observation sessions were conducted for a year in the *New To Islam* community in Glasgow which in this study served as a representative microcosm of a broader panoply of New Muslims communities. I also attended an assortment of activities in which converts participated: public events like demonstrations, charity dinners or fashion shows but also religious meetings, sermons, lectures, talks, shopping trips and *shahadas* (Muslim profession of faith, i.e. declaration of the oneness of God and acceptance of Muhammad as God's prophet). A research diary was kept throughout this phase in order to record and systematise the research materials. The methodology described above allowed for specifying the pathways through which particular types of conversions related to radicalisation. Each pathway was characterized in terms of variables by identifying the conjunctive effects of underlying causal mechanisms operating within specified conditions. This allowed generalisations about possible future instances of radicalised converts who fit the same type of "ideal archetypes".

Findings

The findings of the study confirmed that "becoming to be," i.e. conversion to Islam, has an immense impact on the subsequent "being a Muslim". Therefore, in an attempt to investigate converts' radicalisation, one needs to look at the conversion stories. These are not mutually exclusive but balance each other and are to be read as complementary parts of a whole. These two elements of an individual's life are connected and work in concert. For this reason, a consistency approach is put forward; one that considers the issue of the potential terrorist threat of European converts to Islam from a pre-conversion vantage point and that proposes a concurrent, highly contextualised framework linking the converting trajectories with their subsequent influence of post-conversion period in converts' lives. Thus, the proposed approach

answers to conceptual weaknesses and offers an alternative that deeply affects our conceptions and presumptions about converts.

While carefully distinguishing European converts to Islam from other converting groups, the study weaves together decades of religious conversion research and offers a useful synthesis acknowledging that each conversion process incorporates active, passive, individual, collective, material and spiritual elements. Simultaneously, my proposition is more distinct in terms of research direction while, at the same time as it is more holistic, it avoids overlap and repetition of some of the flaws and biases of earlier models.[10] The main concern of my model is to take into consideration the contextual specificity of a carefully defined social group. I also wanted to portray the full range of the phenomenon of religious conversion indicated by other models, transcending their limitations by incorporating the aforementioned factors into a single model of conversion that can be applied to European converts to Islam.

The framework of the study underpins empirical investigations and it incorporates subjective utilities, recognising the diversity of conversion experiences as well as partially conflicting rationales and goals of changing one's religious denomination which may range from spiritual to ideological and from social to instrumental. Since conversion is the meeting point between an individual and religion, the model thus takes the human aspect in its actual behaviour either involving the individual self or other social actors open to external social forces on the one hand and the approach to the religious element on the other. This approach casts an invaluable light upon the dynamic relationship between social conditions and religious orientation in the identity transformation called religious conversion. These two crucial factors are complementary, not antagonistic, and stretching the analysis fully between the two poles of individual versus collective aspects of conversion captures the multiplicity of the facets of the conversion experience without creating a faulty impression that it is either one or the other aspect, but rather a dynamically interacting and interwoven whole.

		Individual	
		<i>Personal (Self)</i>	<i>Community (Muslims)</i>
Islam	Spiritual <i>(ideational)</i>	Islam: Salvation <i>Conversion Remedy</i>	Islam: Development <i>Conversion Enlightenment</i>
	Material <i>(practical)</i>	Islam: Answer <i>Conversion Solution</i>	Islam: Goods <i>Conversion Necessity</i>

Figure 1. The Conversion Trajectories

The above meta-theoretical matrix is a viable alternative to existing theories; a meeting point between the two modes of thinking about conversion, between the individual approach focusing on a single person and looking for *the ideal type* of convert and the collective approach analysing structural factors and trying to capture *the ideal mechanism* of conversion. It shows unequivocally that converts cannot be treated uniformly as a security risk group. The question arises, however, if there is no ideal convert/conversion model: how can the variance be determined and the potential for violent (or non-violent) radicalisation be assessed?

Assessing the impact of conversion on later life is an extremely challenging and daunting task. In the first place, the conversion narrative is not always available. Secondly, the difficulties of establishing the conversion trajectory notwithstanding, we need to remember that “becoming to be” only shapes “being New Muslim”. The acceptance of Islam as religion by taking *shahada* is merely a first, albeit the most important, step in being a Muslim. However, the richness of the conversion experience is not limited to this simple act. The shape and dynamics of mechanisms operating throughout the conversion process do not determine its consequences. Yet they undeniably inform the further development and provide the impetus and stimulus for the first stages of the New Muslim life. In other words, the ways of Becoming suggest the possibilities of Being.

Converts are not a uniform monolith and the very name designating them as a group is but another social construct with constantly changing boundaries. Nonetheless, amidst the disparity that can be noted when comparing different converts, a common denominator emerges, namely their identity as European New Muslims, which appears to be a unifying factor that overcomes the divisions and discrepancies. It is crucial to analyse the possible ways of living a New Muslim

life and establish what factors have a key impact on the ideational change and how these interact. With the aim to refine the current conceptualisation of a potential terrorist threat we need to identify not only the types of ascertaining conversion but also the ways of living conversion. If *shahada* brings converts together and their identity as New Muslims sets them apart, the key to understanding the potential terrorist threat of European converts to Islam lies in the identity spectrum of understanding of what it means to be Muslim and to delineate the normative space of belonging. Thus, the ideational dimension renders the impartial knowledge about the factors crucial for security implications.

My proposition of the identity-belonging nexus and its influence on individual's actions is presented in the following matrix, being an amended version of Sandra Wallman's four-part social boundary matrix. Wallman's [11] original proposition does not provide answers to the enriched "me" versus the changed "me" dilemma: Is conversion a putting on of a new layer of clothing or putting on a new garment altogether? Similarly, it leaves unexplained the question of conquering the border: Does conversion enlarge the space or is it a simple crossing where what once was "us" now becomes "them"? The main signifier is the nexus of identity and belonging: is the new self built on a rejection of the old or an acceptance of the new and what is the attitude towards "them" in relation to new "us"? Therefore, the study proposes a highly contextualised typology that allows for capturing the full texture and the dynamic nature of conversion, offering an analytic tool that reflect the nature of the problem and also has the potential to inform policy making. The matrix also develops the understanding of the relationship between the discursive and normative constituents of being a New Muslim and their role in the relationship between the individual and the group. Rejection and exclusion, as well as acceptance and inclusion always take place at the intersection of an enabling environment and a personal trajectory. My own research approach, while sympathetic to psychological pursuits, is oriented more towards a social self that is partially contingent on underlying psychological structures. At the crossroads of personal history and the conducive environment, the interplay of factors within the identity-belonging nexus can trigger radicalisation in varying degrees. Simultaneously, the use of violence is only one of the possible avenues of radicalisation.

Belonging

		<i>Inclusion</i>	<i>Exclusion</i>
<i>Identity</i>	<i>Acceptance</i>	Ambassador	Lost
	<i>Rejection</i>	Bridge	Castaway

Figure 2. The Typology of European Converts to Islam

The identity of a convert, the “New Muslim” identity, is understood here as a part of an individual’s self-concept. The degree to which it permeates life and organises other self-identities varies: It can be subjugated to the fact of being Scottish or Dutch or, conversely, it can overpower the notion of being a woman. Regardless of how rich and complex the importance of group membership is, its impact upon the individual behaviour will depend on positive or negative attitudes towards social identity categorization (what I am vs. what I am not). These are crucial in reference to the way we react towards “the other”.

Belonging, on the other hand, is seen as an emotional attachment, feeling safe and “at home” as defined by Nira Yuval-Davis.[12] In my proposition, belonging, as an act of self-identification, is considered from the cognitive perspective of the dynamics between inclusion-exclusion duality, which reflects the isomorphic nature of the border. Again, the notion of who is incorporated and who remains left out is crucial for determining the direction and intensity of interactions as every boundary must be viewed in a wider societal and political context showing the intricate connection between identity and belonging and the importance of borders. Naturally, one cannot attain a typology without making some sweeping generalisations. It is not the intention of this study to argue that the above convert archetypes are set in stone, i.e. that a person displaying one set of features characteristic for a given ideal type cannot and/or will not move into another quadrant. Furthermore, it needs to be remembered that ideal archetypes identified within the proposed theoretical framework remain *ideal*, i.e. while capturing the mechanisms and dynamics of social reality, by their nature offer only simplified versions of the real world.

On the individual level the study explored whether the two identities, the national and the Islamic, are conflicted or competing and whether the indigenous cultural element vanishes after crossing the religious border. The framework shows how individuals feeling at ease with their hitherto prevailing identity and who embrace Islam not as the essence of “the other” but as something that completes the wholeness of their personality (acceptance) are far less inclined to proceed to activities that aim at destroying the culture in which they were brought up as opposed to those who, in order to embrace Islam, feel the need to discard in an act of rejection all that they were before the *shahada*. This framework also indicates that when someone not so much embraces Islam, but rejects the West and everything it represents, by excluding the whole sphere of belonging they make themselves more vulnerable towards radicalisation. The first case resembles a situation where a church building is no longer in use for Christian services but can still serve the community as a museum or an art gallery or a mosque. In the second instance the building itself is deemed undesirable and unfit to become a mosque, so it is destroyed to give space for new structures.

Four Archetypes

By looking at the converts’ own narratives, the study illustrated the dynamic interplay of the factors crucial during a convert’s life after the *shahada*. Each of the elements shaping the way Islam is lived by European New Muslims was analysed through the proposed conceptual framework in order to reflect upon the complex reality of the converts’ lived lives within the identity-belonging nexus. In this light, particular consideration was given to rejection, acceptance, exclusion and inclusion factors. The Ambassadors narratives show how acceptance and inclusion are instruments for internalising the differences and enhancing the pluralism of ideas countering radicalisation. One respondent called Anna showed how the Ambassador archetype represents individuals for whom conversion is based upon acceptance and inclusion, the reconciliation of the old with the new, with all elements working in unison. *“No, it is not important that people know that I am a Muslim. I hope that they will see about my behaviour that I am a Muslim [rather] than I have a label here [pointing to her forehead]. I want to find the similarities. That is what I want to find, because that is what gives us a bond.”*[13] As the analysis revealed, Ambassadors are not tussled between contending perspectives. Ambassadors offer a registry of solutions to potential conflicts and represent some sense of a middle path between the other archetypes that stand divided on ideas central to the lives of European converts to Islam and the issue of them being a security issue.

The Lost archetype counters the theories arguing that only the young, socially alienated and economically marginalised individuals convert. It also challenges the unidirectional dynamics of radicalisation and shows how a convert can practice with all the zeal of a new believer, then slowly diminish in his fervour being on the verge of abandoning religion altogether until a proper balance is found in the spiritual and material elements of life. It presents the most ephemeral and

contradictory of the four archetypes where embracing Islam as the new religion based on an acceptance of the new incessantly clashes with the exclusion of the old sense of belonging in their social, cultural and behavioural dimensions. The study argues that the Lost archetype is the most common and at the same time the least stable of the four archetypes. Simultaneously, it can be claimed that it is a conundrum of so many factors that one can hardly refer to the plethora of circumstances and responses as a cohesive archetype as it encompasses such a multitude of idiosyncratic behavioural traits. It is difficult therefore to describe an ideal individual since the variety within the type is based on an overabundance of highly personalised factors. At the same time, it is the ubiquitous archetype and the main challenge it poses from the security perspective is that it can easily lead a convert into *any* of the other three archetypes depending on which of the push and pull factors prevail in the identity-belonging dynamic. During the interviews a respondent called Asa brilliantly summarised the perils of a lost convert: *“As a new Muslim, if you ain’t got no knowledge you are going to do wild stuff...let’s say at that time I became a new Muslim, and I do not know nothing about Islam and I have...no sort of a mentor, someone to guide me in the right path, I could of easily fallen into um, um, extremism, you know? Because I think, I think, that is how they [radicals] target people...”*[14] Thus, while what is Lost can sometimes be found and mature as an Ambassador, the Lost archetype can occasionally also become a Bridge archetype and even entirely vanish in the vortex of the new-self and resurface as a Castaway.

The Bridge archetype emerges when one’s identity is created on the foundation of rejection and at the same time, instead of limiting the normative spaces of belonging, be opened towards conquering new territories and include new communities into one’s existential sphere. It often necessitates making hard choices like explained by a respondent called Liliana: *“I knew I was going to become a Muslim and I knew the consequences of my choice: that I will not be able to stay at home because it would be hard and that my studies will not help me in anything, in life I mean. I also knew that I would have to leave because most of the [Muslim] guys live abroad, those with whom I would like to be.”* [15] Thus, in a sense acting as a Bridge requires both cultural and social bi-location which only is intensified by the interplay between the factors of rejection and inclusion, a prevalent feature of this archetype. The investigation exposes that Bridges are people of concrete deeds and swift actions. The Bridge, although grounded quite firmly in culture, binds the two banks of his religious identity. Simultaneously, however, the Bridge indicates a certain migratory tendency: one does not enter the bridge to remain there forever, a bridge leads somewhere and hence those who can be ascribed to the Bridge archetype are always on the move, never rooted in one place, never fully settled. Symptomatically, even though the Bridges professes a world without barriers, by acting as an intermediary between two communities whom they clearly distinguish from each other, they in fact replicate the divisions. To quote one of them, Laura: *“In contrast to Europe where we have stereotyping of Muslims, in the Arab world they are stereotyping Europe, yes they are! And a lot of our Muslims [female*

converts] have problems just because they are European. They are rejected...So these are two different worlds, based on their cultures I would say, and converts are just a group in between."[16]

The Castaway archetype draws upon the stories of individuals whose lives constitute a unique coalescence of rejection and exclusion. That provides favourable conditions for a totality of belief which has the potential of resulting in susceptibility towards terrorist violence. The Castaway archetype is the one that has become emblematic, often being taken as representative of the whole convert community. To define this archetype in one sentence, one could say that instead of living Islam *in* Europe, the Castaways live Islam *instead* of Europe. Eric Breininger's memoirs "*Mein Weg nach Jannah*"[My Road to Paradise] perfectly exemplifies these tendencies: "*I knew that I had to take measures against the crusaders who were humiliating our brothers and sisters. Also every Muslim should stand up for a life according to the law of Allah and for that reason that we must build an Islamic state.*"[17] The study concluded that the tandem of rejection and exclusion trigger dynamics whereby a desire for a borderless world results in perpetual reaffirmations of existing divisions. It argued that the Castaway is but a minority in the converts' community and hence the matrix proposed in the doctoral thesis (of which this article forms a partial summary) might help develop policies to target radicalisation vulnerabilities. It invites policy makers to re-think and re-structure current policy approaches to European converts to Islam.

Conclusions

The study's conclusions amount to an invitation to reconsider the concept of "the convert". In addition to redefining "the convert", it also calls for redefining the concept of "the potential". It stipulates that the lack of understanding of converts' drives, and the very nature of the process of radicalisation culminates in, an ignorance of the fact that the convert community, *en masse*, vehemently opposes being labelled a security threat. In particular it is claimed that *the potential* of the convert community as first and foremost allies in countering terrorist threats, is ignored. This, in turn, raises profound concerns in terms of the efficacy of anti-radicalisation and anti-terrorist policies. Secondly, the more flexible perspective offered in the thesis highlights the interplay of factors indicated in the meta-theoretical matrix and the typology. The research conducted opens up alternative avenues that could be used on the policy-making level in order to inhibit and disrupt processes of converts' radicalisation. The theoretical framework proposed in the dissertation allows not only for a more flexible perspective and a fuller and more appropriate understanding of potential terrorist threats posed by European converts to Islam, but also shows how these can be translated into concrete security policies. The negative approach aimed at eliminating Castaways should be replaced by a positive one resulting in strengthening and facilitating the Ambassador archetype. The research conducted strongly advocates a nuanced, more accurate understanding of the potential terrorist threat of European converts to Islam. Such

an approach could be more successful than a rigid essentialised approach of a “risk group” that is far too generic to be functional at the policy level.

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Notes

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