

## II. Research Notes

### Lost Souls Searching for Answers?

#### Belgian and Dutch Converts Joining the Islamic State

by Marion van San

##### *Abstract*

*Since the start of the Syrian conflict much has been written about Western foreign fighters who travel to the country to join Islamic State. In much of the literature it is asserted that a fair percentage of these foreign fighters are converts to Islam. Yet, we know very little about who these people are. In this Research Note, the image of converts who have joined the Islamic State as portrayed in the media is first examined. Subsequently, based on ethnographic research, an attempt is made to provide deeper insight into the family background of seventeen Belgian and Dutch converts. While this is a small sample, it can nevertheless contribute to a better understanding what makes young converts join the armed struggle in Syria in the name of Allah.*

**Keywords:** Islamic State, converts, foreign fighters, radicalization process

##### *Introduction*

According to the latest estimates, the number of foreign fighters traveling to Syria and Iraq in order to fight alongside Islamic State has grown to nearly 30,000, of whom some 5,000 are from Western countries. Although exact numbers are hard to come by, terrorism experts have noted that a significant number of the foreign fighters coming from the West are converts to Islam and that the number of converts rushing to the aid of the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) is far greater than in any other modern conflict in the Islamic World. [1] It is estimated that one in six Europeans joining the organization are converts from non-Muslim faiths, including Christianity, while some have a non-religious background. [2] In France, the ratio of converts among those leaving is even higher: about one in four. [3] From Belgium and the Netherlands dozens of converts have left for Syria, mostly women. The Dutch General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD) recently suggested that most Dutch jihadists are young Moroccans who grew up in the Netherlands. [4] Of a sample of the 329 young people with Belgian nationality, who joined the armed struggle in Syria, ten per cent are converts. [5]

Since the start of the war in Syria in 2011 there has been great concern about the number of converts joining Islamic State as this seems to indicate that violent extremism can attract people from all sorts of environments. [6] Although security services all over Europe perceive converts as a serious and growing terrorist threat, most researchers argue that only a small number of them are attracted to terrorism. [7] Other authors take a different view. Olivier Roy (2008), for example, mentioned the 'very high level of converts' (estimates range from nine to twenty per cent) in organizations such as Al Qaeda. [8] Simcox and Dyer considered the proportion of converts in the UK who committed Islamism-related offences in the last years 'disproportionately high'. [9]

Empirical research on the involvement of converts in Islamism-related offences shows a fragmented picture. The report *Al-Qaeda in the United States. A Complete Analysis of Terrorism Offenses* profiled 171 individuals who were convicted of al-Qaeda related offences or committed suicide attacks between 1997 and 2011. Nearly a

quarter (24 per cent) of all al-Qaeda related offences were committed by converts to Islam. [10] The report *Islamist Terrorism. The British Connections* includes profiles of all Islamism-related terrorist convictions in the UK in 2010, and presents an overview of Islam-related terrorism with significant connections to the UK between 1999 and 2010. The analysis shows that fifteen per cent of the individuals who committed Islamism-related offences were converts. [11] In 2006, Edwin Bakker showed that out of 242 individual cases of jihadi terrorists in Europe, 14 were converts. [12] Some government-issued reports have also shed light on the increasing role of converts in terrorist plots and attacks. [13] However, a clear picture of the involvement of converts in terrorism is still missing. Furthermore, fairly little is known in the social sciences about the involvement of converts in terrorism. [14] There are numerous studies about converts, but they do not address their possible involvement in terrorism. [15] Despite this lack of knowledge, hundreds of media articles have appeared on converts to Islam joining terrorist groups. According to Kleinmann and Flower, most of these articles are speculative and only reinforce an inaccurate stereotype of the group. [16]

This research note will first focus on the image that has been presented in media reports over the last months referring to converts who have joined the Islamic State. Based on ethnographic research this Research Note aims to provide insight into the family background of a group of seventeen Belgian and Dutch converts. Eight concrete cases of Belgian and Dutch converts who joined Islamic State have been analysed in an effort to provide a more complete picture of who these youngsters are.

### ***Who are Islamic State's Western Converts?***

Since the outbreak of the war in Syria there have been many media reports in which terrorism-experts and representatives of security services were asked to explain the large number of converts affiliated with the Islamic State, even though nobody seemed to know exactly how many of them had actually joined the organization. As already shown by Bartoszewicz, the image prevalent in the media presents converts as disaffected and often troubled young people. [17] Those who have joined the Islamic State are often described as 'fragile people who are drawn to a sectarian version of Islam' [18], or as 'lost souls searching for answers' [19] and 'chasing a fictional dream' [20]. They are, furthermore, often seen as people with little knowledge of Islam who have been influenced and radicalized by recruiters on social media. [21] The conventional wisdom regarding European converts to Islam and the branding of these people as a security threat is based, according to Bartoszewicz, on the premise that the majority lack the necessary religious knowledge and are therefore unable to discern between the various interpretations of Islam, which makes them easy prey for radicals. [22]

Experts often think that converts are more vulnerable than others because of a lack of social support. Some were abandoned by their families and they may not be accepted into mainstream mosques. This isolation can make them vulnerable to extremists hoping for white converts to add credibility to their cause. [23] An important reason for people to convert to Islam seems to lie in the desire to forge a new identity, one based on dignity, as claimed by Jessica Stern in *Newsweek*. For those who join Islamic State, there is an element of thrill-seeking as well, perhaps even an attraction to violence. [24] The reason why youngsters join the armed struggle, Peter Neumann, director of the ICSR in London, in an interview with *Der Spiegel*, pointed at their desire to provoke, which is common among teenagers. 'Salafism is the most provocative form of rebellion in tolerant Western societies' he said. 'You can't really do anything more extreme than that.' [25]

In addition, converts are often described as the most dangerous, most fanatical followers of radical Islam. [26] This is illustrated by some cases of their involvement in suicide attacks, such as the twin brothers from North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany, who converted to Islam and committed a suicide attack on behalf of ISIS.

[27] Another example is the 22-year-old Frenchmen from rural Normandy, who converted to Islam at the age of seventeen and appeared in an execution video from the Islamic State. [28] There is also the example of the British convert Khadijah Dare who declared on Twitter after the beheading of James Foley her desire to replicate the execution: “I wna b da 1st UK woman 2 kill a UK or US terrorist!”. [29] Ready to prove their dedication to Islam, it seems that converts are prepared to do anything, including perpetrating the most atrocious acts of violence. [30] It is suggested, Bartoszewicz claims, that someone new to Islam does not have the cultural bearings or a sound religious grounding to resist radical interpretations of Islam. Such statements can lead to a false and misleading perception of the causality between European converts to Islam and terrorism. [31]

The question is indeed if the image that is presented in media reports over the last few years about converts who joined the armed struggle in Syria accords with reality. To get more clarity on this issue, this Research Note examines the life stories of a group of Belgian and Dutch converts who went to Syria. Although the material is still too limited to draw far-reaching conclusions, it gives a unique glimpse into their lives. Further research is clearly necessary.

### ***Research on Belgian and Dutch Foreign Fighters***

The data for this research note were collected through ethnographic research on radicalizing youths and their families which started in 2012 and continues until the present day. Over the past years, the author had dozens of formal and informal conversations with youngsters who departed for Syria. Since May 2013 additional ethnographic research among twenty families whose children have joined ISIS has been conducted.

The youngsters and their families were initially found via *Facebook*, which turned out to be a suitable medium to reach a group that is notoriously difficult to access. [32] But as the war in Syria progressed and tougher measures were proclaimed by the Belgian and Dutch governments to prevent the departure of so many youngsters, distrust increased. In addition, doing research through *Facebook* became more difficult, as the authorities were actively removing the profiles of radicalized youngsters. From that period onwards, informants were found through the author's networks, the parents who already belonged to the researched group and from media reports about youngsters who had left for Syria.

Among the thirty-five youngsters who eventually left for Syria, there were seventeen converts. In six cases, interviews were conducted with the youngsters themselves and in eleven cases with their parents. These were seven young men from Belgium and three young men and seven young women from the Netherlands. They were all between 18 and 30 years old, with a low or medium level of education and originating from lower- or lower-middle-class socio-economic backgrounds. At the time they departed for Syria, only two of them were still in school. Six of them had obtained their diploma, whereas nine had left school without a certificate. To guarantee the anonymity of the youngsters and their families all personal information has been anonymized.

This Research Note examines eight concrete cases of Belgian and Dutch converts who have joined the Islamic State. Obviously, these eight cases cannot possibly provide a complete picture of the phenomenon of radicalized Belgian and Dutch converts. More empirical data are needed to gain a better understanding of what was really going through their minds when they decided to leave their families and join the armed struggle in Syria. Hence, conclusions are necessarily tentative.

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### *Family Backgrounds of the Young Women*

The families of most of the young women who joined ISIS have a history of problems, most of them related to the divorce of their parents, addiction, domestic violence and sexual abuse. For **Joyce**, an eighteen-year-old girl born and raised in the Netherlands, the problems started when she was a young girl. The family had two children (Joyce and her older sister Janice) and lived in a working class neighbourhood in a Dutch town near the Belgian border. Joyce's mother had been in an abusive marriage with Joyce's father for seventeen years before the couple finally divorced. Joyce was allegedly sexually abused by her father, but this could not be verified. She left for Syria in December 2013, ten months after converting to Islam.

Twenty-year-old **Carla** was friends with Joyce on *Facebook*. Her parents had two children: Carla and her older sister Viviane. Her mother left her father when she was pregnant with her youngest child. Carla's father always acknowledged parentage of her older sister but never recognized Carla as his daughter. According to her mother, this had a major impact on her life. Carla's mother has been in a lesbian relationship for the past seven years. The couple lives in a quiet area in the south of the Netherlands. Carla left for Syria in January 2014, seven months after converting to Islam.

After arriving in Syria, Carla struck up a friendship with **Rose**. The girls already knew each other from a group on *Facebook*. Rose had left for Syria in May 2014. She was nineteen years old at the time and had converted to Islam the year before. Rose's mother lives in an apartment in a quiet neighbourhood near Amsterdam. She has been married twice and has two children. Rose's parents divorced when she was two years old. Rose's mother was in an abusive marriage with Rose's father and ended up in a shelter for battered women. Her second marriage was similarly abusive and also ended in divorce.

**Syona**, 21 years old, was in the same Facebook group as Carla. Her mother and stepfather live in a nice middle class house in a quiet area near The Hague. Syona's father lives in a desolate neighbourhood in Rotterdam. His flat is shabby, with unpainted doors and walls, worn-out furniture and broken floor covers. The family has three children. Syona's parents divorced when she was nine months old. The parents blame each other for everything that went wrong with their children. According to Syona's mother, everything changed when she ended up in hospital for an extended period of time during which she was not able to take care of her children. But according to her father, there were already problems before his ex-wife got ill. She worked in a night club, was dating the 'wrong' kind of boyfriends and left her children on their own. When the mother became ill the three children moved in with their father, but the situation spiralled out of control very soon. It was obvious that Syona's father was not able to take care of his children. He was an alcoholic, had a criminal record and was heavily in debt. Because of this domestic situation problems soon arose. The oldest son joined a neo-Nazi group, the second became a drug addict, and, as a young girl, Syona spent her days and nights on the streets. She left for Syria in May 2015, six months after converting to Islam.

### *Troubled Teens*

Joyce has always been a problematic child. As a young girl, she drank alcohol and used drugs, suffered from depression and mutilated herself. At the age of twelve, she spent four months in a mental institution. In the years that followed psychological problems continued to haunt her. In her hometown, she was known as a riotous girl, and was called 'the slutty' by the local boys. For many years her mother and sister feared that she would end up as a prostitute.

Carla had a troubled youth as well. She became pregnant at the age of fifteen, but the relationship with the father of her son lasted only for a short time. Between the age of fifteen and eighteen she lived, as she put

it, 'everywhere and nowhere'. She moved from shelter to shelter and finally ended up on the street. 'I was totally fed up with the situation' she wrote later in a letter. 'So I started to use cannabis, alcohol, and went to clubs almost every day'. Looking back, her mother and her partner think that Carla could have ended up as a prostitute, as she was very naïve as a young girl. Fortunately, that did not happen.

Rose, too, had many problems as a child and was diagnosed with borderline personality disorder. At home as well as in school, she displayed serious behavioural problems. After her parents divorced, Rose barely had any contact with her father, who lived abroad. As a young girl she was always trying to get the attention of the young Moroccan boys in her neighbourhood. Her mother was worried that she would end up in a prostitution network and bought her daughter books to warn her about the danger. At the age of twelve, behavioural problems at home caused Rose to go to a juvenile facility. She quit school when she was sixteen. She has had various jobs, but often left after only a few weeks.

As a teenager, Syona lived on the streets, used drugs and was involved in petty crime. She must have been around 18 years old when she got into a relationship with Mohamed, a street criminal, who later left for Syria after being inspired to do so by his older brother. Although the two were in a relationship, Mohamed made Syona available to other men and acted as her pimp.

### ***Conversion to Islam and Radicalization***

**Joyce** started to read the Bible at the age of seventeen, but apparently did not find in it what she was looking for. Later, she discovered Islam and converted not long after. At first, her family was relieved, because the problems she had before seemed to disappear. She no longer came home drunk, had stopped using drugs and was not dating the 'wrong' guys anymore. However, shortly after her conversion, the problems started again. Joyce began to wear a *niqab* and, over the next ten months, became increasingly alienated from her mother. Eventually, Joyce got in touch with a Dutch jihadi fighter on *Facebook*, married him via *Skype* a few days later and, after a month, left for Syria to join her new husband.

**Carla** converted to Islam around the same time as Joyce. Her mother considers her conversion as a way of dealing with her problems. But her mother also observed that Carla's behaviour changed from the moment she started to attend Islamic lectures in The Hague. What she did not know was that Carla had met Mohamed, Syona's by then ex-boyfriend. A few weeks after her conversion, Carla began to wear a *niqab*. She married Mohamed in December 2013. Shortly after the marriage, Mohamed left for Syria. Carla followed her husband one month later, leaving her 5-year-old son behind.

**Rose** started to wear a *niqab* three months after her conversion. During this period she met a jihadi fighting in Syria on *Facebook*. A few months later she left for Syria herself and got married the day after her arrival. According to her mother, Rose went to Syria because she was looking for forgiveness. 'They think that all their sins will be forgiven', Rose's mother explained. Many of the girls who left, as in Rose's case, appear to have lost their self-respect in one way or another and were told that they will get it back as soon as they start following the rules.

When **Syona** was twenty years old, she started reading the Bible but apparently the book did not make much of an impression on her. A short time later she converted to Islam, influenced by her best friend. Her father noticed that she became completely devoted to her faith. She started to learn Arabic, wore a *niqab* and went to the mosque every week. She also spent much time on the Internet, where she chatted with young people who had joined the armed struggle in Syria. For instance, she spoke regularly on *Skype* with Carla. But she also told her father that she was still in touch with Mohamed. Eventually, Syona also left. She hoped that, by doing

this, her sins would be forgiven. Travelling to Syria meant that she would get a ticket to paradise. 'Mum', she wrote her mother a few days after her arrival in Syria, 'Allah has given me a new opportunity; I have the opportunity to go to paradise, so this is really what I had to do'.

### ***Family Backgrounds of the Young Men***

While the girls often came from dysfunctional families and had many problems in their childhood and during adolescence, the situation of the young men was much more complicated. **Simon**, a 23-year-old born and raised in Belgium, is the oldest of seven children. In his family many problems were caused by the alcohol addiction of his mother, which eventually led to the divorce of his parents. As a young boy, Simon was diagnosed with ADD [explain abbreviation: Attention Deficit...?] and borderline personality disorder. In his early childhood he had lived in various juvenile facilities because of his behavioural problems.

The 24-year-old **Chester** was an acquaintance of Simon and also a convert to Islam. They met on *Facebook*, but also came across each other on a regular basis during meetings of *Sharia4Belgium* and *Sharia4Holland*. [33] Chester is the oldest son from a harmonious family of four that lives in a little village in the south of the Netherlands. Neither Chester nor his brothers and sister ever caused any problems.

**Liam**, 19 years old, lived with his mother and two sisters in Belgium. His parents were divorced. His mother had various relationships with the wrong kind of men and it was obvious she was not capable of raising her children. Liam spent most of the time at his grandmother's house. When his grandmother became too old to take care of him, Liam went back to his mother.

**Drew**, 18 years old, grew up in a harmonious family with two children. His parents divorced when he was four. Drew was raised by his mother and stepfather since he was five years old. He never had any contact with his biological father. Drew's mother has a warm relationship with both her children.

### ***Conversion to Islam and Radicalization***

**Simon**, who worked as an electrician, converted to Islam in 2006 because he was looking for a new purpose in his life. Worried about a negative reaction from his parents, he read books about Islam in secret. At some point, however, his father found out about his conversion, which caused a great deal of conflicts within the family for quite some time. Simon was very devoted to his religion, but he was also a womanizer. He married several times but his marriages all ended in divorce. He grew a beard and started to wear Islamic clothes, and sympathized with *Sharia4Belgium*. Like many youngsters at that time he regularly visited this organization where, in addition to lectures and classes, leisure activities were organized. *Sharia4Belgium* became the family he never had before.

**Chester**, who worked as a social worker, began to read the Koran 'out of curiosity' in the summer of 2011. The book made a tremendous impression on him and Chester converted to Islam. His parents were not pleased with their son's conversion and worried that he would become isolated in the village where he grew up. Chester was very devoted to his religion from the beginning. He exchanged his CD collection for Islamic books, grew a beard and began to wear only Islamic robes.

**Liam**, who had converted to Islam in December 2010, had often played football on a little square opposite his mother's house. He was still in high school when one of his neighbours introduced him to Fouad Belkacem, the spokesman of *Sharia4Belgium*. Belkacem discussed and interpreted certain parts of the Koran and was seen as a wise man by youngsters. Liam, in particular, was impressed by him. The atmosphere at the

headquarters of the organization was friendly and it became a second home for Liam. Every week he attended Islamic classes. He also joined the street-*dawa* movement. From the moment Liam joined *Sharia4Belgium*, his family noticed a change in him. He started to wear Islamic clothes and pressured his mother and sisters to convert to Islam as well. At school it was noticed that Liam's behaviour had changed. He began to criticize his Islamic classmates for practicing their faith incorrectly. He also criticized his teachers because of their religion (he attended a Catholic school). Because the problems were getting worse he was removed from school. From that moment on, Liam began to devote himself exclusively to his religion.

**Drew** converted to Islam in the summer of 2013. He had many Muslim friends and became interested in their religion. According to his parents his behaviour did not change after his conversion. He spent more time in his room but it was unclear whether this had to do with his conversion. He did not change his looks and kept listening to music. It is obvious that Drew was less devoted than Simon, Chester and Liam. Drew quit school shortly after his conversion and worked as a pizza boy at a local pizzeria. He was planning to return to school after the summer holidays. However, a few months later, he was suddenly gone.

### *Leaving for Syria*

In the weeks leading up to his departure to Syria, **Simon** got married again but this marriage also ended in divorce. Without anyone to depend on, Simon quit his job. He began to suffer from depression. Almost all of his 'brothers' in *Sharia4Belgium* had gone to Syria. Finally, in the winter of 2014, he decided to leave for Syria himself.

The first signs that **Chester** was interested in the armed struggle came a year after his conversion. At first, he was only communicating with like-minded people via *Facebook* but that changed when he started to go to lectures and conferences, where he met people he only had known from social media. In the summer of 2012, Chester regularly travelled to The Hague. Most of the young men he met there would join the armed conflict in Syria later that year. Mohamed and his older brother were also part of this group. Chester became more and more convinced that his place was in Syria, defending his brothers and sisters who were being slaughtered and raped by the Assad regime. On *Facebook*, he expressed sympathy for Osama Bin Laden and Anwar al Awlaki. At home, more and more conflicts arose and finally spun out of control in the winter of 2012. Chester left his parents' house and went to The Hague. A few months later, in May 2013, he was suddenly gone.

From the time that **Liam** was expelled from school, he became increasingly involved in the activities of *Sharia4Belgium*. Gradually, he started to join the protest actions organized by the organization and became more and more convinced that he had to go and help his brothers and sisters in Syria. In April 2013 he left, presumably with a group of ten other members of the organization.

**Drew's** mother never noticed a change in her son's behaviour after his conversion, but as it turned out, Drew and the friend he later travelled to Syria with, had indeed been studying jihadism in the weeks leading up to their departure. The boys often sat together in their room, praying and reading the Koran. They also watched *Youtube* videos about the war in Syria. They read books about the armed struggle and listened to sermons of Al Qaeda ideologues. The boys became more and more convinced that they should leave for Syria to help their brothers and sisters. If they did, they would be rewarded with a place in paradise. They left in the winter of 2014. Chester's departure came as a complete surprise to his family.

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**Conclusion**

The public image of converts joining the Islamic State as currently portrayed by the media is mostly one of youngsters with a problematic youth who acquired their knowledge of Islam through social media and are therefore easily influenced. These young people are seen as more susceptible than others to radical versions of Islam because of their limited knowledge of the religions various traditions. The present research has led the author to conclude that there is a considerable degree of truth to these observations. Unlike Bartoszewicz, Kleinmann and Flower, the present author is not convinced that most media articles are speculative and only reinforce an inaccurate stereotype of the group of converted jihadists. Nevertheless, there is no denying that reality is usually much more complex than media reports would have us believe.

The converts introduced in this Research Note were all under the age of thirty, came from lower- or lower-middle-class socio-economic backgrounds and had a low or medium level of education. Many of them, especially the girls, had a problematic childhood and adolescence. A common theme throughout their lives is that almost all of them were, in one way or another, abandoned by their fathers at a young age. Most of them used alcohol and drugs as teenagers and frequented nightclubs, while some of them were involved in prostitution or petty crime. Their conversion was often a means to escape their former lifestyles. Some girls left for Syria because they thought their sins would be forgiven. Others left because they fell in love with a fighter.

An accumulation of problems eventually leading to a period of seeking religious guidance has often been described in the literature. Wiktorowicz, for example, explains how traumatic personal experiences often set in motion an introspective period of 'religious seeking'. When a person's 'identity is tied in part to religion or he or she desired religious meaning, a cognitive opening may lead to religious seeking', which can also make the person vulnerable to radicalization. It is, however, never one single incident that makes a person susceptible to radicalization, but rather a history of traumatic life experiences and mental or behavioural health issues. [34] As we have seen, the girls often entered a period of religious seeking and ended up converting to Islam. It was their way of leaving the past behind and seeking forgiveness. What appealed to them in Islam, and later also in the ideology of ISIS, was that there were clear rules according to which one is supposed to live. In the end, that was what most girls had been looking for all their lives.

The situation of the young men was somewhat more complicated. For some of them, a previous disappointment was the reason for their conversion while others became interested in Islam because they had friends who were Muslims or they simply started to read the Koran out of curiosity. Some of these youngsters grew up in harmonious families, but at some point in time entered a period of seeking religious guidance. They acquired their knowledge of Islam mostly through social media. The question remains as to what extent they are different from young men from Islamic families who travelled to Syria. (For instance, to what extent do males and females differ in their knowledge of Islam?) Another noteworthy difference between the young men and women who left for Syria was that, at the time of their departure, the men had been converts to Islam for much longer than the women. On average, the young men converted between two and ten years before they departed to the warzone, the women between six and twelve months. As far as the majority of the young men are concerned, their decision to leave for Syria was based on a more or less 'informed choice', whereas the young women's conversion and subsequent departure for Syria were more often of an impulsive nature.

This Research Note sketched a more complex picture of converts joining IS than the one presented by the media. Much more empirical research is needed to help us find out how conversion can lead to radicalism and extremism. In any case, this Research Note shows that the converts who left for Syria were not all

lost souls searching for answers. Some made an informed choice, some left because they were looking for forgiveness, while others simply fell in love.

**About the Author:** Marion van San studied sociology and criminology at the Free University in Brussels. She completed her PhD in sociology at the University of Amsterdam (1998) and now works as a Senior Researcher at the Rotterdam Institute for Social Policy Research (RISBO), Erasmus University. Her current research focuses on the radicalization of youngsters from an educational perspective.

## Notes

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