

## Research Notes

### Radicalisation: A Subtype of Religious Conversion?

by Julien van den Elzen

#### Abstract

*This Research Note starts by evaluating Lofland and Stark's conversion model. By comparing it with several radicalisation models, it was found that conversion and radicalisation processes have much in common. Based on this observation, the idea of a radical-conversion model is formulated. Subsequently, five hypotheses derived from the radical-conversion model are tested with a sample of foreign fighters database (n = 408). It was found that converts and non-converts can be seen as equals. The convert's involvement in suicide missions and perceived trustworthiness are relatively the same as non-converts. However, due to certain predisposition factors, differences for rank, desertion, and the role of women were found. This Research Note suggests that there are strong indications that radicalisation is a sub-type of conversion and that more research is needed on this topic.*

**Keywords:** Conversion, Radicalisation, Syria and Iraq, Foreign Fighters

#### Introduction

The Soufan Group's December 2015 estimates indicated that between 27.000 and 31.000 foreign fighters worldwide had travelled to Syria and Iraq to join the Islamist groups, in particular the Islamic State.[1] At least 5.000 foreign fighters (FFs) had arrived from Europe.[2] It is difficult to determine the exact number of converted FFs from open source data. However, comparing estimates from Belgium, France, Germany and The Netherlands, it appears that the percentage of converted FFs is respectively 8%, 23%, 12-16%, and 11.8-18.4%.[3] However, it is estimated that less than 2% of the European Muslim community consists of converts. In other words, converts to Islam are relatively over-represented.[4].

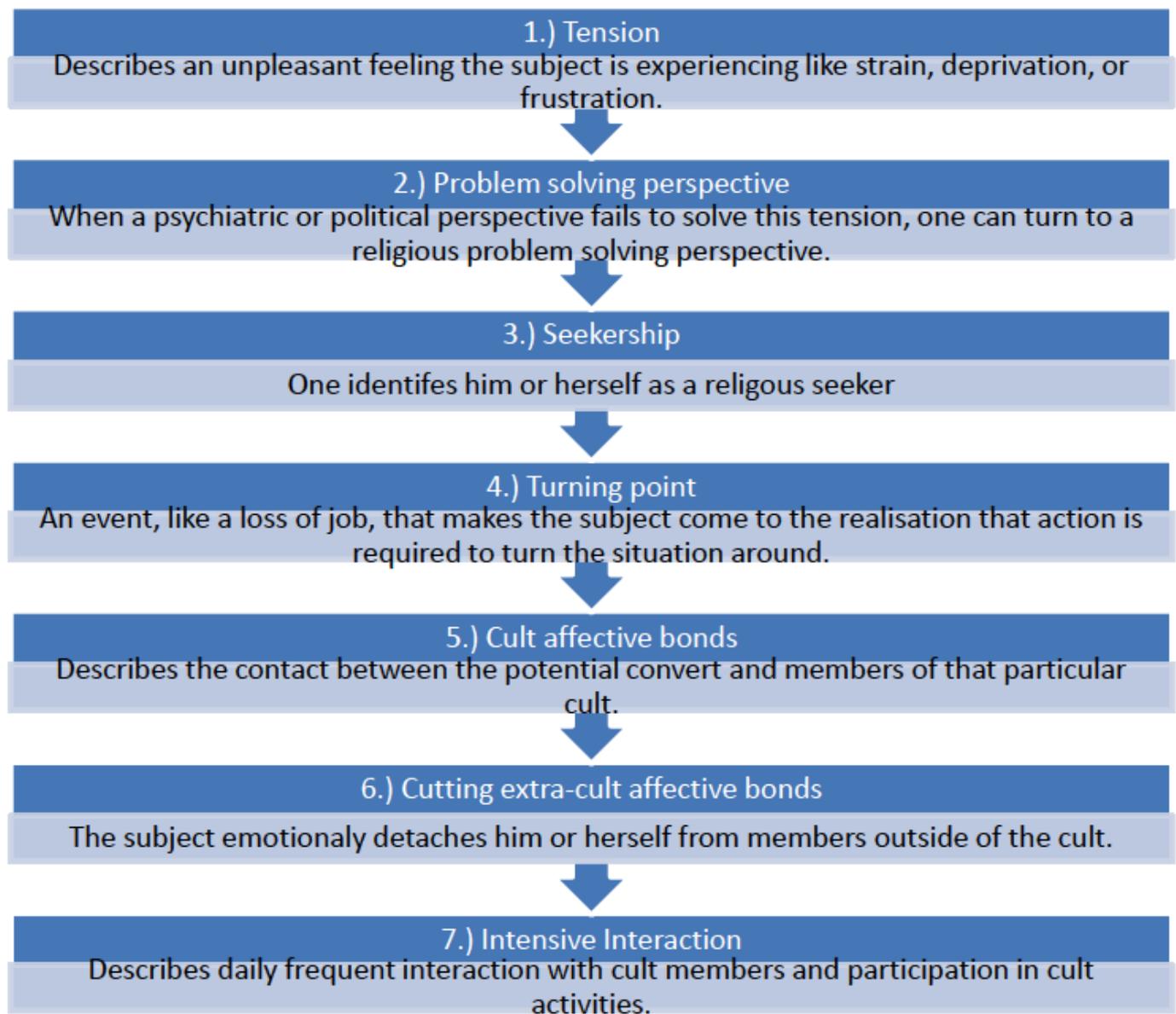
One can wonder why converts tend to radicalise more than born-Muslims do. Is there something about converts that makes them more inclined towards the use of violence? Or is radicalisation a sub-type of conversion, putting inter-faith converts more at risk of going down the radical path?

#### A Religious Conversion Model

In 1965, Lofland and Stark published a seven-step model to explain the process behind religious conversion. [5] For their research they used a millenarian cult, based in Bay City (USA). Despite the fact that their model is quite rudimentary, the authors suggest that it reveals some of the basic principles that are applicable to a general conversion process towards a deviant perspective. [6] They acknowledged two types of conditions: predisposition conditions, and situational contingencies. Predisposition conditions are comprised of factors like background, ethnicity and socio-economic status. Lofland and Stark argue that especially situational contingencies, for example an existing friendship with a person belonging to the new religion, are among the factors leading up to religious conversion.[7]

Lofland and Stark identified seven steps in the conversion process (see Figure 1)

Figure 1: Lofland and Stark's Model of Religious Conversion



According to Lofland and Stark, religious conversion can only take place when a person goes through all seven steps successfully.

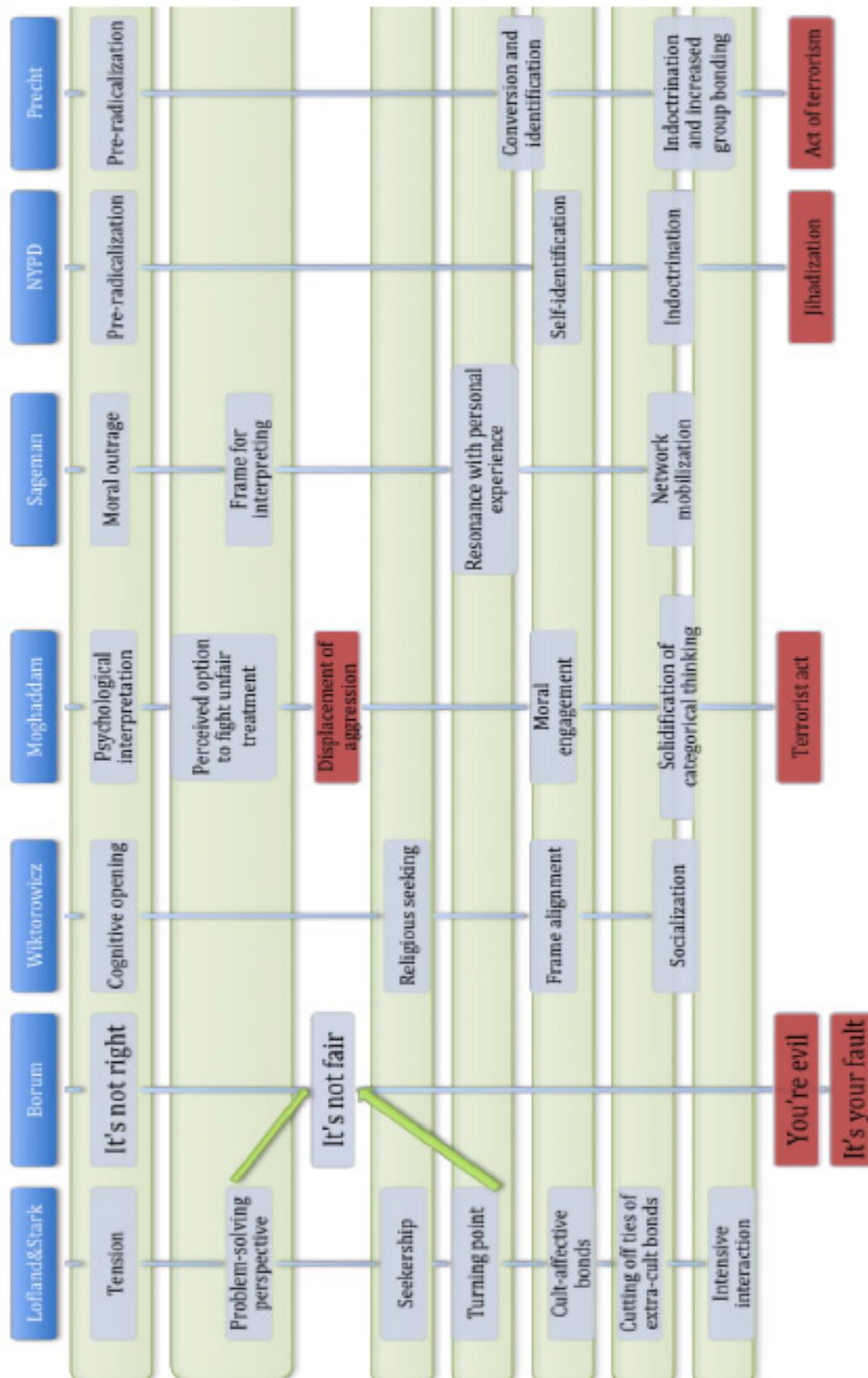
### ***Radicalisation as a Form of Religious Conversion***

Reviewing the literature on radicalisation, one finds dozens of theories, mechanisms and models.[8] Focusing on various radicalisation models, one can, however, notice similarities between them. Figure 2 displays the steps of six different radicalisation models (Borum; Wiktorowicz; Moghaddam; Sageman; NYPD; and Precht) and compares these with Lofland and Stark's conversion model.

With Borum's model being the exception, almost all the radicalisation models show strong similarities with Lofland and Stark. Observing the resemblance between the conversion model of Lofland and Stark and these radicalisation models can be the first step towards a Radical-Conversion Paradigm (RCP).

It is striking that that the first step in all models involves some form of tension. Whether one considers religious conversion or Islamic radicalisation, it appears that tension acts like the kick-starter of the process.

Figure 2: Comparison of Lofland and Stark 's Conversion Model with several Radicalisation Models.



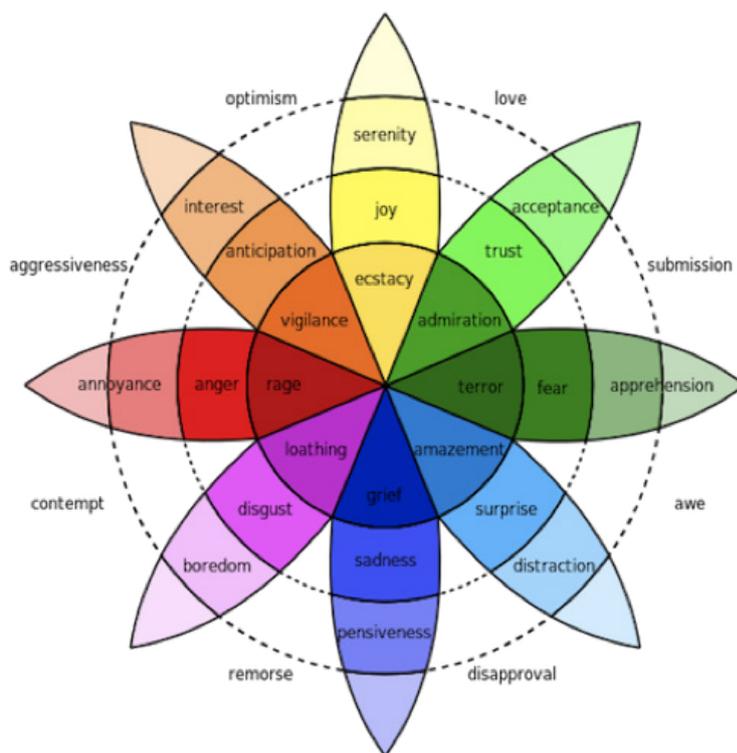
As one can see, not all steps in the radicalisation models fit the conversion model one-on-one. However, after studying the radicalisation models in more depth, one notices that many of the steps in the conversion model are incorporated in the radicalisation models but are not always explicitly mentioned as these are considered to be logical steps; for example, steps like a ‘problem-solving perspective’ and ‘seekership’ are not always overtly mentioned. Yet, it is automatically assumed that radicalisation is a result of a problem-solving perspective to deal with the previously mentioned tension that stands at the basis of the process.

The same can be said for ‘seekership’. Regarding Islamic terrorists, the adoption of a world-affirming worldview or the aspiration to become a political figure is not observed in terrorist behaviour. Instead, they often turn into devout fundamentalist Muslims that are under the impression that Islamic world domination will be the healing system for all evil in this world. Radicalisation of Islamic terrorists always incorporates steps of a ‘problem-solving perspective’ and ‘seekership’.

Nevertheless, the most remarkable difference between the model of Lofland and Stark and radicalisation models is the presence of violence at the end of the process. We should keep in mind that the conversion model was based on a non-violent millenarian cult; its activities did not contain a violent component. However, Lofland and Stark never suggested that their model could not be applicable to conversion to a violent cult.

In 1980, American psychologist Robert Plutchik produced a wheel-shaped diagram in which he visualised eight basic emotions and other emotions derived from them (see Figure 3). From his diagram, it can be seen that aggressiveness is the result of anticipation in combination with anger: “*anticipation + anger = aggression, revenge, or stubbornness.*”[9]

**Figure 3: Diagram of Emotions by Robert Plutchik**



A person will choose the type of perspective that he or she is expecting to provide a solution to existing discontent. From Plutchik’s diagram, one can read that anticipation in combination with joy creates optimism. When the newfound religion induces feelings of joy, persons will continue their conversion path with an optimistic outlook.

On the other hand, when the newfound religion or religious group is provoking and nurturing feelings of anger, persons will continue their path of conversion with feelings of aggression.

Religious conversion as well as radicalisation both involve emotions of expectancy. Deducing from the similarities between the conversion model and the radicalisation models, it is suggested here that conversion and radicalisation are similar processes. However, especially the type of emotion that goes along with the emotion of expectancy differs. Therefore, radicalisation could be seen as a type of radical conversion. Instead of a person converting to peaceful Islam, due to situational contingencies, as described by Lofland and Stark, he or she converts to a violent form of Islam.

Figure 4 shows the proposed radical-conversion model (RCM), with the left side being Lofland and Stark's conversion model. It is not suggested here that the radical-conversion model is a novelty. However, many of the steps of the reviewed radicalisation models have strong similarities with most of the steps of the conversion model of Lofland and Stark. The novelty is that the steps in most radicalisation models are linked to a religious conversion model. Verifying the validity of the proposed radical-conversion process is not the aim of this Research Note. Nevertheless, assuming this premise to be true allows the formulation of a set of hypotheses about converted Islamic radicals and born-again Muslim radicals.

If the radical-conversion paradigm holds for Islamic radicalisation, it would mean that the general view of converted-Muslim radicals in comparison with born-Muslim radicals is incorrect, or at least incomplete. The radical-conversion model suggests that all Islamic radicals are in fact converts, as in converted to a more extreme form of Islam. No distinction is made between inter-faith converts and intra-faith converts since every radical is a type of convert on its own, in spite of his or her original background. This implies that one should not find significant behavioural differences between the intra- and inter-faith converts.

### ***Comparing Inter-faith Converts to Islam to Intra-faith (born-again) Converts***

#### ***Fanaticism***

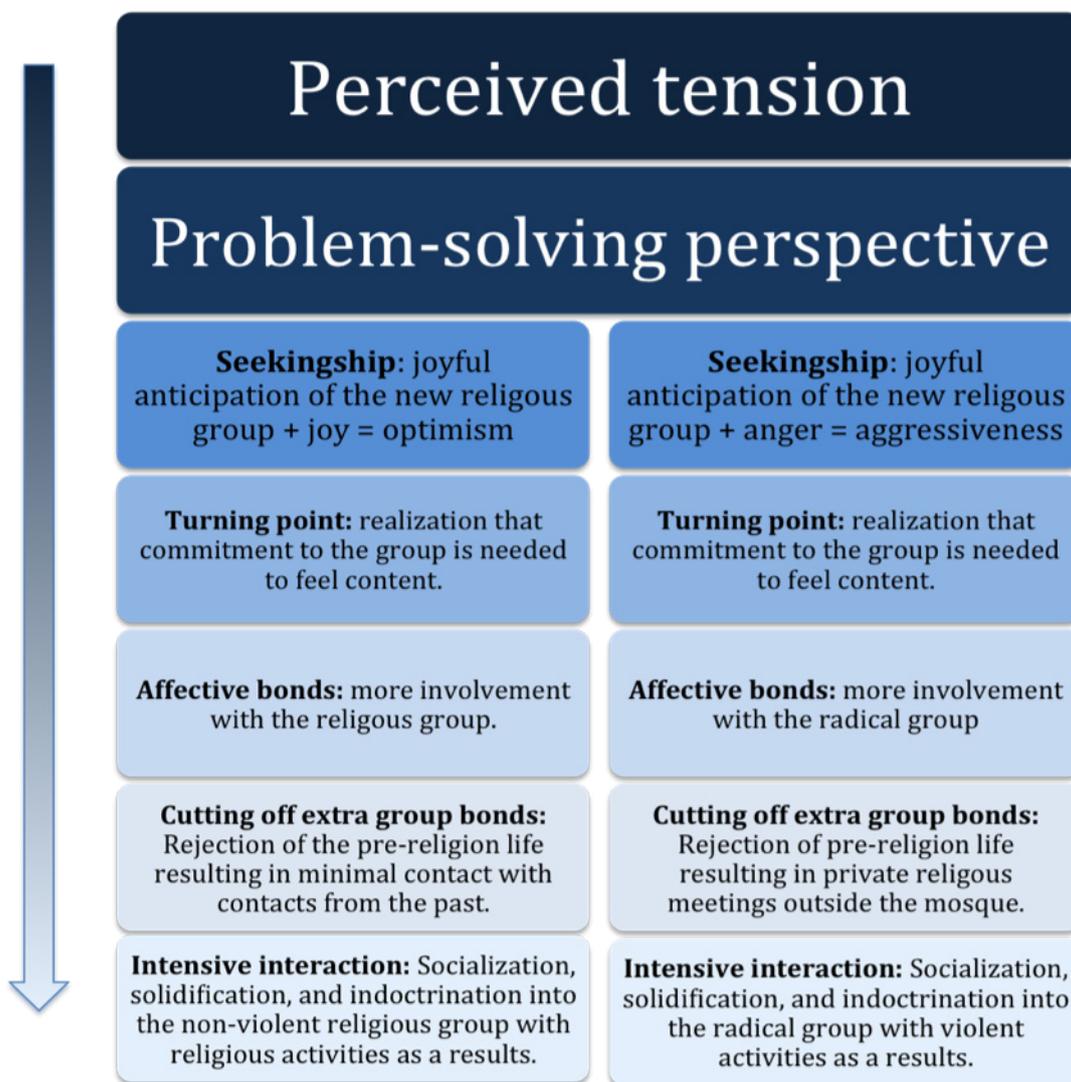
Converts appear to be overrepresented in the European foreign fighter statistics. Silber and Bhatt, discussing converts, noted: "*Their need to prove their religious convictions to their companions often makes them the most aggressive.*"[10] If true, this would suggest that converts tend to be involved to a greater degree in ruthless acts like suicide bombings than non-converts.

However, the radical-conversion model suggests that every radical extremist can be considered a convert and therefore it would be logical that all radicals experience the need to prove their religious convictions.

Precht distinguishes three types of conversion of which inter-faith conversion and increased observance (born-again intra-faith conversion) are two [11]. The idea to consider these two as conversion, together with the radical-conversion model, leads us to believe that individuals from both groups will feel the need to prove themselves to fellow companions to the same degree. This leads to the following hypothesis:

**H<sub>A:1</sub>: Converted FFs and non-converted FFs are relatively equally involved in suicide missions.**

Figure 4: The Radical-Conversion Model (RCM)



**Trustworthiness**

One can imagine that the inter-faith converted foreign fighter is not a trusted subject within the ISIS organization. There is the general idea that Muslim converts need to prove their Muslim identity to fellow Muslims, which can lead to an enhanced religious zeal. However, the radical-conversion model suggests that all FFs coming to Syria need to prove their trustworthiness. This leads us to the following hypothesis:

**HA:2: Converted FFs and non-converted FFs both experience suspicions of being foreign spies relatively equally.**

**Position in Hierarchy**

Looking at past and present al-Qaeda or Taliban commanders, one notices that it is very rare to find converts holding high-ranking positions. Although it has been assumed so far that converted and non-converted FFs can be treated equally, a great deal can be said to negate this when it comes to hierarchical ranking.

It is very likely that born-Muslim radicals have greater affinity with the Arabic language and therefore have a clear advantage over inter-faith converts. On the other hand, factors like low socio-economic status and education are often mentioned as reasons for radicalisation among second and third generation non-Western immigrants in Europe. It is very likely that converts with a Western background experience these problems to a lesser extent. Converted FFs can therefore possess valued skills that are welcomed by ISIS. This leads to the following hypothesis:

**HA:3: The converted foreign fighter cannot rise high in rank, with the exception of some highly skilled individuals.**

### *Desertion*

It is not uncommon that ISIS members desert the organization. The radical-conversion model predicts that converts and non-converts can be treated equally when it comes to fanaticism and trustworthiness. Yet, converts and non-converts have different predisposition conditions that need to be taken into account. One has to consider the influence of non-Muslim family members on the return of converts who are attempting to desert. The question is whether this same influence by family members applies to non-converts. According to a report from the Gatestone Institute, there are more than 100.000 British citizens who sympathise with perpetrators of suicide bombings and other terrorist acts. Radicals are often influenced by family members and close friends. It is more likely for a non-convert to radicalise through other radical family members than converts would. Therefore, deserting to be reunited with family could be much harder for non-converts than it is for inter-faith converts. This leads us to the following hypothesis:

**HA:4: Converted FFs tend to desert relatively more than non-converted FFs.**

### *The Role of Women*

When looking at conversion motives, it appears that an affectional motive is often found in female conversion. [13] They manifest strong emotional feelings of affection for a significant other, but not necessarily because the religion itself is appealing. According to Strømme, women who join ISIS are often referred to as “jihadi brides” and not as female fighters.[14] It would appear that their motivation to join ISIS are intrinsically linked to male fighters. Furthermore, according to Bakker and De Bont, the primary role for ISIS women is to get married, get children, and obey their husbands.[15] Only a select few can join the fighting ranks of the all-female al-Khansaa brigade. One of the prerequisites to join is fluency in Arabic.[16] It is probably harder for a female convert to acquire a paramilitary position than it is for non-converts.

Although the radical-conversion model would suggest that converts and non-converts would both fulfil the same roles, predisposition conditions for non-converts are different than for converts. This leads to the following hypothesis:

**HA:5: Converted female FFs are fulfilling domestic roles relatively more frequent than non-converted female FFs.**

### *Methodology*

In order to test these five hypotheses, a database was built, containing 408 European FFs that have left for the ISIS caliphate. The database contains only individuals about whom enough information was available – variables like gender, age, country of origin, convert status, their role, and whether they are dead or alive.

Subsequently, the hypotheses were tested with the help of statistical analysis. Whenever insufficient data was available, case-study research was done in order to make at least rudimentary observations about the group. This means that certain hypotheses could not be statistically rejected. Nevertheless, the analysis does serve as a step into providing insights into the phenomenon.

## Results

### Converts and Suicide Bombings

Table 1 shows that 16,2% of all the individuals in the dataset (66 out of 408 FFs) were inter-faith converts. From the 408 FFs, 43 were found to be involved in suicide bombings. Of the 43 suicide bombers, 20,9% (9 individuals) were converts. Using a 5% statistical significance (Critical Z-score = 1,645) we find a Z-score score of 0,842. Based on this, the hypothesis that converts are relatively equally involved in suicide missions remains under consideration.

**Table 1: Data on Inter-Faith Converts vs. Non-Inter-Faith Converts**

	Number of individuals	Percentage
Total	408	
<i>of which converts</i>	66	16.2%
<i>of which non-converts</i>	342	83.8%
Suicide bombers	43	
<i>of which converts</i>	9	20.9%
<i>of which non-converts</i>	34	79.1%

However, 8 out of the 43 suicide bombers went back to attempt attacks in Europe. For the scope of this research, they should not be included. All of them were non-converts, leaving the number of inter-faith convert suicide bombers at 9 individuals. Using a statistical significance of 5%, one finds a Z-score of 1,528, which again means that the hypothesis remains under consideration.

Although the dataset is limited, no evidence has been provided to prove otherwise. The result is in line with the radical-conversion model and goes against mainstream ideas about converts and their supposedly greater fanaticism.

### Converts and Trustworthiness

Unfortunately (in terms of statistical desiderata), only four out of the 408 FFs in the database were accused of spying.

Mario Sciannimanica, a.k.a. Abu Zubayr al Almani, was a German foreign fighter that had recently converted to Islam prior to joining the ISIS ranks.[17] Before his conversion he was an aspiring rapper pursuing wealth and chasing girls.[18]

In Syria he stayed in touch with his parents, whom he made swear allegiance to Islam. Although this meant nothing to them, they agreed and regularly sent him money in the hope of staying in touch with him.[19] According to an ISIS source, Mario was put through a hurried trial and subsequently sentenced to death by his former comrades.[20]

Mohammed Amine Boutahar, a.k.a. Abu Ubaida al-Maghribi, was a Dutch foreign fighter from a Muslim Moroccan family.[21] He reportedly spoke fluent Arabic and was the prison chief of James Foley. Nevertheless, his powers and responsibilities went far beyond that. He was accused of passing on information to foreign intelligence agencies after negotiations about several Western hostages held in one of his prisons. He was executed by a shot in the head in the presence of other ISIS members.[22]

Iliass Azaouaj was a Belgian preacher of Moroccan descent. He left for Syria in 2013 and posted on Facebook a call to the “mujahedeen brothers” to join the fight in Syria.[23] However, a few days later he posted a photo of

himself with the Belgian Minister of Interior. This raised the suspicion of him having connections within the Belgian government. The jihadist group distrusted his loyalty and accused him of espionage - with decapitation as a result.[24]

Jejoen Bontinck is a Belgian converted foreign fighter who came under the influence of Sharia teachings and decided to join the fight in Syria.[25] When he arrived, he was accused of spying and was locked up together with James Foley. When Jejoen's father, Dimitri Bontinck, found out his son had been imprisoned, he left for Syria to get him back. After Dimitri gained the militant's trust and following negotiations, both father and son were allowed to return home together.[26]

Evidently not enough data was available to reject the second hypothesis. However, these four cases do give us some insights in their differences and commonalities. Out of the four individuals, two were non-converts and it shows that both groups experience suspicions of spying. It also seems that age is irrelevant. The oldest of the four, Mohammed Boutahar, was born in 1983 while the youngest, Jejoen Bontinck, was born in 1995. Furthermore, role and rank appear unrelated as well. A regular fighter, a knowledgeable imam, and an eminent security chief, all faced accusations of spying. However, one of the most profound commonalities between the four individuals was their continued contact with the outside world. Whether this meant staying in touch with one's parents or being suspected of being in touch with foreign governments, all individuals were seen as untrustworthy because of it.

Looking at the conversion model of Lofland and Stark and the radical-conversion model, cutting off ties with the outside world seems an inevitable step towards full (radical) conversion. Those that do not follow this last step are not considered trustworthy, which is in line with the observations made regarding these four individual cases.

### *Converts and Rank*

Although the radical-conversion model suggests that converts and non-converts can be treated as equals when it comes to radicalisation, the hypothesis that converts cannot raise high in rank is based on the notion that factors like language deficiencies prevent them from holding important positions. Only six FFs were identified holding such ranks.

- Reyaad Khan was a 21-year-old born-Muslim from the U.K. in the position of an attack planner.
- Junaid Hussain was a 21-year-old born-Muslim from the U.K., holding a key position as a hacker in the ISIS organisation.[27]
- Haitham Rahma is a Swedish born Muslim from Syrian descent. He is the leader of a 2000-member-counting armed militia that is working closely with ISIS.
- Mohammed Amine Boutahar was a Dutch born-Muslim from Moroccan descent fulfilling the role of security chief in Aleppo.
- Aqsa Mahmood is a British born-Muslim fulfilling the role of leader in the al-Khansaa brigade.
- Sally Jones is a 46-year-old British convert and wife of Junaid Hussain, fulfilling the role of leader of an all-female militia.

Of the six individuals, only one individual was a convert. Unfortunately, not enough data was available for statistical hypothesis testing. The hypothesis that converts cannot raise high in rank is based on the assumption that factors like language deficiencies will be the limiting factor. Nevertheless, the case of Sally Jones shows us that this line of thinking is probably too limited. She did not have Arabic skills prior to her coming to the caliphate or any other skills that made her valuable. It remains unclear how she acquired a position as such but

it is not unthinkable that her husband had a positive influence in that regard. She can be the ultimate example that more factors than just the convert-status determine the role one holds in the caliphate, or could also be the proverbial exception to the rule.

### *Converts and Desertions*

It was suggested earlier that converts tend to desert more than non-converts because of their connections to non-Muslim family members and friends, but not because of their convert status in itself. Of the 408 FFs, 27 of them deserted the organisation. Of the 27 individuals who are counted as deserters, 9 of them are converts. Unfortunately the group of deserters is rather small for a reliable statistical analysis. Nevertheless, the outcome can be seen as a step in the right direction in formulating the connection between converts and deserters.

A one-sided Binomial analysis with a significance level of 5% provides a Z-score of 2,416 (critical z score 1,645), i.e. the number of converted foreign fighters does exceed the expected value, meaning there is an over-representation of converted deserters among the total number of deserters.

Although the radical-conversion model would predict that non-converts would desert just as much as converts, the results indicate that converts do tend to desert more. Looking closer at these 9 converts, parental help appeared to be paramount in the escape from the caliphate for 6 of them. Just as with converts and their rank, the result of converts and desertion can again be explained by predisposition factors but not because of the fact that they have converted to Islam.

### *Converted Women and Violence*

It was hypothesised that converted women are found in domestic roles relatively more often than born-Muslim women. This premise was based on the idea that it is harder for converted women to gain a fighting role and therefore have no other option than to fulfil a domestic role.

Of the 408 FFs in the database, 21 women were found to fulfil a domestic role. Of those 21, 7 women were converts. Although the group is small, applying statistical analysis on the 7 women and a 5% significance level, it was found that converted women do tend to fulfil a domestic role more often than non-converts.

Even though the hypothesis was not rejected, the dataset was too small to offer a conclusive answer. Furthermore, looking at the individual female cases of all the FFs in the database, one does find examples where converts do fulfil non-domestic roles. For example, Sally Jones who is not fluent in Arabic, converted under the influence of her husband, and still ended up in a fighting role.

It was suggested earlier that women tend to convert for affectional motives. The hypothesis was based on the notion that women also further radicalise for this reason. However, looking at the individual cases and theories on radicalisation, radicalisation always contains a component of violence and aggression, whether this is active participation or passive support. That means that even converted radicalised women can certainly have aspirations for violent jihad but have fewer opportunities to put these ambitions actively into practice. More research with a larger group of female FF is needed to provide a more conclusive answer to this hypothesis.

### *Conclusion*

Comparing Lofland and Starks model of conversion with several radicalisation models, revealed similarities. The radical-conversion model suggests that all radicals are converts – inter-faith or intra-faith (born again) converts. The significant difference from ordinary religious conversion is the accompaniment of violence and aggression in radicalisation to Islamist jihadism. Radicalisation can, in our view, be seen as merely a sub-type of religious conversion but not as an entirely different process.

Although there is a general view of inter-faith converts being more fanatical than (intra-faith) non-converts, our analysis indicates that converts are equally involved in suicide missions as non-converts – something that is

in line with the radical-conversion model. However, the introduction of this Research Note noted an overrepresentation of converts in Foreign Fighter statistics. This raises the question whether or not this discrepancy speaks against the radical-conversion model.

As noted in Figure 2, radicalisation as well as conversion starts with a perceived tension in the future convert. Lofland and Stark proposed that situational contingencies are imminent in the conversion process. One finds that situational contingencies are essential in the radicalisation process as well. It seems that the crossroad between conversion and radicalisation all lie in those situational contingencies. When an uncertain and vulnerable person experiences positive feelings such as joy, he or she is likely to go further in an ordinary conversion process. When that person undergoes at the critical moment emotions such as hate and anger, he or she is likely to go down the radicalisation path.

To come back to the question raised above: is the overrepresentation of converts in foreign fighters a phenomenon that goes against the radical-conversion paradigm? On the contrary, it only enforces the idea even more. Because radicalisation can be seen as a sub-type of conversion, individuals who start the (radical)-conversion process reach the junction between ordinary conversion and radicalisation more often than born-Muslims that do not need to convert to Islam anymore. As can be seen from the radical-conversion model, the first two steps are the same as in the model of Lofland and Stark. It is what happens after the problem-solving perspective that determines whether the person embraces in his or her conversion a violent perspective.

The radical-conversion thesis suggests that inter-faith converts and intra-faith (born again) Muslims could all be considered converts. Nevertheless, this research based on more than 400 individuals did find differences in rank, desertion, and the role of women. Although the data set is very rudimentary, the individual cases cited were showcasing a substantial number of other factors that make converted and born-Muslims different. The most important observation here is that this difference is not so much determined by the convert status itself, but by factors that come along with being a convert having a non-Muslim background. (e.g. family ties, education, etc.)

**About the Author:** Julien van den Elzen graduated in 2017 with a Masters degree in Crisis and Security Management from Leiden University, The Netherlands. He also holds a science degree in engineering from Delft University.

## Notes

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