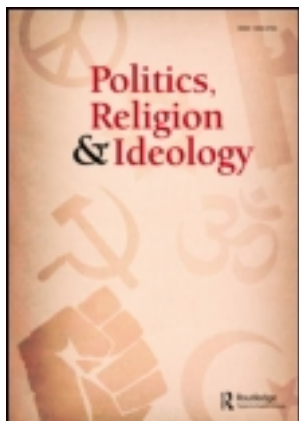


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European Converts to Islam: Mechanisms of Radicalization

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ABSTRACT While European converts to Islam represent only a tiny percentage of Europe's Muslim population, members of that group have participated in major Islamist terrorist plots and attacks on European soil. Although the radicalization process has not been the same for all individuals, it could be still possible to understand the circumstances under which some European converts turned to violence. Therefore, the article focuses on a number of mechanisms that may have contributed to the radicalization of European jihadi converts, including personal victimization, political grievance, the slippery slope effect, the power of love and the inspirational preaching.

Introduction

While European countries, together with their North American allies, are fighting a far away war against the Taliban in Afghanistan, a homegrown threat has emerged. The shoe bomb plot in 2001, the terrorist attacks in Madrid and London in 2004 and 2005 respectively, the transatlantic aircraft plot in 2006, the 2007 bomb plot in Germany, and the 2010 Moscow metro bombings all had something in common: European converts to Islam were involved at various levels and stages.

There is only speculation about the exact number of Muslim converts in Europe since most European population surveys do not include a question on religion. In France, estimates lie at approximately 50,000 to 100,000 converts out of a population of three to four million Muslims.¹ In 2006, there were 850,000 Muslims in the Netherlands, including 12,000 converts.² In Germany, the estimated number of converts ranges from 12,000 to 100,000³ with the total Muslim population set at around three million,⁴ most of them of Turkish origin. In Great Britain, there were about 63,000 native converts out of a population of 1.6 million Muslims in the early 2000s.⁵ However, their number must have increased because the Muslim population as a whole reached 2.4 million in 2009.⁶ Spain has an

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¹Pew Research Center, *Mapping the Global Muslim Population* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2009), p. 21.

²Statistics Netherlands, 'More Than 850 Thousand Muslims in the Netherlands', 27 October 2007. <http://www.cbs.nl/en-GB/menu/themas/bevolking/publicaties/artikelen/archief/2007/2007-2278-wm.htm?Languageswitch=on>.

³J. Kandel, 'Organisierter Islam in Deutschland und gesellschaftliche Integration', *Friedrich Ebert Stiftung*. <http://library.fes.de/pdffiles/akademie/online/50372.pdf>.

⁴CIA, *The World Factbook 2010* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2009).

⁵Office for National Statistics, 2001 Census, London: The Stationery Office. <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/census2001/census2001.asp>.

⁶R. Kerbaj, 'Muslim Population Rising 10 Times Faster Than Rest of Society', *The Times*, 30 January 2009. <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/article5621482.ece>

estimated 800,000 Muslims, roughly 20,000 of whom are converts.⁷ In Belgium there are about 500,000 Muslims of whom approximately 10,000 are converts.⁸ In Sweden, the estimated number of native converts is 6000 out of 300–350,000 Muslims.⁹ In neighbouring Denmark, there are about 2800 converts out of 200,000 Muslims.¹⁰ In total, there must be probably 200,000–350,000 converts in the European Union, making up less than two per cent of its Muslim population. Outside the European Union, significant numbers of converts can be found in Russia, where there are approximately 16 million Muslims mostly living in the North Caucasus and Tatarstan.¹¹ In Switzerland, the estimated Muslim population is 400,000 Muslims of whom approximately 10,000 are converts.¹² The estimates of the Muslim population, however, must be viewed as purely illustrative because they do not explain how many people are true believers/practitioners or call themselves Muslims simply meaning a certain kind of traditional identity.

As an area of investigation, religious conversion has received considerable attention during the last four decades.¹³ According to John Lofland and Rodney Stark, conversion is the process by which ‘a person gives up one perspective or ordered view of the world for another’.¹⁴ A convert, in this study, therefore, is one who has changed membership from one religious group (e.g., Christianity) to accept membership in another religion (Islam). It should be noted that the terms *convert* and *new Muslim* are used interchangeably. According to Merrill Singer, there are two types of conversion: the ‘inter-faith’ and ‘intra-faith’ conversions; the former occur when a person moves from one religion to another (e.g., from Christianity to Islam) and are obviously far more challenging and demanding than the latter which occur when a person moves from one denomination to another (e.g., from Protestantism to Catholicism).¹⁵ Lofland and Stark have also provided a categorization of converts; the ‘verbal converts’ who maintain a nominal involvement in the new religion and the ‘total converts’ who demonstrate far greater interest and involvement.¹⁶

In the last two decades, there has been a proliferation of books focusing on Muslim converts in Europe and elsewhere.¹⁷ Only a few analysts, such as Olivier Roy and Milena Uhlmann, have touched upon the sensitive issue of *jihadi converts*, defined as those converts

⁷G. Pingree and L. Abend, ‘In Spain, Dismay at Muslim Converts Holding Sway’, *Christian Science Monitor*, 7 November 2006. <http://www.csmonitor.com/2006/1107/p04s01-woeu.html>.

⁸H. Bousetta and L. A. Bernes, *Muslims in the EU: Belgium*, Open Society Institute 2007. http://www.soros.org/initiatives/home/articles_publications/publications/musecities_20080101/musecitiesbel_20080101.pdf.

⁹A.M McGinty, *Becoming Muslim: Western Women's Conversions to Islam* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 20.

¹⁰L. Frøslev, ‘Flere Danskere Konverterer Til Islam’, *Berlingske Tidende*, 21 February 2010. <http://www.berlingske.dk/danmark/flere-danskere-konverterer-til-islam>.

¹¹Pew Research Center, op. cit., p. 21.

¹²‘Les Suisses se tournent vers l’islam par amour’, 21 June 2010. <http://www.20min.ch/ro/news/suisse/story/14388429>.

¹³See J. Lofland and R. Stark, ‘Becoming a World Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective’, *American Sociological Review*, 30 (1965), pp. 862–875; J. Lofland, *Doomsday Cult: a Study of Conversion, Proselytization and Maintenance of Faith* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966); M. Singer, ‘The Use of Folklore in Religious Conversion: The Classic Case’, *Review of Religious Research*, 22 (1980), pp. 170–185; R.L. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

¹⁴Lofland and Stark, op. cit., p. 862.

¹⁵Singer, op. cit., p. 171.

¹⁶Lofland and Stark, op. cit., p. 864.

¹⁷L. Poston, *Islamic Da'wah in the West: Muslim Missionary Activity and the Dynamics of Conversion of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); K. Van Nieuwkerk, *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006); K. Zebiri, *British Muslim Converts: Choosing Alternative Lives* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2008); A. Kose, *Conversion to Islam: A Study of Native British Converts* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1996); A.S. Roald, *New Muslims in the European Context: The Experience of Scandinavian Converts* (Boston: Brill, 2004).

who have been involved in terrorist activities.¹⁸ In addition, European security agencies have monitored jihadi converts, but the insights of intelligence analysts are rarely published. Therefore, a considerable amount of knowledge has been confined wholly to the realm of classified intelligence analysis, with negative consequences for the scholarly policy work being done on this important issue. Researching Europe's jihadi converts is certainly challenging, because open source information is not always available or reliable. Since it was possible to collect data only for some jihadi converts, the analysis here is qualitative.

This essay will first analyze the factors leading some Europeans to embrace Islam. Then, it will focus on the phenomenon of radicalization among converts. More specifically, the essay will utilize Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko's theory of mechanisms to explain the radicalization of European converts.¹⁹ It will examine four mechanisms: *personal victimization*, *political grievance*, *the Slippery Slope* and the *power of love*. Furthermore, it will emphasize the role of *inspirational preaching* as an additional mechanism leading to radicalization. The essay will finally assess the threat that could originate from European converts joining jihadi groups.

Factors Leading Europeans to Conversion

The conversion of native Europeans to Islam is hardly a new phenomenon. The first wave of conversions to Islam occurred in England in the late nineteenth century. Following a journey to Morocco in 1887, William Quilliam, a well-known lawyer from Liverpool, converted to Islam and upon his return to England he started preaching the new religion to his compatriots. Quilliam established the Liverpool Mosque and the Muslim Institute and he soon attracted a number of converts. He criticized British involvement in Sudan, urging Muslim soldiers from British India to refrain from attacking Sudanese Muslims. Finally, Quilliam left Great Britain and was reported to have gone to the Ottoman Empire in 1908.²⁰ This first generation of converts was usually middle or upper-class citizens who turned to Islam as an alternative to Christianity. The Muslim faith represented for them, at the time of the British Empire, an exotic Other.

The second wave of conversions took place in West European countries from the 1960s onwards and was the result of two important developments: the post-war Muslim immigration and the rise of protest and counter-culture movements in the 1960s. The first generation of Muslim immigrants remained rather isolated from the rest of society; as a result, mixed marriages with native Europeans were not common. The second and third generations of Europe's Muslims, however, have increasingly married outside their religious group. In France, for instance, the intermarriage rate has been very high: half of Muslim men marry non-Muslim women and one-fourth of Muslim women marry non-Muslim men.²¹ Although circumstances differ from country to country, many non-Muslim partners typically convert to Islam to get their in-laws' approval. Most of these new Muslims are what Lofland and Stark called verbal Muslims. Additionally, individuals involved in

¹⁸O. Roy, 'Al-Qaeda: A True Global Movement' in Rik Coolsat (ed.) *Jihadi Terrorism and the Radicalization Challenge in Europe* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 109–114; M. Uhlmann, 'European Converts to Terrorism', *Middle East Quarterly*, 2008, pp. 31–37.

¹⁹C. McCauley and S. Moskalenko, 'Mechanisms of Political Radicalization: Pathways Toward Terrorism', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 20 (2008), pp. 415–433.

²⁰Kose, op. cit., p. 14.

²¹J. Laurence and J. Vaisse, *Integrating Islam: Political and Religious Challenges in Contemporary France* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2006), p. 43.

Hippie and other counter-culture movements embraced Sufism as a spiritual alternative. The fact that Sufism is a mystical and spiritual movement within the Muslim faith, in search of communication with God through ascetic practices, can be appealing to those who rejected Christianity for being too 'materialistic'.

Following the collapse of communism in the late 1980s, there is currently a third wave of conversions. In the post-Cold War era, Islam has come to be seen as a religion of rebels. Olivier Roy has drawn attention to the phenomenon of 'protest conversion' which can be divided into four categories: the politicised rebels who admire the anti-imperialistic rhetoric of radical Islam, the religious nomads who convert to Islam after experimenting with other religions, individuals with criminal record who find refuge in Islam, and members of minority groups (e.g., Blacks, Latinos and people of mixed race) who are attracted to Islam because of its cross-racial appeal.²² Interestingly, many former Marxists have been involved in a renewed quest for identity, which partly shows itself in an interest in Islam. Indeed, Islam and communism are not that different. Both prioritize group goals over individual interests and claim to be universal. Furthermore, both offer a vision of a perfectly just society that can be created on earth: the communist utopia of a classless society resembles the utopian vision of an Islamic caliphate. As a result, a growing number of former Marxists have converted to Islam, including prominent French philosopher Roger Garaudy.

In many cases, converts adopt a Muslim name in order to demonstrate their commitment to the new religion. New Muslims are also keen to demonstrate to their circles their allegiance to the (proper) Muslim way of life. Therefore, they very often quit habits such as drinking alcohol and eating pork. Conversion to Islam is not always acceptable to parents and other family members. Many converts have mentioned a difficult times they had with parents and siblings when they announced to them their decision to embrace Islam. Female converts have faced strong criticism for their decision to wear a *hijab* which, from a Western point of view, has largely symbolized oppression. Other adopted habits are the avoidance of handshake between women and men, male circumcision, and quitting smoking.

Although Islam is practiced differently around the world, *da'wa* (i.e., call to Islam) is an important part of a devout Muslim's life. The believer is commanded by the Quran (16: 125) 'to invite (all) to the way of thy Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching'. Indeed, many converts were first introduced to Islam by Muslim neighbours, colleagues and friends. However, the proselytism network is more sophisticated than one may think. An increased number of converts familiarized themselves with the Muslim faith by using the Internet. There is a large and ever growing number of websites which are dedicated solely to potential and existing converts. In addition, there are several Islamic organizations (e.g., Tablighi Jamat, Muslim World League) which are specialized in *da'wa* activities. Islamic missionary organizations are usually keen to publicize cases of European converts because this would implicitly demonstrate Islam's superiority over other religions.

The Radicalization of European Converts

Generally speaking, most European converts tend to follow liberal interpretations of Islam. Since they grew up in modern and secular societies, converts naturally adjust Islam to fit their own needs. Moreover, the social environment in which converts live compels them to behave in a certain way in order to maintain an 'acceptable' professional and social

²²O. Roy, *Globalized Islam: The Search for New Ummah* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), p. 317.

image. Also, suspicion and often discrimination against Europe's Muslims mean that many converts will maintain a low profile to avoid harassment and exclusion.

Although many Europeans would stereotypically associate jihadi terrorists as Arabs or South Asians, white and black European converts have actually participated in most terrorist plots and actual attacks that have taken place on European soil since 9/11. According to a 2007 New York Police Department report entitled *Radicalization in the West: The Homegrown Threat*, 'converts have played a prominent role in the majority of terrorist case studies and tend to be the most zealous members of groups. Their need to prove their religious convictions to their companions often makes them the most aggressive'.²³ Although it is very difficult to know precisely the number of European converts who have been recruited by jihadi groups, a survey conducted by the Nixon Center revealed that converts were eight per cent of the 212 suspected and convicted terrorists implicated in North American and Western Europe between 1993 and 2003.²⁴ In 2006, Edwin Bakker's study identified 14 converts out of 242 individual cases of jihadi terrorists in Europe.²⁵

Some government-issued reports have also shed light on the increasing role of converts in terrorist plots and attacks. In March 2004, for example, a report released by the Dutch General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD) claimed that 'a small number of young Dutch indigenous converts have declared themselves prepared to support or join the jihad'.²⁶ In 2005, a study conducted by the French police on 1610 converts found out that one-third of them had police records and 10 per cent had converted in prisons. According to the study, most of French converts were introduced to Islam by Tablighi Jamaat and Wahhabi organizations, and three per cent were suspected to belong or be close to the violent Islamist movement.²⁷

In total, at least 48 converts with European citizenships had a confirmed role in the plotting and/or execution of terrorist attacks in 10 European countries from 1990 to 2010 (See table 1). In the post-9/11 period, 33 converts have been arrested for jihadi activities in European Union countries and Switzerland, representing five per cent of the total number of arrested jihadi terrorists.²⁸ Although in absolute numbers jihadi converts are a very small group, they constitute a significant subgroup of Europe's jihadi terrorists because, as it will be shown in the following section, many of them had important operational and leadership roles in major terrorist attacks on European soil. Their significance also stems from the fact that converts tend to be less physically visible than Muslims of immigrant origin in many European societies.

Converts were first recruited by jihadi networks in the 1990s. Some well-known cases include Lionel Dumont, who converted to Islam after serving with the French army in Somalia and then fought in Bosnia in defence of local Muslims, as did Christophe Caze who headed the infamous Roubaix Gang on his return to France; British convert David

²³M. Silber and A. Bhatt, *Radicalization in the West: The Homegrown Threat* (New York: New York Police Department, 2007), p. 29.

²⁴R.S. Leiken, 'Bearers of Global Jihad? Immigration and National Security After 9/11', Nixon Center, p. 6. http://www.nixoncenter.org/publications/monographs/Leiken_Bearers_of_Global_Jihad.pdf.

²⁵E. Bakker, *Jihadi Terrorists in Europe – Their Characteristics and the Circumstances in Which They Joined the Jihad: An Exploratory Study* (Clingendael: Netherlands Institute of International Relations, 2006).

²⁶AIVD, 'Background of Jihad Recruits in the Netherlands', 10 March 2004. <https://www.aivd.nl/english/publications-press/@119090/background-of-jihad>.

²⁷P. Smolar, 'Les Conversions à l'Islam Radical Inquiètent La Police Française', *Le Monde*, 13 July 2005. <http://observatoire-islam-europe.blogspot.com/2005/07/les-conversions-lislam-radical.html>.

²⁸Bakker's study identified 242 arrested or convicted jihadi terrorists in Europe from 2001 to 2006. Europol's *Terrorism Situation and Trend Report* (The Hague: Europol, 2010) reported 201 arrests relating to Islamist terrorism in 2007, 187 arrests in 2008 and 110 arrests in 2009. If the two studies are accurate, then 740 individuals were arrested in Europe for jihadi activities from 2001 to 2009.

Table 1. European jihadi converts

Country of origin (<i>N</i> = 48)	Estimated number of converts
Belgium (2)	10,000
Denmark (1)	2800
France (10)	50,000–100,000
Germany (6)	12,000–100,000
Ireland (1)	Unknown
Italy (1)	Unknown
Russia (6)	Unknown
Spain (1)	20,000
Sweden (1)	6000
Switzerland (1)	10,000
The Netherlands (3)	12,000
United Kingdom (15)	63,000

Sinclair, a 29-year-old computer specialist who travelled to Bosnia to fight with foreign Mujahedeen and was killed in a battle by Bosnian Croat forces in 1993; German Stephen Smyrek who was arrested in Israel in November 1997 because he had allegedly been trained by Hizballah to carry out a suicide attack in Tel-Aviv; and the founder of *Islamisches Informationszentrum* in the German city of Ulm, Thomas Fischer, who was killed by the Russian forces in Chechnya in November 2003.

This first generation of jihadi converts did not initially attract much attention from European security services for two reasons. First, their number was so small that they were not thought of as a serious threat. Second, they targeted unpopular foreign regimes rather than their own governments. Yet, some converts did participate in terrorist attacks on European soil; for instance, David Vallat and Joseph Raime, two Frenchmen who converted to Islam while in prison,²⁹ gave logistical support to Algeria's Armed Islamic Group for its 1995 bombing campaign in Paris.

Since the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington DC, an even larger number of European converts have been involved in terrorist incidents. Richard Reid, who is known as the shoe bomber for his 2001 attempt to detonate explosives hidden in his shoes during a transatlantic flight, and Germaine Maurice Lindsay, one of the 7/7 London bombers, have probably been among the most famous jihadi converts. Four British converts, Richard Belmar, Feroz Abbasi, Martin John Mubanga and Jamal Malik Al Harith, were detained in Guantanamo Bay after being captured fighting for the Taliban in Afghanistan. In addition, three converts, Ibrahim Savant, Umar Islam and Abdul Waheed, were part of a group of mostly British-born Muslims of Pakistani origin which plotted to blow-up US bound airliners in August 2006. A German convert, Ibrahim (Christian) Ganczarski was also involved in a suicide bombing against a synagogue in Djerba, Tunisia which killed 21 people, including several European tourists. Two more German converts, Fritz Gelowicz and Daniel Schneider were imprisoned in April 2009 for planning to bomb Ramstein Air Base and Frankfurt airport.

Other known cases of jihadi converts include the Dutch-American Walters Brothers and Martine van der Oeven (former policewoman) in the Netherlands (all members of the Hofstad network), the Italian bomber Domenico Quaranta, the Swedish suspected hijacker

²⁹H. Mili, 'Al-Qaeda's Caucasian Foot Soldiers', *Jamestown Foundation Terrorism Monitor*, 4, 2 November 2006. [www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=948&tx_ttnews\[backPid\]=181&no_cache=1](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=948&tx_ttnews[backPid]=181&no_cache=1).

Kerim Chatty, the British Andrew Rowe, Dhiren Barot, Andrew Ibrahim, Nicky Reilly and Simon Keeler, the Irish Khalid Kelly, the Danish Abdallah Andersen, the Swiss Daniel Morgenej, the German Eric Breininger who was killed while fighting in Pakistan, the Belgian woman Muriel Degauque, the Belgian Pascal Cruyppeninck, the Spanish Luis Jose Galan Gonzales, and the French Jerome Courtailler, Johan Bonte, Jean-Marc Grandvisir, Robert-Richard Pierre, Willie Brigitte and Thomas Barnouin.

Also, converts have been involved in some of Russia's worst terrorist incidents. The notorious Karachai group, which has been blamed for several deadly explosions in Russian cities including the August 2004 attack in Moscow metro, had several Slavic converts as members under the leadership of Nikolai Kipkeyev: for example, Vitaly Zagorulko (an ethnic Ukrainian and ex-officer in Russia's Interior Ministry), Yury Menovshchikov (a former Russian paratrooper), and Ivan Manarin (a Russian army veteran). Moreover, Ukrainian Vladimir Khodov, who had converted in a Russian prison in 1996, participated in the Beslan takeover in March 2004. In addition, a Russian convert and ex-soldier, Pavel Kosolapov, participated allegedly in the double suicide bombing in Moscow metro in March 2010.

These individuals come from different backgrounds but a rather large number had criminal record and troubled family history. For example, Richard Reid had convictions for crimes against persons and property, and David Courtailler and Muriel Degauque were drug addicts. Therefore, it is easy to dismiss these cases as being ones of troubled individuals. But not all were social outcasts; on the contrary, some had a career and family to take care of. While it is not possible to draw a profile of the typical jihadi convert, it may still be possible to describe the circumstances under which one can be radicalized.

Conceptualizing the Radicalization of European Converts

The question that naturally arises is why some converts join jihadi networks while most others remain law-abiding citizens. There is a large body of literature on radicalization and its causes. The term *radicalization* can be understood as 'a growing readiness to pursue and support far-reaching changes in society that conflict with, or pose a direct threat to the existing order'.³⁰ In the context of this analysis, *radicalization* means that an individual commits personal resources (e.g., time, effort, money) to wage a jihadi campaign, either alone or as member of a group.

To begin with, Brian Jenkins argues that radicalization is 'a self-recruitment and very much an individual matter... many people may share the same circumstances, but only some will, as a consequence, adopt radical views'.³¹ In *Leaderless Jihad*, Marc Sageman claims that radicalization is a collective rather than an individual process in which friendship and kinship play a major role.³² Alex Wilner and Claire-Jehanne Dubouloz utilize transformative learning theory to understand cognitive and behavioural changes that occurred during the three transformative phases of radicalization: trigger (i.e., when an individual is facing dilemmas); process of change (i.e., revision of his/her belief system) and outcome (i.e., pursuing a new lifestyle).³³ Max Taylor and John Horgan emphasize the social/

³⁰A. Dalggaard-Nielsen, 'Violent Radicalization in Europe: What We Know and What We Do Not Know', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 33 (2010), p. 798.

³¹B.M. Jenkins, *Would-Be Warriors: Incidents of Jihadist Terrorist Radicalization in the United States Since September 11, 2001* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2010), p. 7.

³²M. Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), pp. 66–69.

³³A. S. Wilner and C.J. Dubouloz, 'Transformative Radicalization: Applying Learning Theory to Islamist Radicalization', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 34 (2011), pp. 418–438.

political/organizational context in which potential terrorists find themselves.³⁴ Drawing on his research on new religious movements, Lorne Dawson stresses the role of charismatic authority; in his words, 'leaders are the focal point of recruitment, instrumentally through their actions, and inspirationally through their example. To succeed they must provide followers with a tangible emotional reward, an experience which is novel and deeply satisfying'.³⁵ Lorenzo Vidino argues that radicalization could be the result of 'factors such as perception of discrimination and frustration at US foreign policies'.³⁶ Likewise, Bruce Hoffman emphasizes political events like the war in Iraq as a mechanism of radicalization.³⁷

This analysis will follow Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko in drawing on mechanisms of individual radicalization to understand the circumstances under which some European converts turned to violence. Although radicalization process has not been exactly the same for all individuals, McCauley and Moskalenko argue that it could be still possible to identify certain mechanisms. The term *mechanism* is defined in a broad sense as a 'the unconscious direction of a mental process in which feeling or emotion plays an important role'.³⁸

This perspective was chosen for two reasons. First, it follows a case study-driven approach emphasizing individual-level radicalization trajectory which is particularly useful for a small group such as the European jihadi converts. Second, this perspective offers a variety of explanations about the causes of individual radicalization, ranging from personal experiences (victimization and power of love) to group-level factors (political grievance and slippery slope). Having said that, it is possible that more than one mechanism may have contributed to the radicalization of some jihadi converts.

Individual radicalization by personal victimization

There is a long list of individuals all around the world who joined terrorist groups, because they were victimized or believed they were victimized by authorities. Discrimination and abuse can give rise to anger that could be transformed into rage, hatred and a desire to take revenge. Chechnya's female suicide bombers, who have been responsible for some of Russia's terrorist attacks, are often called Black Widows (*chernye vdovy* in Russian) because their husbands were killed by Russian security forces. Besides, Thomas Hegghammer's study of terrorist recruitment and radicalization in Saudi Arabia revealed that a significant number of al Qaeda members spent time in prison and were subjected to physical and/or psychological torture.³⁹ More importantly, a European survey claimed that:

... many Muslims have experienced verbal assaults in public transportation means and other public places. Muslim women who wear the headscarf and Muslim men who travel with women dressed this way are particularly frequent targets of offensive comments.⁴⁰

³⁴M. Taylor and J. Horgan, 'A Conceptual Framework for Addressing Psychological Process in the Development of the Terrorist', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 18 (2006), pp. 585–601.

³⁵L.L. Dawson, 'The Study of New Religious Movements and the Radicalization of Home-Grown Terrorists: Opening a Dialogue', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 22 (2010), p. 15.

³⁶L. Vidino, 'Homegrown Jihadist Terrorism in the United States: A New and Occasional Phenomenon?', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 32 (2009), p. 12.

³⁷B. Hoffman, 'Terrorism in the West: Al-Qaeda's Role in "Homegrown" Terror', *Brown Journal of World Affairs* 2 (2007), pp. 91–99.

³⁸C. H. Warren, *Dictionary of Psychology* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1934), p. 161.

³⁹T. Hegghammer, 'Terrorist Recruitment and Radicalization in Saudi Arabia', *Middle East Policy*, 13 (2006), p. 46.

⁴⁰A.S. Nyman, *Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims in the EU: Developments since September 11* (Vienna: International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights, 2005), p. 30.

Richard Reid, a British convert of Jamaican-English descent, is a typical example of this subgroup. Reid had a troubled youth and served sentences for various crimes. He converted at the age of 25 while in prison. Reid reportedly blamed racism for his troubles with the law. According to his father, 'he was born here in Britain. . . it was distressing to be told things like Go home, nigger!'.⁴¹ Being a mixed race person, he felt he did not belong anywhere. He joined the Finsbury Mosque in North London at the time that Abu Hamza, a radical imam of Egyptian origin, was preaching there. During 1999–2000, he visited Afghanistan where he possibly received training from al Qaeda. Within the jihadi networks, Reid was treated as an equal. In this way, he coped with racism and marginalization. He found a new role in life, and his self-esteem was boosted.

Another British convert, David Sinclair, a 29-year-old employee of a computer company, could have felt victimized by his employers. Sinclair lost his job after converting to Islam and wearing Islamic clothes to work.⁴² He must have seen himself as a victim of anti-Muslim discrimination because reportedly he did not want to live anymore in a non-Muslim country like the Great Britain. Therefore, he decided to travel to Bosnia and to fight together with other Muslim volunteers against Serbs and Croats.

Individual radicalization by political grievance

In some cases, radicalization is the result of a perceived grievance. According to McCauley and Moskalenko, 'sometimes an individual is moved to individual radical action and violence in response to political trends or events'.⁴³ Through the use of new media, many converts are now more familiar with Muslim insurgencies and thus more susceptible to jihadi messages. Islamist literature has made frequent reference to conflicts in Chechnya, Palestine, Kashmir and the Balkans portraying Muslims as the victims of infidel aggression.

Converts have usually an idealistic vision about the unity of ummah (i.e., the community of believers), deemphasizing divisions within Islam. Although there is no single Muslim identity, many converts see themselves as part of a broader Muslim community. The sense of belonging to a largely imaginary global community has been reinforced by the climate of Islamophobia prevailing in many European countries after the 9/11 attacks. Those who eventually joined jihadi groups found a new mission in life, a divine duty to fight against injustice and exploitation in the name of ummah.

Converts such as French terrorists Lionel Dumont and David Vallat testified that footage of the Bosnian war or the Chechen conflict was a primary catalyst in their radicalization.⁴⁴ In addition, Eric Breininger's memoirs, which were posted on jihadi websites after his death in Pakistan in April 2010, offered a detailed look into the world of jihadi converts. In *Mein Weg nach Jannah* (My Path to Paradise), Breininger explained how he was radicalized in Germany in the summer of 2007:

We followed the events which were unfolding in the regions of jihad and watched films of Mujahedeen fighting against the Crusaders. What really shocked us the most above all was the news about the prisons, and how the Crusaders treated our brothers; how they tortured and oppressed them. And also the fact that these infidels are putting innocent women in prison, raping them day after day. . . that these honorable women were being treated like dirt just fanned the

⁴¹M. Elliott, 'The Shoe Bomber's World', *The Time Magazine*, 16 February 2002.

⁴²E. Kohlmann, *Al-Qaida's Jihad in Europe: The Afghan-Bosnian Network* (Oxford: Berg, 2004), p. 95

⁴³McCauley and Moskalenko, op. cit. p. 419.

⁴⁴Mili, op. cit.

flames of hatred within me towards the infidels. . . I quickly realized that I had to do something against these Crusaders, who are humiliating our brothers and sisters.⁴⁵

If the document is authentic, then it shows how events such as the Abu Ghraib scandal contributed to his radicalization. In particular, the mistreatment and torture of female detainees triggered in him feelings of revenge.

Luis Jose Galan Gonzales (Yusuf Galan) who was arrested in Spain in relation to the 2004 Madrid bombings could also be included in this category. He had reportedly been an ETA sympathizer, working with the Basque nationalist party Herri Batasuna in the late 1980s.⁴⁶ After his conversion, Galan became the president of the *Ibn Taymiyyah* cultural association, which supported the second Palestinian Intifada that began in September 2000. The death of thousands of Palestinians during the uprising probably changed his perspective and radicalized him further. Moreover, the 9/11 events must have had an impact on Galan because he made speeches at demonstrations against the US invasion of Afghanistan.⁴⁷

Individual radicalization in joining a radical group—the slippery slope

The radicalization process can also occur with and within a radical group. At the beginning, any new member would be typically entrusted with small tasks such as collecting donations, finding safe houses or monitor potential targets. As individuals become increasingly isolated from the society, they must rely even more on the group interrelationships.⁴⁸ Then, s/he would be elevated to the operational level and would take part in violent activities.

There have been at least a few cases of converts radicalizing within jihadi groups. David Courtailler was raised as Roman Catholic in St Pierre en Faucigny, a small French town. Following his parents' divorce, he had drug and drinking problems. In 1996, Courtailler moved to England where he got acquainted with the local Islamic community. Courtailler described his experience as follows:

I went to a mosque for the first time with some Muslim friends. It was really something, all those people praying. There was just this serenity streaming from their faces. The people were nice. I made friends. I learned Arabic. Then one day I made the leap: I converted. . . Some friends had spoken to me about Afghanistan, Pakistan. I was curious, and besides, I had never really travelled anywhere. I thought it would be great to go over there. So I went. They totally took care of everything.⁴⁹

After travelling to Afghanistan, he attended training camps and got instructions for assisting jihadi cells in Europe. Finally, David Courtailler was sentenced to four years by a French court in May 2004 for conspiring with terrorists.

⁴⁵E. Breining, *Mein Weg nach Jannah* [My Path to Paradise], p. 52. <http://www.scribd.com/doc/31071994/Schaheed-Abdul-Ghaffar-al-Almani-Mein-Weg-Nach-Jannah>.

⁴⁶D. Noyes, 'AliasYusuf Galan: Neighbors, Sleepers, and the Violence of Recognition in Urban Spain', in R. Bendix and J. Bendix (eds) *Sleepers, Moles, and Martyrs: Secret Identifications, Societal Integration and the Differing Meanings of Freedom* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2004), p. 70.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸A. Kirby, 'The London Bombers as "Self-Starters": A Case Study in Indigenous Radicalization and the Emergence of Autonomous Cliques', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 30:5 (2007), pp. 415–428.

⁴⁹J. Cesari, 'Muslims in Europe and the Risk of Radicalism', in Rik Coolsaet (ed.) *Jihadi Terrorism and the Radicalization Challenge in Europe* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), p. 106.

Ibrahim (Christian) Ganczarski was born in 1966 in the Polish city of Gliwice and he was raised as a Roman Catholic. In 1976, he moved with his parents to Germany and became a naturalized German citizen. He converted to Islam at the age of 20 and married a German female convert in 1990. In 1992, Ganczarski went to Saudi Arabia on a fellowship to study Islam where he became more extreme in his views. When he returned to Germany in 1994, he attended the Al-Taqwa mosque in the city of Duisburg, where he met Mohamedou Ould Slahi, a Mauritanian Islamist. His radicalization was gradual and slow. It started probably in Saudi Arabia and continued upon his return to Germany in 1994. Like many converts, he volunteered to participate in various activities. At the beginning, he was entrusted with less important duties and responsibilities (e.g., carrying messages) but eventually he became one of al Qaeda's leaders in Europe. He was arrested in Paris in June 2003 and sentenced to 18 years in prison for his role in the Djerba attack in Tunisia that left 21 dead.

Individual radicalization in joining a radical group – the power of love

Converts could join jihadi groups because they have an emotional attachment to the leadership or an existing member. There is nothing unique in this. According to Donatella della Porta and Mario Diani, 'the more costly and dangerous the collective action, the stronger and more numerous the ties required for individuals to participate'.⁵⁰ Most terrorist groups would recruit members from a small pool of sympathizers in order to avoid infiltration by security agents; relatives and lovers are particularly preferred because kinship would reinforce internal cohesion against external enemies.

In November 2005, 38-year-old Muriel Degauque became the first female European convert to commit a suicide bombing in Iraq. She was born in Belgium and was raised as a Roman Catholic. Following the death of her brother in a car accident, she led a troubled life with alcohol and drug abuse. After divorcing her first husband, a Turkish immigrant, she married a Belgian–Moroccan man who was known to the police as a radical Islamist. They moved to Morocco for some time, where she learned Arabic and studied the Quran.⁵¹ When they returned to Belgium, Degauque gradually adopted the Salafi interpretation of Islam wearing full Islamic attire and avoiding any contact with strangers. The couple then travelled, via Syria, to Iraq and joined jihadi fighters. It is safe to assume that Degauque was radicalized after getting married to an Islamist whom she eventually followed to martyrdom.

There have been also a few cases of converts who were radicalized by their brothers. For example, Russian jihadi convert Vladimir Khodov was introduced to Islam and was later radicalized by his brother Boris who had converted in a Russian prison in 1996. The Walters Brothers are also an example of this subgroup. Jason Walters, the older brother, was converted to Islam by his father Carl, a black US serviceman stationed in the Netherlands. He later joined the infamous Hofstad group which murdered Theo van Gogh. His younger brother, Jermaine Walters, followed his steps and became member of the Hofstad group too.

The inspirational preaching as a mechanism

While these mechanisms could explain some cases of convert radicalization, they largely ignore the powerful influence of religious ideas and practices. Indeed, inspirational

⁵⁰D. Della Porta and M. Diani, *Social Movements: An Introduction* (Carlton: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), p. 117.

⁵¹G. Smith, 'Raised as Catholic in Belgium, She Died as a Muslim Bomber', *New York Times*, 6 December 2005. http://www.nytimes.com/2005/12/06/international/europe/06brussels.html?_r=1.

preaching can be another important mechanism leading to individual radicalization. A preacher's sermon is not only designed to reveal the truth but also to encourage the listener to do the kind of thinking that the reception and adoption of such truth require. Preaching could change perceptions of reality and inspire individuals to act accordingly. This kind of preaching has not been exclusive to Islam. For example, a charismatic anti-abortion Christian minister, John Burt, was accused of inspiring Michael Griffin, who murdered a doctor outside an abortion clinic in 1993.⁵² Baruch Kopel Goldstein, who killed 29 Palestinian Muslims in a Hebron mosque in 1994, had been exposed as a member of the Jewish Defense League to radical Rabbi Meir Kahane's preaching.

It is true that a preacher cannot fully control the perlocutionary effect of his words on the audience, which could be anything from anger to fear to boredom. Depending on the personal history and experiences, however, a convert could also be inspired by a radical preacher to become a jihadi fighter. According to Thomas Precht:

... radical preachers or imams are especially likely to influence young person's belief systems by speaking from a position of authority on religious issues. These preachers are often associated with the Mosque, but are also active in spreading their messages through the Internet, in prisons, via video, DVD, in written material or in private homes.⁵³

In other words, radical Islamic preaching, which draws its legitimacy from Quranic sources, could be an inspirational driving force on the path of radicalization. Indeed, many jihadi terrorists were inspired by radical preachers in Europe and elsewhere. For example, Sheik Omar Bakri Muhammad, who founded the radical Islamic group al Muhajiroun in Great Britain, appears to have been the mentor of the two British citizens of Pakistani origin who carried out a suicide attack in Israel in 2003.⁵⁴ It also known that Sheikh Abdullah Azzam, a radical Palestinian Islamic scholar who preached jihad in defence of Muslims in Afghanistan after the 1979 Soviet invasion, influenced bin Laden's thinking as a young man who had joined the Mujahedeen.

Germaine Maurice Lindsay (Abdullah Shaheed Jamal) is an example of this kind of radicalization. He was born in Jamaica in September 1985 but, while still a baby, he moved to Great Britain with his mother. Little is known about his religious upbringing, but at the age of 15 he converted to Islam together with his mother. After his conversion, Lindsay became gradually more conservative but he never travelled to Muslim countries. In 2003, Lindsay married a white convert from Northern Ireland who he had met on the Internet. They lived a family life in Aylesbury in Buckinghamshire.

Lindsay's radicalization looks like a puzzle. He had not been victimized as a convert; on the contrary, he was reportedly a confident young man. All evidence points to Lindsay's involvement in the 7/7 plot from the very beginning, which means that he had been radicalized before joining the group of the three British-born Pakistani men. He had no serious involvement in Islamist activities and he had never travelled to war zones. If we ignore the role of inspirational preaching, it seems that Lindsay moved straight to terrorism. The key

⁵²L. Rohter, 'Towering Over the Abortion Foe's Trial: His Leader', *The New York Times*, 5 March 1994. <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9807E2DC113AF936A35750C0A962958260&sec=&spon=&pagewanted=1>.

⁵³T. Precht, 'Home Grown Terrorism and Islamist Radicalisation in Europe: From Conversion to Terrorism', Danish Ministry of Justice, p. 53. http://www.justitsministeriet.dk/fileadmin/downloads/Forskning_og_dokumentation/Home_grown_terrorism_and_Islamist_radicalisation_in_Europe_an_assessment_of_influencing_factors_2_.pdf.

⁵⁴S. O'Neill, 'How Radical Preachers Turn a Young Man Into a Suicide Bomber', *The Times*, 18 November 2006. http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/education/student/news/article640346.ece.

to the answer may lie in the words of Samantha Lewthwaite, Lindsay's wife; according to her, when Lindsay began visiting mosques in London and Luton:

... his behaviour gradually began to change. He turned from the man that I married. In hindsight I can now see exactly what was happening to him and why. How these people could have turned him and poisoned his mind is dreadful. He was an innocent, naive and simple man. I suppose he must have been an ideal candidate.⁵⁵

An important factor leading to Lindsay's radicalization appears to be the influence of Sheik Abdullah El-Faisal, a radical Muslim preacher of Jamaican origin. In one of his speeches, El-Faisal stated:

These are the words of Allah... commanding us to fight and kill the disbeliever even when they are in their own countries... so if you were commanded to fight them, even when they are in their own countries, how can you have them in the holiest land of Islam... It is incumbent upon us Muslims to remind the believers of the importance of killing these disbelievers, finding them and killing them... Brothers and sisters let me remind you that all of you will die except the martyr.⁵⁶

According to the UK Government report about the 7/7 bombings, 'Lindsay is believed to have attended at least one lecture and to have listened to tapes of other lectures by [El-Faisal]'.⁵⁷ While living in Great Britain, El-Faisal had openly advocated the killing of Jews and Hindus and had encouraged British Muslims to become jihadis. Indeed, during a BBC interview, El-Faisal admitted that he knew Lindsay but denied any role in Lindsay's radicalization.⁵⁸

Dhiren Barot, a British Indian convert, could be another example of this subgroup. In 2006, he was found guilty of conspiring to murder people by targeting financial institutions in the United States (e.g., the World Bank, the New York Stock Exchange) and setting off a 'dirty bomb' in Great Britain. He was raised by a middle-class Hindu family which moved to Great Britain from Kenya in 1973. Barot's conversion to Islam at the age of 20 was reportedly a revolt against his strict father.⁵⁹ He soon came under the influence of Abu Hamza, the former imam of the Finsbury Mosque in London, who has been convicted for his role in the 9/11 attacks. Abu Hamza was a veteran of the Bosnian and Afghan wars who had lost both his arms and an eye. He became notorious for his inflammatory preaching against non-Muslims, calling British Muslims to fight in defence of Muslims in Palestine, Chechnya, and Kashmir. Barot attended several of Hamza's lectures. According to David Carlisle, Abu Hamza's charisma had a 'profound effect on Barot'.⁶⁰

⁵⁵D. Sanderson, 'Bomber's Widow Says Extremists Twisted His Mind', *The Times*, 23 September 2005. <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/article569784.ece>.

⁵⁶Royal Court of Justice, 'Judgment in Appeal of *Crown v. El-Faisal*', 4 March 2004. <http://www.hmcourts-service.gov.uk/judgmentsfiles/j2352/regina-v-el-faisal.htm>.

⁵⁷UK Government, *Report of the Official Account of the Bombings in London on 7 July 2005*, 11 May 2006. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/11_05_06_narrative.pdf.

⁵⁸D. Sandford, 'Hate Preacher Knew 7/7 Bombers', *BBC News*. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/7465201.stm.

⁵⁹S. O'Neill, 'How Young Hindu Turned to Islam and Abu Hamza', *The Times*, 8 November 2006. <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/article629219.ece>

⁶⁰D. Carlisle, 'Dhiren Barot: Was He an Al Qaeda Mastermind or Merely a Hapless Plotter?', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 30:12 (2007), p. 1058.

Finally, a French convert of Caribbean origin, Willie Brigitte, was involved in a terrorist plot in Australia. Brigitte embraced Islam at the age of 30 after attending a mosque in the Parisian suburb of Couronnes. During his interrogation by France's leading anti-terrorist judge, Jean-Louis Bruguiere, in late 2003, it became clear that Brigitte was radicalized by Mohamed El Maghrebi, a radical preacher of Algerian origin:

- Judge
Bruguiere: With regard to your radical concept of Islam, you have indicated that you were influenced by particularly virulent Hadith [i.e., recorded oral traditions about Prophet Muhammad] relating to the jihad which were constantly repeated at the Omar mosque. These Hadith were part of the theology classes given by Mohamed El Maghrebi at the Couronnes mosque. Thus, it appears that after your conversion to Islam which was allegedly the result of personal reasoning, theology classes given at the Couronnes mosque... led you to embrace a radical concept of Islam oriented towards the jihad, which subsequently led you to travel to Pakistan... what can you say on this subject?
- Brigitte: Yes that is true. It is a fact that in the teaching given by Mohamed El Maghrebi, the Hadith relating to the jihad had a major part. Moreover, all those who took part in this teaching either died in Afghanistan, or have been arrested by the Americans because they had been to that country.⁶¹

Like other converts, Brigitte fell under the influence of a preacher who interpreted Islam in a radical way. Mohamed El Maghrebi's preaching changed Brigitte's perception of the world around him. During those sermons, evidence from the Quran and the Hadith was presented to the attendees regarding Islam's superiority. His life's purpose was to join the jihad against the 'Crusaders' and their allies.

Conclusions and Prospects for the Future

Although it has often been negatively presented in the media and elsewhere, Islam has won thousands of new followers in many European countries. While the huge majority of European converts have been law-abiding citizens, a small number of them have been radicalized, participating in jihadi activities. Despite fundamental differences in outlook, there are numerous indications showing that the four mechanisms suggested by McCauley and Moskaleiko have been responsible for the radicalization of at least some European converts. Those converts were radicalized because they became victims of abuse or discrimination; for some others, radicalization was the result of political grievances; the slippery slope effect was identified as another mechanism of radicalization; there were also cases of individuals being radicalized by partners or relatives. Finally, it was argued that inspirational preaching could function as an additional mechanism of individual radicalization.

⁶¹Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 'Interrogations of Willie Brigitte'. <http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/content/2004/s1131449.htm>.

European converts present a particularly difficult challenge to security agencies, since they are unlikely to fit any racial profile of a typical al Qaeda affiliated terror suspect. Indeed, converts have been viewed as a valuable asset by terrorist groups because they are often indistinguishable from the rest of the population. More importantly, jihadi converts have taken advantage of the Schengen Treaty and US visa waiver programs to travel without much scrutiny. European governments must carefully choose strategies and policies for dealing with jihadi converts, if they are to avoid a threat to European security. Yet, a harsh security response could possibly push more converts to radicalization in a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. After all, new Muslims (like all citizens) must fully enjoy their civil rights and liberties.

While investing more in intelligence-gathering is certainly an option, a successful counter-radicalization strategy should focus on the destigmatization of converts. As a minority within a minority community, European converts to Islam have been vulnerable to exclusion and discrimination. Therefore, European governments should promote inter-religious dialogue, enforce legislation on equality and non-discrimination, and take measures to combat Islamophobia. In this regard, working with Muslim communities and their leadership is a precondition for implementing any policies to tackle the radicalization of converts.

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