

Chapter 8

Violent Converts to Islam: Growing Cluster and Rising Trend

Jahangir E. Arasli ¹

Introduction

Before and since the death of Osama bin Laden, the role and place of violent Muslim converts in the context of Islamist homegrown terrorism (hereafter HGT) largely remains below the radar screen, both in the research community and in the security practitioners' pool. Despite the exponentially growing evidence which suggests that converts are steadily moving from the periphery into the epicenter of HGT, conventional wisdom still treats them as a marginal, fringe phenomenon rather than as a sustained and arguably growing trend posing serious security challenges.² This essay represents a modest attempt to help bridge the gap between outdated perceptions and existing realities vis-à-vis the (in some quarters sensitive) issue of converts. It is to be hoped that this chapter will also contribute to future shaping of the topic as an independent and important sub-discipline in the field of counterterrorism.

Accordingly, the essay first touches upon the general issues of *definition* and terminology. Subsequently, it provides a brief *historic overview* and offers empirical data suggesting that the threat posed by violent converts is evolving to a higher level. After that, this chapter addresses the core questions, related to the personal characteristics of converts, as well as the reasons for and *patterns* of their conversion experience and radicalization. Finally, it analyzes *practical aspects* of violent converts' activities in the format of HGT. Given its limited scope, this essay is not aimed at covering the whole picture in a comprehensive sense. Rather, ambitions are limited to simply charting the general contours of the

¹ Dr. Arasli is a long-time member of the CTWG, has served as an adjunct professor in the Program on Terrorism and Security Studies (PTSS) at the George C. Marshall Center. He is an expert on terrorism and counter-terrorism from Azerbaijan.

² For an example of such "traditional" approach towards the issue see all editions of the "EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report" (a.k.a. TE-SAT), issued by the EUROPOL before 2010 (accessible at the agency's website: www.europol.europa.eu/publications/EU_Terrorism_Situation_and_Trend_Report_TE-SAT/TE-SAT2010.pdf). It has never identified converts as a trend to within HGT, rarely referring to the issue only in relation to some concrete terrorism-related cases. The TE-SAT 2010 represents a remarkable and welcomed departure from that tradition, as has been indicated in chapter 6.

problem and providing a number of initial thoughts, while leaving its particular aspects, as well as policy recommendations, for future in-depth research publications. All views, expressed in the essay, are those of the author and do not reflect an official position of any institution.

Definitions

This chapter offers a notional terminology that the author operates with throughout the text. As well, it encompasses some statements that help to clarify a relevant distinction between the “normal” (that is, moderate) convert and violent converts.

1. In the simplest terms, religious conversion might be understood as a change from one faith to another that involves internalization of a *new identity* by a neophyte. Conversion is not restricted to a transition from one religion to another, but also includes a journey from non-religion (such as atheism and agnosticism), or nominal religion (i.e., when an individual has a formal religious affiliation by place of birth, nation and parentage, but does not regard himself/herself as a practicing believer).³
2. As in many other cases, there is no universal, officially-coined definition of violent Muslim converts. This permits the author to offer his own working definition, if admittedly improvised, incomplete and provisional. Violent Muslim converts are individuals who adopt a new identity, based on and linked to self-assumed misinterpretations or distortions of Islam that justify or encourage violence, including terrorism. Hereafter in this text, violent convert actors, operating in the realm of radical Islam, are indicated as violent Islamic converts, or *VICs*.
3. Conversion to extreme interpretations of Islam becomes a first and the most important step prior to further radicalization, indoctrination, recruitment, and eventual violent intention and/or activity. Though in certain personal cases it may vary, almost all violent converts perform a conversion – radicalization – activation (CRA) loop.⁴
4. A combined conversion and radicalization (C&R) segment of the mentioned CRA loop serves as a crucial “boost stage” that enables an individual to jump to distorted and politicized versions of Islam that approve of and legitimize violence as religiously justified. The final product of such a trajectory is ultimately violent intentions and actions.
5. The term “violent activity” applies to an engagement into a broad range of functions of “newborn” Muslim converts, not necessarily just direct

³ This statement is a fusion, based on a compilation of different sources which address the issue of religious conversion. The quantity of the mentioned sources does not allow citing them.

⁴ The notion of CRA loop (or, a “conversion ladder”) is for the first time introduced by the author in this essay. It will be elaborated in more details in future publications.

application of violence. Mainly, we refer to terrorism and insurgency. Beyond “direct action,” it also implies related ideological and propaganda activities and efforts (such as recruitment of others to the ideological cause, spreading politico-religious extremism, and hate preaching) as well as different forms of organizational, technical, materiel and financial support that sustain violence. “Violent activity” also applies to certain “gray area” cases that at a glance might appear purely criminal, yet in fact involve a traceable causal influence of conversion to Islam.⁵

All of this is not to say that a mere conversion to Islam poses a security problem by default. Conversion to Islam, as to any other belief system, should be treated as a manifestation of the right of an individual to make a personal choice, assured by freedom of belief and expression. Neither Islam per se, nor conversion to its mainstream form is a security threat as such. A key word in the equation of violent Islam convert is “violent”; that signals a clear distinction from “normal” (i.e. moderate) conversion pattern, related to mainstream, purely “spiritual” Muslim faith. Violent actors are representing only a thin slice from the general pool of people who choose Islam as their new religion.⁶

The last point raises a legitimate question: why should anyone care about violent converts? The answer is simple: although they represent a minority among converts to Islam, in *real numbers* the violent individuals constitute a *growing pool* of hundreds, if not thousands of extremely dangerous people who represent a direct security threat. The empirical evidence is examined in the next two sections.

A Brief Pre-9/11 Overview

Indeed, prior to the 9/11 watershed terrorism event, the converts were an exotic product of the global bazaar of violence. Yet, they were not completely foreign to it. A first generation of violent converts can be traced back to the late 60s – early 70s, when a certain number of young Afro-Americans joined either the radical wing of the Nation of Islam (NOI) movement, or the ranks of the Black Panthers and similar anti-establishment groups, which were involved in the projection of violence. Later, in the 70s and the 80s, a number of American converts, some of Caucasian origin, joined the extremist Pakistan-linked Islamist sect Jamaat ul-Fuqra (JUF) that was active throughout the U.S., often

⁵ An example of such “gray area” case is the story of John Allen Muhammad, a.k.a. the “Beltway Sniper,” who killed and injured 13 people in Washington, DC in 2002. He converted to Islam upon his military service in the Gulf. For details, see: “Muhammad a Gulf War Vet, Islam Convert,” *CNN.com*, 26 January 2004, <http://archives.cnn.com/2002/US/10/24/muhammad.profile> (accessed 19 April 2010).

⁶ Farhad Khosrokhavar, “Jihadism in Europe and the Middle East,” in *Islamism as Social Movement*, ed. Thomas Olsen and Farhad Khosrokhavar (Aarhus, Denmark: Centre for Studies in Islamism and Radicalization, Department of Political Science, Aarhus University, 2009), 41, http://www.ps.au.dk/fileadmin/site_files/filer_statskundskab/subsites/cir/pdf-filer/H%C3%A6fte2final.pdf (accessed 1 February 2010).

demonstrating a violent *modus operandi*. In 1980, an American convert David Belfield, a.k.a. “*Dawood Salahuddin*,” who has been recruited by the security services of the newly-established Islamic Republic of Iran, killed a prominent Iranian opposition leader who lived in exile in the USA.

However, these *first-generation converts* were not embedded into a broad context of global jihad that still remained to emerge. Rather, these converts represented what might be termed “protest conversion,” like the Panthers who choose Islam as their racial identity assertiveness tool, mixing it with a good portion of Marxism, or were contained within a peripheral trend, such as the case of JUF. Or, in some single-issue cases such as the one of David Belfield, they were acting as operatives of a foreign intelligence service. It is important to stress that most of converts in that period were still lacking an articulated and elaborate religious justification of the violence they committed.

The second generation of violent converts arrived with the global transformation that occurred in late 80s – early 90s. The ascendance of a radical political Islamism and the associated violent trend has contributed to the emergence and rise of the convert phenomenon. The war in Bosnia was a notable first call. That conflict engaged dozens of European converts, who were radicalized and fought on the Muslim side. The notorious “Roubaix Gang” and a particular member, a French convert and Bosnian war veteran Lionel “*Bilal*” Dumont, serve as an eloquent example of this developing trend,⁷ which nonetheless remained unnoticed at that time. Indeed, the armed conflicts of the last decade of the past century (Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chechnya, Kashmir, and some others), that involved a direct or indirect participation of Al-Qaeda (AQ), produced scores of professionally trained and battle-hardened violent converts to Islam. For instance, before 2001, AQ founded *Al-Khaldan* camp in Afghanistan, which was exclusively used for military and terrorist training of non-Arabs, including converts.⁸ Those who survived the fighting came back to Europe and North America. In a parallel development, a sharp rise of migrant communities with extensive outer social relations—a particular outcome of the European liberal migration and asylum policies—also preconditioned the expansion of a pool of Western converts to Islam. The third factor was an aggressive and financially-sustained preaching of radical Wahabbist and Salafist versions of Islam, projected by certain religious circles and centers in Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and the Arab states of the Gulf via forward outposts, located in the West. The worldwide preaching campaign, waged everywhere from official mosques to correctional facilities and aimed primarily at Muslims from migrant communities,

⁷ For more details on the Roubaix Gang, see: “Roubaix Gang,” *Global Jihad*, http://www.globaljihad.net/view_page.asp?id=1701 (accessed 21 June 2010). On Lionel Dumont, see: Jim Frederick, “Japan’s Terror Threat,” *Time.com*, 31 May 2004, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,644220,00.html> (accessed 21 June 2010).

⁸ Jeffrey Cozzens, “Islamist Groups Develop New Recruiting Strategies,” *Jane’s Intelligence Review* 17:2 (online), 1 February 2005, <http://www.janes.com/>.

delivered an important by-product – Western converts to Islam, radicalized to a level of readiness to perform violent activities.

A combination of these three mentioned factors contributed to the emergence and initial development of the VICs' phenomenon as an integral cluster of the *global jihad movement* (GJM).⁹ Yet, before the start of the new Millennium, violent converts were still treated both by practitioners and scholars as an isolated and marginal phenomenon, when they were even noticed at all.

A State of the Field

The 9/11 attack reshaped the entire global politico-security landscape: with the WTC towers' collapse, major paradigms decisively shifted. Foremost, the events of 9/11 marked a beginning of the new stage of the overt and broad confrontation of the GJM against the Western world. Among thousands of other things, it influenced the rapid evolution of a VIC-associated trend. The high-visibility attack itself attracted and brought scores of already disgruntled or disenfranchised Westerners under the banner of radical Islam. In a stunning development, hundreds of Americans, citizens of a nation which was a victim of terrorist attack, converted to Islam within months after 9/11, most likely to demonstrate disagreement with the public mainstream.¹⁰ Another example are the convert members of the so-called "Toronto 18" terrorist group, dismantled in Canada in 2006, who admitted that the 9/11 attack captured their imagination and attracted attention to Islam,¹¹ eventually making them susceptible to radical jihadist ideology. The role of the 9/11 event as an enabler of conversion is itself interesting; however, this essay's format does not provide an opportunity to go deep into this issue. What is important in this regard, is to understand that 2001 indicated a start of the *third generation of violent converts*, fully integrated into the GJM. This chapter examines some empiric evidence suggesting that within less than a decade after 9/11, the growing influx of violent Islam neophytes has impressively expanded the VIC cluster of GJM, making it a substation security threat in the context of homegrown terrorism. The brief

⁹ Since the GJM will be referred further in this essay, its notion should be elaborated. In simple terms, the author understands the global jihad movement as a loosely-knit but strongly-motivated trend, rooted in radical and politicized interpretation of the Muslim faith. The eventual goals of GJM are vaguely defined and ultimately irrational. However, on the operational and tactical side the GJM is quite rational. The combination of the two mentioned factors makes the GJM a threat of a worldwide magnitude. A precursor organizational nucleus for GJM was Al-Qaeda v1.0 (a.k.a. Al-Qaeda Central), which created an impetus for the GJM by launching the 9/11 attack. Current organizational structure of the GJM is based on the loosely connected small groups, cells and individuals, sharing common radical Islamist ideology and joint vision of the enemy (the U.S., Israel, Western civilization in general, and the moderate Muslims).

¹⁰ Brendan Bernhard, *White Muslim: From LA to New York ... to Jihad* (Hoboken, N.J.: Melville House Publishing, 2006), 12.

¹¹ Isabel Teotonio, "Toronto 18," *The Star.com*, 22 June 2010, <http://www3.thestar.com/static/toronto18/index.html> (accessed 1 July 2010).

analysis is broken into three supra-regions of the globe: the U.S., the rest of the West, and the rest of the World.

The United States

There were 40 Islamist terrorism-related plots and incidents that took place or were foiled in the U.S. after 9/11.¹² Violent converts were directly engaged in 26 of the mentioned 42 cases, what makes a full 61.9 per cent of the total number. The particular patterns of involvement were as following:

- Part of VIC operated within groups or cells (between 4 and 11 members). Roughly half of the mentioned groups/cells were amalgam of “native” and “newborn” (i.e. convert) Muslims, such as the “Portland 7” group (three converts of 7 members), the “LA Prison” cell (three of 4, including a leader), the Raleigh Jihad group (four of 8, including a leader), and Virginia Jihad Network (four of 11). Another half consisted solely of converts (examples: the “Miami 6” group, the “JFK Fuel Tanks Plot” cell, the “New York Synagogue Plot” cell).
- Some VICs were part of the self-radicalized pairs of like-minded action-oriented friends each consisting of a “native” Muslim and a convert (examples of the latter are James Elshafay and Carlos Almonte). Many other converts acted either as “lone wolves” (such as Abdulhakim Mujahid Muhammad, a.k.a. the “Arkansas Shooter,” and Derrick Shareef), or those with formal ties but without a clear operational link to any known terrorist structure (examples: Michael Finton, Chris Paul). One “gray area” case involved a non-Muslim (Michael Reynolds), who offered his assistance to AQ on motivations other than religion. Yet, their terrorist intentions and activities were of low-profile, amateur nature, and localized within the U.S.
- In at least three cases (Richard “Shoe-bomber” Reid, Jose “Dirty-Bomber” Padilla, and Diren Baroth), converts were chosen by AQ-affiliated structures to plan or execute high-profile, mass-casualty-oriented attacks against an airborne jetliner (with the use of an improvised but

¹² Different sources provide different estimates on a number of cases, omitting some of them. Own statistics, manned by the author, accounts for 42 incidents (as for 30 June 2010). For examples of other estimates, see: Jena Baker McNeill, James Carafano, and Jessica Zuckerman, “30 Terrorists Plots Foiled: How the System Worked,” *The Heritage Foundation*, 29 April 2010, www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2010/04/30-Terrorist-Plots-Foiled-How-the-System-Worked (accessed 13 May 2010); Germain Difo, “Ordinary Measures, Extraordinary Results: An Assessment of Foiled Plots Since 9/11,” *American Security Project*, May 2010, www.americansecurityproject.org/content/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/Foiled-Plots.pdf (accessed 29 May 2010); and Bryan M. Jenkins, *Would-Be Warriors: Incidents of Jihadi Terrorist Radicalization in the United States Since September 11, 2001* (Santa Monica, C.A.: RAND Corporation, 2010).

innovative explosive device), and in the urban environment (with the use of radiological dispersal devices (RDD)).

- Two episodes involved converts then in the service of the U.S. military, attempting to provide classified information to AQ recipients (Ryan Anderson, the U.S. Army National Guard and Paul Hall, a.k.a. "*Hassan Abu Jihad*," from the U.S. Navy). In one more case, related to the military, Hassan Akbar, a U.S. Army convert serviceman, motivated by religious rage, conducted a successful armed attack against his unit members (Iraq, 2003).
- One specific case involved two American women converts (Coleen LaRose and Jamie Paulin-Ramirez), who conspired within a wider jihadist group to kill a Swedish cartoonist on the grounds of alleged blasphemy against Mohammed.
- Several U.S. converts (including Omar Hammami, Bryant Vinas, and Daniel Joseph Maldonado) were involved into direct fighting in conflict zones, such as Afghanistan and Somalia, including against fellow Americans. At least one convert (Adam Yahye Ghaddan) was engaged as a media spokesman in a sophisticated strategic communication campaign, conducted by AQ-Central. A recently detained convert, Barry Bujol Jr., was allegedly providing materiel support to AQ.
- These facts eloquently illustrate the tense dynamics, operational magnitude, spatial dimension, foreign linkages and diverse patterns related to American converts' activities, both within the homegrown terrorism domain, and in the jihadist movement on the global stage.

The Rest of the West

In Europe, converts have been part of most of the major known terrorist plots and associated networks which have come into the spotlight since 9/11. It is hard to find a country on the continent, from Spain to Norway, where VICs did not leave footprints. The converts-related developments in Canada and Australia are equally eventful. The facts in support of this statement follow.¹³

- A British – Jamaican convert Germain Lindsay was one of the four suicide bombers, who conducted the 7/7 attack (the London tube bombing in 2005).
- A Spanish convert Jose Luis Galan Gonzales (a.k.a. "*Yousuf Galan*") was a member of a jihadist logistic and recruitment ring, linked to the 9/11 hijackers. Jose Emilio Suarez Trashorras supplied 110 kg of stolen ex-

¹³ All data below is a compilation of information, produced by different news agencies between 2001 and now.

plosive to terrorists who launched the 3/11 attack (the Madrid mass transit bombing in 2004).¹⁴

- A Belgian convert to Islam, Muriel Degauge, became a first-ever European female suicide bomber (died in an attack in Iraq, November 2005).
- A German–Polish convert, Christian Gancharzski, affiliated with AQ and operating within Germany, was a mastermind of the terrorist attack in Jerba, Tunisia in April 2002, which left 14 German tourists dead.
- Two of the four members of the *Sauerland* cell in Germany, who planned a mass-casualty attack against German civilian and the U.S. military targets, were homegrown converts (i.e., fifty per cent of the total number).
- Three of 24 detained conspirators of the “liquid explosive plot,” aimed at the midair destruction of several Trans-Atlantic jetliners in summer 2006, were converts (12.5 per cent of a total number).
- At least three of the 19 members of the *Hofstaad* Islamist terrorist network in the Netherlands, that killed filmmaker Teo van Gogh, were ethnic Dutch (that is, 15.8 per cent of a total number). This figure might be even higher, if we also count the so-called “barnacles” (i.e., members of the outer ring, friends and sympathizers, etc.). The second-in-command of the network was a convert Jason Walters of Dutch–American descent.
- At least four members of the “Toronto 18” terrorist network in Canada were converts (22.2 per cent of the total number).
- Between 2002 and 2006, Australia has experienced eight criminal cases, related to converts’ engagement into terrorist activities. That number included one case of a preparation of the attack with the use of explosive by a female convert, four cases of cooperation with the foreign terrorist networks AQ, the *Taliban*, *Jemaa Islamiyah*, and *Lashkar-e-Tayyaba*, and one case of participation in a grassroots self-radicalized cell.

This list of examples could be continued, however, the above facts are sufficient to demonstrate both the scope of the problem, and its diverse patterns, such as in the previously discussed American case. Still, although they display certain similarities with the U.S., the European converts’ trend demonstrate differences as well.

The major factor in Europe, determining the influx of converts and their rapid radicalization, is the existence of massive, not-fully-integrated Muslim first- and second-generation migrant communities, which are as of this writing

¹⁴ Christopher Jasparr, “Madrid Attack Points to Sustained Al-Qaeda Direction,” *Jane’s Intelligence Review* (August 2004), 31. The conversion of Trashorras to Islam is still disputed though by those who argue he was involved into the conspiracy on the criminal profit-driven motivation.

growing steadily across the continent. Those communities, with their extensive social networks, and associated web of mosques, Islamic centers and clubs create a gravitational force for the “indigenous” Europeans, who experience certain problems, feel alienated, need guidance, and wish to fill a social communication void or change their whole way of life. Such factors create a fertile environment for conversion, and in many cases, for the subsequent radicalization of these converts. According to some estimates, out of nearly 5,000 confirmed Moslem extremists of the *Salafi* trend, put under police surveillance in France, more than four hundred of them were the “newborn” Muslims¹⁵ (a total of eight per cent), grouped mostly around mosques and praying congregations.

The second factor of note is the relative geographic proximity of Europe to the Muslim-majority world, in particular to the Middle East, the Gulf and South Asia. This proximity facilitates a relatively easy access to those regions for two primary purposes associated with converts: the study of Islam, and participation in armed jihad. The first track assures a sustainable radicalization and indoctrination mechanism, while the second provides professional training in terrorist tradecraft and “learning-by-fighting.” The last point has important security implications. The breaking of the *Sauerland* cell (2007) and revealing of the existence of the “German Taliban” nucleus group operating in the lawless area of Afghan–Pakistani border (2009)¹⁶ were wake-up calls for European security authorities, highlighting the real danger of the “exchange” of convert cadres between active jihadist war zones and Europe.

The Rest of the World

Violent converts are not an exclusively a Western phenomenon. They may be traced in many conflicts involving Islamist movements and organizations around the world.

The most notable example is Russia, which is fighting an Islamist insurgency in the North Caucasus. Since the start of the Chechen war in 1994, hundreds of ethnic Russians and other Slavs, including military personnel, have converted to Islam, joining the ranks of the insurgency (in some cases, the sequence of action was actually the opposite: join the insurgents and then convert). An analysis of the search warrants issued by the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs against 59 individuals for their participation in the Chechen invasion into Dagestan in 1999, demonstrates that five of them (or 8.4 per cent of the total number) were ethnic Russians, i.e., at least formally Orthodox Christians prior to the conversion.¹⁷ At least three (or, perhaps even more) of 32 terrorists who

¹⁵ Craig Whitlock, “Trial of French Islamic Radical Sheds Light on Convert’s Role,” *Washington Post*, 1 January 2006.

¹⁶ Yassin Musharbash, Marcal Rosenbasch, and Holger Stark, “The Third Generation: German Jihad Colonies Sprout Up in Waziristan,” *Spiegel Online*, 5 April 2010, www.spiegel.de/international/germany/0,1518,687306,00.html.

¹⁷ Based on the data posted on February 12, 2001 on the website of the РОСИНФОРМЦЕНТР (The Russian Information Centre, www.infocentre.ru, in Russian). That website is currently defunct.

seized hostages in the Beslan school in Russia in September 2004 were converted ethnic Slavs, including the alleged group's leader Vladimir Khodov (thus, 9.3 per cent of a total number). Even more importantly, a convert, Alexander Tikhomirov, a.k.a. "*Said Buryatski*" (killed in March 2010), was for more than two years a primary ideologue of the "Caucasus Emirate," an umbrella for the constellation of Islamist insurgent groups in the North Caucasus. His example indicates that converts are trusted to the extent that it is possible for them to occupy senior positions in the command hierarchy, and to act as authoritative sources of the jihadist ideology.¹⁸ Another notable convert, Pavel Kosolapov, a dropout cadet from the Russian Strategic Missile Forces' Military Academy, who joined the Islamist insurgency, is allegedly a mastermind behind several major terrorist attacks in mainland Russia.

Beyond Chechnya and the North Caucasus, some Russian/Slav VICs were detected in several Islamist self-radicalized cells in the Volga region and in Siberia, as well as found in the ranks of Islamist groups in the former Soviet republics in Central Asia, Afghanistan, and even as far afield as Lebanon. Overall, in addition to the influence of a decade and a half-long conflict in North Caucasus, other driving causes behind a high rate of conversion to a violent form of Islam in Russia appears to be the post-Soviet ideology/identity vacuum, and more recently, frustration due to the severe economic crisis. These factors seem to have made many non-Muslims turn their attention to the "protest potential" of Islam. A factor complicating an assessment of the role of Russian converts in the Islamist activities in Eurasia remains the less than transparent information picture generated by official Russian sources that make it difficult to verify facts.

Other remarkable examples of VIC activities can be taken from two disparate regions of the world. In the Philippines, the underground *Raja Solaiman Movement* (RSM), consists, according to some estimates, of several hundred converts, and is engaged in a terrorist urban insurgency against government.¹⁹ The RSM operative cadres are blamed for the worst incident in the history of maritime terrorism, when a February 2004 arson attack onboard of MV *Superferry 14* claimed 116 lives. On the other edge of the globe, in Trinidad and Tobago, the extremist organization *Jamaat ul-Muslimeen* (JAM), consisting of Afro-Caribbean converts, is engaged in a broad array of violent and dubious activi-

¹⁸ On Said Buryatsky, see: Mairbek Vachagaev, "Killing of Said Buryatsky Unlikely to Deter North Caucasus Insurgency," *The Jamestown Foundation – Eurasia Daily Monitor* 7, no. 48, 11 March 2010, http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=36146 (accessed 17 March 2010).

¹⁹ On the RSM profile, see: "Philippines Terrorism: The Role of Militant Islamic Converts," *The International Crisis Group*, Asia Report #110, 19 December 2005, [http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/asia/south-east-asia/philippines/110_philippines_terrorism_the_role_of_militant_islamic_converters.ashx](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/asia/south-east-asia/philippines/110_philippines_terrorism_the_role_of_militant_islamic_converters.ashx) (accessed 3 November 2007).

ties, ranging from organized crime to political militancy (including an attempted armed coup in the past).²⁰

Summarizing the chapter, it is safe to state that the displayed evidence is sufficient to recognize the rise of converts' cluster in the context of HGT/GJM in the last decade. The vast reservoir of open source information makes it easy to establish that fact. What is really difficult is to find out the answers to three key questions, arising from the abovementioned findings: *who* (are the converts?), *why* (are they converted and radicalized?), and *how* (do they undergo conversion in a practical sense?).

Patterns

This chapter omits broad dynamics and structural dimension, focusing exclusively on the *individual level*, crucial from the standpoint of understanding the motivations behind violent conversion, and mapping out trajectories leading to it. Furthermore, it is relevant for assessing political and operational implications of the VIC factor, and an elaboration of effective counter-measures (such as profiling, counter-radicalization narratives, de-radicalization strategies, etc.). Given a broad scope and a complex, if not perplexed, nature of this segment of the overall theme, the ambitions of the chapter are limited to simply highlighting some key observations. These observations are derived from researching the set of converts' profiles, which were compiled from multiple sources by the author.²¹

Who?

The first discovery coming from the study is: *there is no a universal portrait of converts*. They are all different. Violent converts might come from any nation, race, age, social strata, family background, level of education, and previous religious faith-affiliation (all branches of Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc.), "nominal" religion, or non-religion (atheism and agnosticism). A violent convert may be a member of the parliament and of the erstwhile ruling party, a wealthy businessman in his 50s, a father of three adult children, like Mr. Abdul Qader from Guyana, who conspired to blow up fuel tanks in the New York City international airport.²² Or, he could be a borderline mentally-retarded, uneducated and unemployed 22-years-old young man, like Nicky Reilly from England, who detonated an explosive device in the shopping mall in his

²⁰ On the JAM profile, see: Chris Zambelis, "Jamaat al-Muslimeen: The Groth and Decline of Islamist Militancy in Trinidad and Tobago," *The Jamestown Foundation – Terrorism Monitor* 7, no. 23, 30 July 2009, http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=35344 (accessed 11 August 2009).

²¹ The created VIC' unified profiles are planned to be revealed in a future publication.

²² On Abdul Qader's profile and the plot details, see: Gordon French, "Guyana 'Shocked' by Terror Plot to Blow Up JFK Airport," *Caribbean Net News*, 4 June 2007, www.caribbeannetnews.com/news-1867--13-13--.html. His story beat an argument of a conventional wisdom that terrorists are necessarily poor and socially-deprived.

hometown.²³ An example of these two completely disparate personages illustrates the diversity of the pool of radical converts.

Yet, notwithstanding all of these existing differences, a careful investigation of the personal profiles of violent converts reveals one inherent *common denominator*. This denominator is a *crisis* that all individual converts had in the period of life preceding their conversion. The problems causing a crisis might be of any origin – psychological, personal, social, etc. Whatever the nature, these troublesome life experiences bring the individuals in question to the decision of conversion to Islam as a remedial *solution*.²⁴ In simple terms, the pre-conversion experience of a neophyte creates a *trigger factor* for conversion. Such a move constitutes a first stage of the CRA loop.

This complex issue requires illustration with concrete examples of negative life experiences and the resulting syndromes, as mentioned in the previous paragraph. For instance, we note that all three of the most notorious German convert jihadists (Fritz Gelowicz, Daniel Schneider and Eric Breininger) came from what would be commonly described as dysfunctional families. That hardly could be a coincidence. Since the respective parents of the future perpetrators divorced when the latter were in their early teen years, their still-forming psyche definitely has been affected. Another example is the previously mentioned Muriel Deagauge, a Belgian convert and “she-bomber.” Prior to her conversion, she had experienced a permanent life-crisis chain: a shock event (her brother died in a motorbike accident), social problems (she was employed in low-income jobs only), communications problem (had bad relations with parents), and personal problems as well (was twice-divorced). In both mentioned cases, as in most of the others, the *life crisis had created a point* from which the individuals started to seek a solution. Development of personal exit strategies eventually saw them gravitate towards conversion to radical Islam.

The above mentioned outcome is not too random or uncommon. Life crises make individuals suffer, feel disenchanting, frustrated, alienated, or marginalized. Yet, quite a few tend not to blame themselves for their own problems. Rather, the majority, concisely or not, put the blame on the environment (the society and state they live in, and their well-doing fellow citizens). Generated anger moves the disgruntled and disenfranchised individuals closer to conversion, and precisely to *radical interpretations* of Islam, bridging the gap between C and R inside the CRA loop with more speed.

Why?

The previous piece indicated the need for a pre-conditional crisis phase to occur prior to conversion. A relevant question to address in this regard is why are

²³ On Nicky Reilly’s profile, see: “Nicky Reilly: Profile of a Failed Suicide Bomber,” *Metro.co.uk*, 15 October 2008, www.metro.co.uk/news/357902-nicky-reilly-profile-of-a-failed-suicide-bomber.

²⁴ Perhaps, not coincidentally, the main electoral slogan of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt sounds very neuro-linguistically: *Al-Islam huwa al-Hall*, or Islam is the Solution.

some individuals opting for conversion to Islam to curb their problems? Below is a set of several possible reasons (the order in which they are listed is random).

- *Simplicity.* Compared to the practices of other religions, Islam is characterized by a simple and short conversion procedure. To become a full-fledged Muslim, a neophyte need only vocally articulate a *shahada* statement (*La Illahi illa'Llah wa-Muhammad ar-Rasool l-Llah*, or "There is no God except God, and Muhammad is his Prophet), verified by two Muslims.
- *Guidance.* Islam provides a detailed and simple mapping both for daily life and dealing with contingencies. A strict dichotomy of what is permitted and forbidden (a clear "can" and "can't") suits many. This reason often goes in hand with the lure of "simplicity."
- *Identity.* The process, sometimes referred as the "post-modern ideas crisis," is associated, according to some estimates, with "*losing confidence in the Christian vision.*"²⁵ Actually, this is not a new phenomenon: the notion of *Gott ist Tot* was coined by Friedrich Nietzsche as early as 1882.²⁶ Such a decline, and a widening spiritual void, can result in a deteriorating of identity in at least some Westerners. The seeking of identity assertiveness and "*a need to belong*"²⁷ may eventually bring them towards Islam. As explained by Yvonne Ridley, a British journalist who converted to Islam in *Taliban* captivity, turning a fierce critic of the West, she chose to be a part of "*the best and biggest family in the world*"²⁸ (i.e., the Muslim *ummah*).
- *Protest.* In the current global political environment, the radical interpretations of Islam are serving as an "*outlet of rebellion*"²⁹ against the existing order and prevailing realities. This draws a striking parallel with the period of the Cold War, when some disappointed Westerners, especially among youth, were susceptible to radical leftist ideology. In other words, "*...some of the converts believe in the utopian role of Islam*

²⁵ Michael Nazir-Ali, "Extremism Flourished as UK Lost Christianity," *The Telegraph*, 7 January 2008, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1574695/Extremism-flourished-as-UK-lost-Christianity.html> (accessed 15 October 2008). For further details, see: "Islamic Radicalism in Europe Reflects Spiritual Void," *Islam in Europe*, 16 September 2007, <http://islamineurope.blogspot.com/search/label/Converts?updated-max=2007-10-25T08%3A10%3A00-07%3A00&max-results=20>.

²⁶ Means "God is Dead" in German.

²⁷ The "need to belong" concept is elaborated by a French-Lebanese philosopher Amin Maalouf. See Amin Maalouf and Barbara Bray, *In the Name of Identity: Violence and a Need to Belong* (New York, N.Y.: Arcade Publishing, 2001).

²⁸ Hannah Bayman, "Yvonne Ridley: From Captive to Convert," *BBC News*, 21 September 2004, http://news.bbs.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/england/3673730.stm.

²⁹ Jumana Farouky, "Allah's Recruits," *Time.com*, 20 August 2006, www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1229125,00.html.

*in the same fashion as the middle-class leftist youth in the 1960s and 1970s believed in Marxism or communism. Islamic terrorism partially feeds on the exhaustion of leftist ideologies that mobilized part of the youth in Europe...*³⁰ The potential of radical Islam as an internalization tool of anti-establishment, anti-state and anti-societal defiance and militancy³¹ likely remains one of the most common causes of conversion among the profiled VIC actors.

- *Ego*. Adventurism, machismo, and a need to overcome an inferiority complex make some personalities, primarily young men with no hopeful life perspectives, drifting towards radical Islam domain, where they can find the whole variety of benefits: new likeminded friends, self-confidence, a feeling of superiority towards “ordinary” fellow citizens, and adrenalin rush. As noted by Oliver Roy, a prominent French scholar in the field of the political Islam and Islamism, “*they (converts) are people who feel devalued, despised and by becoming terrorists they suddenly become supermen, heroes.*”³² Not surprisingly, the conflict areas in the Muslim world, such as Afghanistan, Waziristan, Kashmir, Chechnya, Bosnia, Iraq or Somalia, serve as a magnet for these young and disenfranchised converted jihad-wannabes.

This list of reasons above is, of course, incomplete and shows only some of the many possible considerations within a broad spectrum of motivations, ranging from technical to spiritual. Again, it is impossible to establish a universal motivational pattern of conversion to radical Islam. The extreme challenge here is a need to assess *identity*, penetrate an individual *cognitive level* and establish *syndromes* caused by life crises, which are all different in each single case. In the words of Gen. Wesley Clark, answering on the CNN anchor’s question about possible motives of a U.S. convert soldier’s assault against his fellow servicemen in Iraq in March 2003, “*you can’t imagine what the motivation could be. What could he be thinking?*”³³ Furthermore, it also involves a broader set of issues in psychology, sociology, anthropology, and some other sciences, relevant both to the study of the violent convert phenomenon and the preemptive profiling.

How?

There are multiple ways that the neophytes convert in practical terms. Each convert has his/her own unique trajectory that move them toward an eventual

³⁰ Farhad Khosrokhavar, 37.

³¹ Pamala L. Griset and Sue Mahan, *Terrorism in Perspective* (London: Sage Publications, 2003), p.119.

³² Cited from Grim’s Hall blog, 31 October 2005, http://grimbeorn.blogpost.com/2005_10_01.archive.html.

³³ “101st Attack: The Investigation,” *CNN.com*, 24 March 2003, www-cgi.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0303/24/se.06.html.

landing in the domain of radical Islam. Yet, it is still possible to identify some of the most common *enablers* as follows.

- *Internet.* The Net (emails, chat rooms, Facebook, Twitter and other social networks, blogs and websites) is a huge enabler of C&R, providing access to sources of knowledge, indoctrination, and guidance, not to mention a network of contacts. The last point is crucially important, since contacts are often used as a recruitment “hook.” An absence of direct physical contact creates an initial friendly environment that emboldens neophytes who otherwise would abstain from certain decisions.³⁴ Two early American jihadist-converts, John Walker Lindh and Adam Yahee Ghadan started their C&R trajectory through Internet surfing.
- *Mosques.* Preaching facilities and congregation communities, controlled by radical imams, have produced hundreds of radical converts in Europe and the U.S. Affiliation with such hubs becomes a starting point for the C&R trajectory. For instance, two French violent convert brothers Jerome and David Courtallier, who plotted an attack against the American Embassy in Paris in 2001, converted and radicalized in the Brighton mosque in the UK.³⁵ Fritz Gelowicz and Daniel Schneider of the *Sauerland* cell were attending radical gatherings in the now notorious *Multikulturhaus* Islamic center in Neu-Ulm, Germany.³⁶ These mosques and similar facilities are centers of gravity for alienated and disgruntled Western Islam neophytes.
- *Relations.* Different kinds of social relations provide another enabler of C&R. Many future converts contracted a radical version of Islam through a series of contacts with “native” Muslims. Such contacts may be facilitated via study in school or college, affiliation with a particular sports team or fitness club,³⁷ other common interests, friendship, marriage, or an equal kind of partnerships and relationships. Germaine Lindsay, a 7/7 suicide bomber, was converted and radicalized by his

³⁴ On more details on the jihadist recruitment via Internet, see: Daniel Williams, “Terrorists Seek Next ‘Jihad Jane’ on English-Language Web Sites,” *Bloomberg Businessweek*, 19 April 2010, www.businessweek.com/news/2010-04-19/terrorists-seek-next-jihad-jane-on-english-language-web-sites.html.

³⁵ An initial motivation for conversion of both brothers was to curb drugs additions. Visiting a mosque they were hooked and consequently indoctrinated. For details, see: Anthony Barnett, Martin Bright, and Nick Paton Walsh, “UK Student’s ‘Key Terror Role,’” *The Guardian*, 28 October 2001, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2001/oct/28/terrorism.uk>.

³⁶ Roland Strobele, “Southern German Towns Become Hub of Jihadism,” *World Politics Review*, 17 September 2007, <http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/1142/southern-german-towns-become-hub-of-jihadism>.

³⁷ Scott Atran, “Who Becomes a Terrorist Today?,” *Perspective on Terrorism* 2:5 (March 2008): 3-10.

ethnic Pakistani schoolmates. By the same token, a Russian convert Pavel Kosolapov got C&R from his Chechen neighbors. Jason Walters from the *Hofstaad* network was converted by his converted father, and then became self-radicalized with the little help of his Moroccan friends, eventually converting his younger brother, who also joined the mentioned network. Many violent converts, such as Jack Roche from Australia and Willie Brigitte from France, converted first due to their marriage to Muslim women (a mandatory step to formalize relations in accordance with the Islamic tradition), and then radicalized in the process of interaction with Muslims. Some female converts, like Jill Courtney from Australia and Egle Kusaite from Lithuania, were converted and rapidly radicalized by their Muslim boyfriends.

- *Study.* Though it is often said that travel broadens the mind, it is not always in the right direction. Examination of the known converts profiles indicate that some of them were converted upon their travels to the Middle East or South Asia. Often starting as a natural curiosity about another country, culture and tradition, the process eventually ended with conversion. Not being a problem as such, however, the conversion stage was rapidly altered by the radicalization stage, after the “new-born” Muslims turned to education in the religious schools (*madrassa*), controlled by the radical Islamist centers throughout the region and found in Egypt, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf region and Pakistan. An American convert Carlos Leon Bledsoe, a.k.a. “*Abdulahakim Mujahid Muhammad*,” launched a shooting attack at the U.S. Army recruitment center in Arkansas, killing one and injuring another serviceman, shortly after completing such a brainwashing study experience in the Yemeni *madrassa*.³⁸
- *Incarceration.* Prison conversion, as recognized by a number of scholars and law enforcement practitioners, is increasingly transforming into a real problem.³⁹ Muslim inmates constitute a substantial part of the European prison population: for instance, in the UK they make 11 per cent, as for 2008.⁴⁰ Many correctional facilities in Europe and the USA already have turned to a “*radicalization incubators*,”⁴¹ controlled by

³⁸ Joseph Abrams, “Little Rock Shooting Suspect Joins Growing List of Muslim Converts Accused of Targeting U.S.,” *Fox News*, 2 June 2009, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,524799,00.html>.

³⁹ For in-depth analysis of prisons as conversion breeding-ground, see: “Recruitment and Mobilization for the Islamist Militant Movement in Europe” (The European Commission, December 2007), pp.39-44, http://ec.europa.eu/justice_home/fsj/terrorism/prevention/docs/ec_radicalization_study_on_mobilization_tactics_en.pdf.

⁴⁰ Richard Ford, “Prisoners Convert to Islam for Jail Perks,” *The Times Online*, 8 June 2010, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/crime/article7145784.ece>.

⁴¹ Mitchell D. Silber and Arvin Bhatt, *Radicalization in the West: The Homegrown Threat* (New York, N.Y.: New York City Police Department, 2007), 20.

various radical Muslim gangs and visiting radical preachers, who openly proselytize Islamism. Psychological specifics of confined environment and “captive audience” deform the psyche, making non-Muslim inmates, especially those who want to break the criminal record circle, more susceptible to conversion offers.⁴² Richard “*Shoe-Bomber*” Reid was converted and radicalized behind bars. Two American home-grown terrorist cells consisting of converts (the LA gang and the Synagogue plot group) originated from prison cells.⁴³

There are additional observations relevant in the area of conversion and radicalization. The first is related to the C&R enablers. The first four of the five above-listed enablers are obviously linked to the *globalization factor* (G-factor). Globalization, both in its technological and human dimensions, trumps geography, leading in intensifying interaction between disparate civilizations. Air transportation squeezes physical distance, allowing travel to take hours, instead of weeks and months as in the not so distant past. The Internet makes communication even faster. Additionally, migration changes demography. One must not necessarily travel from Europe any more to explore and contact another world; it might be found the next door, just behind the street corner, in the London’s suburbs, in the Paris *banlieues*, in Milan or The Hague. The openness of Western culture makes it easy for Islam to proselytize, while countering penetration with the strict and prohibitive safeguards that operate within radical Islam. The “dark side” of the “Globalization factor” is important to assess with regard to the phenomenon of conversion in general, and its violent dimension in particular. Increasingly, the converts-related terrorist cases illustrate their “globalized” nature. The March 2010 “Cartoon” plot was based around a cell whose members originated from Algeria, Libya, the Palestinian Territories, Croatia and the USA (three of the seven detainees were converts), based in both sides of the Atlantic, in Ireland and the States, and aimed at a target in Sweden.⁴⁴ Sergey Malyshev, an ethnic Russian convert from Belarus, who fought in Chechnya on the rebels’ side, was arrested in 2005 in Spain for his role in a recruitment ring, consisting mostly of Pakistanis and linked with the Iraqi insurgency.⁴⁵

⁴² *Ibid.*, 39.

⁴³ On the last group, see: Joseph Abrams, “Homegrown Terror Suspects Turned towards Radicalism in U.S. Prisons,” *Fox News*, 22 May 2009, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,521215,00.html>.

⁴⁴ For details, see: Jonathan Adams, “Jihad Jane and 7 Others Held in Plot to Kill Swedish Cartoonist,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, 10 March 2010, www.csmonitor.com/World/terrorism-security/2010/0310/Jihad-Jane-and-7-others-held-in-plot-to-kill-Swedish-cartoonist.

⁴⁵ Hayder Mili, “Al-Qaeda Caucasian Foot Soldiers,” *The Jamestown Foundation – Terrorism Monitor* 4:21 (2 November 2006), www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=948&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=181&no_cache=1.

A second observation focuses on a *vague nexus* between C and R. As was noted by Jean-Louis Bruguiere, the French anti-terrorism judge, “*the converts are undeniably the toughest. Nowadays the conversions happen more quickly and the commitment is more radical.*”⁴⁶ Michael Taarnby, an Islamism expert from the Danish Institute for International Studies, echoes him: “*It’s striking, the number of converts engaged in terrorist activities.*”⁴⁷ The question of why some converts prefer exactly *extreme violent interpretations* of Islam is perhaps the toughest one to answer authoritatively. Are they blindly lured and recruited, or do they cross the threshold to radicalism voluntarily? Did they succumb to peer pressure, internal group’s dynamic and leaders’ charisma, or did they come already prone to hatred and violence, just comfortably embedding their rejection and prejudice into an already existing extremist resistance ideology? Identifying a “*missing link*” that bridges the gap between conversion and radicalization certainly leaves a broad field open for useful future research.

Summarizing the current chapter, it is necessary to keep in mind that violent conversion is a very non-linear, complex and obscure process, as is illustrated by hundreds of personal narratives. The centerpiece of each story, however, is a specific problem(s) an individual suffers from. A need to combat this problem causes a reaction – a conversion to Islam viewed as a sought solution. In other words, at a certain point, existing long-term causes meet a trigger factor, as in a classical “precondition – precipitance” equation designed by Martha Crenshaw.⁴⁸ When conversion is offered in a package with radical ideology, the outcome becomes a beginning of ascendance of “newborn” Muslims up the violent conversion ladder.

Practical Aspects

This section discusses the value of violent converts for GJM, and their operational and structural dimensions. It also touches briefly upon two randomly selected aspects associated with converts, namely their role in the so-called “war of ideas” and the phenomenon of female suicide terrorism.

Value

Assessing the place and role of VIC in the context of HGT underlines the multiple *utility* of converts for the global jihad. That utility of both a practical and symbolic nature may be broken down along several functional activity lines, as follows:

- *Direct action.* This track includes direct involvement in terrorism, insurgency and, in some cases, associated organized crime. The converts

⁴⁶ Mark Trevalyan and Jon Boyle, “Al Qaeda Exploits ‘Blue-Eyed’ Muslim Converts,” *New Zealand Herald*, 16 October 2005, http://www.nzherald.co.nz/world/news/article.cfm?c_id=2&objectid+10350447 (accessed 14 June 2009).

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ For more information, see: Martha Crenshaw, “The Causes of Terrorism,” *Comparative Politics* 13:4 (1981): 379-399.

may operate in the violent domain either as ordinary ranks (“muscles”) or as leaders. The area of operations could be their native environment (i.e., the West), conflict zones in the Muslim world, or elsewhere. The scale of their terrorist tradecraft may vary from expert and high-profile to low-tech and amateur. Some examples of such activities have already been referred to in this essay. In addition, a selected specific segment (female suicide terrorism) is explained in more details in this section as an example of the potential operational roles of converts.

- *Ideological support.* This domain includes participation in Islamist propaganda efforts, the recruitment and indoctrination of the new followers, and related activities. One notable example of an individual engaged in the ideological support of terrorism is Trevor William Forest, a.k.a. “*Abdullah al-Faisal*,” a British – Jamaican convert imam, who preached religious and racial hatred across the UK Muslim community, until being legally banned.⁴⁹ The role of converts in the “war of ideas” is elaborated on further in this chapter.
- *Other support.* Available information suggests that converts are widely used in different forms of material and technical support in the context of the GJM. For example, Raphael Gendron, an ethnic French convert IT-specialist, was maintaining a website of the Malika al-Aroud Islamist network, which was used for jihadist propaganda and recruitment, principally in Europe.⁵⁰ Some converts are active in various Islamic charities, controlled by the radical centers. Another form of contribution by converts is engaging in classical espionage. As mentioned in chapter 4, two U.S. Armed Forces servicemen were convicted this decade for their attempt to act as AQ “moles” or sources of intelligence.

Structural Dimension

In recent decades, converts were spotted in the ranks or in the outer circles of major terrorist, insurgent, political extremist and criminal groups. Some examples include Al-Qaeda, Taliban (both in its Afghani and Pakistani branches), *Jemaah Islamiyah* /JI/, *Lashkar-e-Tayyaba* /LET/, Hezbollah (Lebanon), Moroccan Combat Islamic Group /GICM/, *Al-Shabab* (Somalia), and People against Gangsterism and Drugs /PAGAD/ (South Africa). As well, they served in different structures of the Iraqi, Kashmiri, Chechen and Niger Delta insurgencies. Only two organizations with more than one hundred members consisted solely of VICs – the RSM in the Philippines and the JAM in Trinidad and Tobago, already mentioned in earlier section. Otherwise, violent converts have been embedded

⁴⁹ Margaret Ryan, “Cleric Preached Racist Views,” *BBC*, 24 February 2003, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/2784591.stm.

⁵⁰ On this network, see: “Belgium: Al-Qaeda Cell Sentenced,” *Islam in Europe blog*, 10 May 2010, <http://islamineurope.blogspot.com/2010/05/belgium-al-qaeda-cell-sentenced.html>.

in small numbers into a huge mass of “native” Muslim members within different terrorist organizations.

However, on the lower organizational level, the converts-related structural dynamic is disturbing. VICs are increasingly represented as a percentage of members in the grassroots *self-radicalized autonomous cells and groups* scattered across the Western urban environment. Most of the mentioned structural units are amalgam, i.e. consisting both of “native” and convert Muslims. However, some are including exclusively converts (such as “Miami Six” or “Synagogue Plot” groups). To further complicate the landscape, many violent converts have demonstrated their willingness and ability to operate as “*lone wolves*” without formal affiliation to any specific jihadist group. Such a dynamic poses obvious implications to the Western security services and law-enforcement agencies.

Operational Dimension

The small groups and loners embedded into growingly multicultural, diverse and fluid Western human terrain and not easily distinguishable from the moderate Muslim pool, *pose the key security challenge* from the standpoint of profiling, detecting, penetrating and dismantling terrorist plots. This fact was openly noted by Dennis Blair, then Director of the U.S. National Intelligence (DNI), and Robert Mueller, FBI Director.⁵¹ Such scattered and low-profile groups of likeminded and “action-oriented friends”⁵² with hardly predictable internal dynamic, absent formal hierarchy, and loose outside connections are a real *center of gravity* of security concerns and efforts. If such entities are keeping a low profile and look and behave “traditionally,” they produce few warning indicators prior to activation. An illustrative example of this is the 7/7 terror cell, which consisted of three members of Pakistani descent and a convert. The current small groups’ threat that in some ways is comparable with the challenge of sleeper espionage cells of the Cold War period, and trumps the meaning of strategic intelligence in combating terrorism. Equally, it defeats Sun Tzu’s paradigm of penetrating the enemy army commander’s intent. Instead of the army, there are hundreds of decentralized “platoons” (groups, sells and lone-wolves), which are well-blended into environment. The threat posed by “white-skinned, blue-eyed, hard-to-detect” converts (a dream of the late terrorist Abu Mus’ab al-Zarkawi)⁵³ in such an environment seems to be continually expanding.

⁵¹ “Intel Chief: Small Groups are Key Terror Challenge,” *CBS News*, 21 April 2010, www.cbsnews.com/stories/2010/04/21/ap/cabstatepent/main6419040.shtml, and “Home-Grown, Solo Terrorists as Bad as Al-Qaeda: FBI Chief,” *AFP*, 15 April 2010, http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5iInTgA39LB2g_-Cb2zFH-wN0hwGg.

⁵² Atran, “Who Becomes a Terrorist Today?.”

⁵³ Mili, “Al-Qaeda Caucasian Foot Soldiers.”

Female Suicide Terrorism

The use of women as suicide bombers is not unique in the context of Islamist terrorism: it has a record in Iraq, Israel/Palestine, Chechnya/Russia, and other areas. However, the use of converts for this end is a relatively new, but potentially very dangerous trend. It is directly related to a steadily growing pool of Western women who convert to violent interpretations of Islam. In the spring of 2010 alone, two American female converts were detained for their alleged role in the so-called "Cartoon plot," and an Australian woman was imprisoned in Yemen for her suspected ties to AQ in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). The utmost threat emanating from this phenomenon is the creation of a new source of willing suicide executioners – female converts.

As was indicated as early as in September 2005, "*it is no longer if but when – when will we have Caucasian converts to Islam... American or Canadian female suicide bombers? It is only a matter of time.*"⁵⁴ This frightening prediction materialized just two months later, when the first known convert "she-bomber," Muriel Degauge, committed her attack in Iraq. She was one of up to 47 female converts (originating mostly from Germany, Belgium, and Denmark) who reportedly were targeted by recruiters for suicide missions in Iraq and Pakistan.⁵⁵ Although such media-originated reports could not be verified from independent sources, the alarming truth is that many women upon conversion to Islam *fall under influence* of radical Islamist ideology, subsequently becoming more susceptible to brainwashing, and eventually directed toward suicide missions. A study of the profiles of Muriel Degauge and Egle Kusaite,⁵⁶ another female convert who opted for a suicide mission (and was arrested in Lithuania in 2009), reveals some striking parallels. Both experienced crises in their pre-conversion period. Both were converted and radicalized by their Muslim male partners. Both had never been in the Muslim world, their C&R stories took place in Europe. Though, M. Degauge eventually travelled to Iraq and detonated her explosive belt next to the American military convoy, but did not manage to claim any fatalities. Unfortunately, the next she-bomber may choose a less complex and more effective way (from the standpoint of the media-political effect) to do the same in a crowded public place in one of the European cities.

⁵⁴ Debra D. Zedalis, "Female Suicide Bombers," 59-60, in *Female Terrorism and Militancy: Agency, Utility and Organization*, ed. Cindy D. Ness (London, New York: Routledge, 2008), and "Symposium: The She Bomber," FrontPageMag.com, 9 September 2005, <http://97.74.65.51/readArticle.aspx?ARTID=7310>.

⁵⁵ Karla Cunningham, "The Evolving Participation of Muslim Women in Palestine, Chechnya, and the Global Jihadi Movement," 95, in *Female Terrorism and Militancy: Agency, Utility and Organization*.

⁵⁶ On E. Kusaite's story, see: "Potential Suicide Bomber Charged in Lithuania," *Baltic Report*, 4 May 2010, <http://balticsreport.com/?p=16608>.

War of Ideas

Analysis of strategic communication, projected by different segments of the GJM, indicates that its leaders increasingly appreciate and exploit the propaganda value of converts. In particular, this has been well demonstrated by the frequency the converts appear in the jihadist propaganda videos and Internet forums, and other tools of ideological support of terrorism (IST).

Converts, able to appeal to specific groups of people, are skillfully used by jihadist entrepreneurs to hit *different Western target audiences*. Adam Yahyee Ghadan, working for AQ, speaks American-accented English and addresses primarily the American mid-class, trying to turn it against the U.S. government's foreign policy. For instance, his speech aired by Al-Jazeera in early October 2008 was devoted to commenting on the unfolding financial crisis in the States. On the other part of social spectrum, the young convert Eric Breininger (killed in Pakistan, April 2010) was messaging to his peers from lower-class disenfranchised German youth, urging them to join the jihad in the ranks of Taliban. The media-spread images of Breininger, posturing in military fatigues, traditional Arab scarf around the neck and with Kalashnikov rifle in his hands, creates a very appealing message to those unstable "angry young men" back in Europe, who feel themselves alienated and deprived of life perspectives. Such use of turncoat Westerners for propaganda purposes by GJM provides another resemblance of the Cold War pattern.

The growing role of converts as high-value assets in the IST field made in 2010 the EU officials, for the first time, to recognize it by stating: "*Western converts are increasingly being used by Islamist terrorist groups for propaganda and recruitment purposes. Native speakers have appeared in videos produced by terrorist organizations and disseminated on the Internet, broadcasting messages to potential recruits in EU Member States in their own language.*"⁵⁷

Conclusion

Summarizing the main points of the above considerations, it is important to underline the following key items relevant to violent converts to Islam. Part of these findings were reported by the author in the meetings of the Counterterrorism Working Group in Tbilisi, Georgia (April 2007) and in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany (September 2007), as well as during the 12th Annual Conference of the Partnership for Peace Consortium of Defense Academies and Security Studies Institutes in Warsaw, Poland (June 2010).

1. Violent Muslim converts clearly represent a *rising trend* and an *expanding physical subset* within the domain of homegrown terrorism, associated with the global jihadist movement. Yet, this violent conversion trend is *indivisible* from the entire issue of homegrown terrorism and

⁵⁷ "EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report – TE-SAT 2010," *EUROPOL*, 2010, www.europol.europa.eu/publications/EU_Terrorism_Situation_and_Trend_Report_TE-SAT/TE-SAT2010.pdf (accessed 31 May 2010), 44.

- should arguably be treated as a “big threat within great threat.” Converts create a “*third element*” of HGT, beyond radical, second-generation Muslims and legal and illegal Muslim non-citizen migrants.
2. Violent conversion is a *multifaceted phenomenon* without discernable universal patterns of conversion and radicalization of its actors. The highly diverse and individual internal motivations and drivers behind C&R represent the most *complex segment* of this phenomenon.
 3. From the operational standpoint, the converts are hard to observe, scattered and profiling-proof targets, and pose a substantial *security challenge* as such. The absence of clearly defined characteristics of such targets, blurred in Western human terrain, complicates detection and the prevention of converts’ activities.
 4. Converts provide a *multiple value* for the global jihad in the domains of operations, support and propaganda. In particular, the role of converts in IST and propaganda efforts of the GJM, aimed at the Western public, is steadily *increasing*. Thus, converts are currently forming a promising potential *recruitment pool* and are regarded as an *essential force multiplier* by the entrepreneurs of global jihad.
 5. The converts-related dynamic is *evolving*. The next generation of violent converts will likely be more action-oriented, and consist mostly of young people, including scores of female converts. In a time of protracted global socio-economic crisis precipitating in growing frustration in society, the number of Western violent converts to Islam will likely *continue to rise*. The problem will continue to gradually move from its previously peripheral position to the very *epicenter* of the HGT domain.
 6. Violent actors should be clearly *distinct* from moderate converts, who represent a majority of the Islam converts’ pool, and mainstream converts should not be treated with any prejudice. However, to combat the VIC threat effectively, it should first be recognized as such, properly identified and named. The political sensitivities and post-modern ethical values surrounding the issue of VIC should not become the factor that may potentially *complicate* the development of effective strategies to counter the challenging phenomenon in question.

Being an indivisible part of HGT, the VIC phenomenon still requires *special consideration* from the standpoint of devising and employing proper counter-terrorism policies and practices. To be countered effectively, the conversion phenomenon still has to be rigorously studied and understood. In this regard, one of the most relevant requirements is increased *scholarly research*. This chapter represents an attempt to provide an initial overview of the problem, and is intended as the first of a series of planned publications examining various aspects of converts to radical, violent Islamism.