



# Islamist extremist converts

## Challenges and recommendations for rehabilitation work

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**RAN**   
Practitioners

# **Islamist extremist converts**

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## Introduction

According to the available data, the number of converts to Islam varies significantly per Country and moves from a percentage, among the total Muslim population, of 0.3/4.5 in Germany to 23 in the United States, but their involvement in Jihadist movements seems to be overrepresented (from 6 to 23 percent of foreign fighters from various Western European countries and probably up to 40% of the US foreign fighters are converts <sup>(1)</sup>), which highlights the need to take a closer look at what seems to make this group more vulnerable to extremist propaganda.

Unfortunately, systematic research that analyses in depth the possible link between conversion and radicalisation are still in their infancy and the scarcity of useful data complicates the understanding of the motifs and the modalities with which converts can become part of the Jihadist violent global plan and the implementation of efficient rehabilitation strategies.

Anyway, treating converts as a monolithic group of potential terrorists creates misconceptions because each convert follows a personal path towards Islam and has in common with the others only the religious interest and the cultural background of origin. The majority of converts will never approach radicalisation nor be involved in terrorist acts. For these reasons, conversion to Islam must not be considered a default security issue.

When approaching the topic, the lack of knowledge of the “why” and the “how” of the converts’ radicalisation and an exhaustive description of possible rehabilitation strategies becomes evident. But why would such information be pivotal? Do converts radicalise differently than Islamist extremists with a Muslim cultural or family background? And, if yes, how?

Although the answers to these questions are relevant to understand the existing challenges and the possible rehabilitation strategies for this specific target group, it is worth remembering that:

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*“Both religious conversion and radicalization are similar in that they both involve significant changes in beliefs, attitudes and behaviors however, radicalization differs as a process in that the new beliefs, attitudes and behaviors occurring as a result of conversion are heightened and polarized in preparation for engaging in some form of violence”<sup>(2)</sup>...*

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The current knowledge about why Muslim converts seem to face a higher risk of radicalisation than the native-born Muslims is still not extensive enough to provide conclusive answers. However, the following text will aim to collect and present the existing knowledge on particular challenges related to their rehabilitation process to provide some insights for P/CVE practice. The aim is to sensitise practitioners working with extremist converts regarding some of the most relevant issues around conversion and extremism and to provide some indications regarding potential pathways for deradicalisation, exit work and rehabilitation.

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<sup>(1)</sup> Bergema, Van San. *Waves of the Black Banner*. P. 636-661.

<sup>(2)</sup> Flower, *Muslim Converts and Terrorism*. P.6-9.

## Do radicalised converts differ from Islamist extremists with a Muslim background?

Due to the impossibility to define a general key factor that can lead to converts' radicalisation, several authors focus on **individual elements** (troubled or traumatic past), **group elements** (contacts with members of radical networks) and **societal elements** (socio-economic deprivation, grievances over the foreign politics adopted by Western countries against some Muslim-majority ones) <sup>(3)</sup>.

However, identifying specific elements that differentiate non-radicalised from radicalised converts and the latter from Islamist extremists coming from a Muslim family or cultural background is not an easy task.

Moreover, the above-mentioned elements have been proven to be in common with people who do not become involved in jihadist groups and some of them have been considered as relevant for a number of different paths, such as deviance in a broader sense or other social issues<sup>(4)</sup>.

Bartoszewicz <sup>(5)</sup>, focussing on the role of identity and the need of belonging in the conversion narratives, argues that the experiences lived during the process of conversion (becoming a Muslim) strongly influence the path to being a Muslim. She concluded that the risk of radicalisation is higher when the convert rejects their former identity, social environment and culture, losing at the same time the sense of belonging while potentially feeling rejection from the society they live in.

The outcomes of another interesting empirical research<sup>(6)</sup> can be summarised as follow:

- **From a relational point of view, converts generally take religion more seriously than native-born Muslim people as they like to show their commitment towards the new religion in an attempt to be more credible.** This sometimes leads to the assumption that converts are at an increased risk of committing extreme actions. However, the notion of this attitude, also called *convert's zeal* <sup>(7)</sup> is openly disputed in research because "such conceptual errors can lead to a false and misleading perception of the causality between European converts to Islam and terrorism" <sup>(8)</sup>.
- **From a subjective point of view, converts' lack of religious basis and their attitude for "searching" (meaning, identity, guidance, mental peace) can lead them to consider radical beliefs if they are more suitable for their inner needs.**
- **Converts often are supported in their path towards Islam by documents, information and contacts found, above all, online <sup>(9)</sup>.** The self study of Islam and the absence of any links with regular Muslim communities and mosques in general expose converts to major risk of radicalisation as they rely on materials available online, disproportionately linked extremist actors.
- **Converts seem to be more dependent on the ideas of the few Muslims they are in direct contact with.** The lack of contact with moderate Muslims determines a higher possibility to enter in touch with the radical views of faithful that pretend to be more knowledgeable.
- **Conversion in prison is particularly dangerous.** The whole path is often lead by self-proclaimed Imams who can preach extremist notions of Islam.

<sup>(3)</sup> Kleinmann, *Radicalisation of Hometown Sunni Militants*.

<sup>(4)</sup> Lofla and Stark *Becoming a World Saver*.

<sup>(5)</sup> Bartoszewicz, *Controversies of Conversion*.

<sup>(6)</sup> Geelhoed, Staring, *Schuurman. Understanding Dutch Converts*.

<sup>(7)</sup> Benjamin. *The converts' zeal*.

<sup>(8)</sup> Bartoszewicz. *Controversies of Conversions*.

<sup>(9)</sup> Geelhoed, Staring, *Schuurman. Understanding Dutch Converts*.

**Table 1 - Converts vs. Native-born Muslims**

Converts	Native-born Muslims
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Significant discrepancy between the culture of origin and the new religious precepts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Culture of origin and religious precepts are strictly linked to each other</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Linguistic barriers (no or superficial knowledge of the languages spoken in regular mosques)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Languages spoken in regular mosques are generally more familiar</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Faith is approached mainly via the internet or through the mediation of a friend</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Faith is approached inside the family and the Muslim community</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• During the conversion they are often discriminated and isolated, even by family members.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family and friends following moderate interpretations of religion can play a sentinel role in detecting possible attempts to radical drifts.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• According to some authors, due to conversion, Westerners may lose their societal status of “whiteness” and the privileges deriving from it. This process of re-radicalisation from white to non-white is linked to the perception of Islam as a religion supposedly belonging to different, non-Western cultures <sup>(10)</sup>.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Privileges reserved to “white” people in the Western society are normally hardly accorded to native-born Muslims that can be instead victims of discrimination and Islamophobia<sup>11</sup>.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Experience of double discrimination: from the Western society and the Muslim community.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Native-born Muslims are often subject to discrimination and Islamophobia from Westerners, but not their communities.</li> </ul>

<sup>(10)</sup> Moosavi. *The Racialisation of Muslim Converts*.

<sup>(11)</sup> Moosavi. *The Racialisation of Muslim Converts*.

## Key challenges

The different ways in which converts approach Islam generate specific challenges that need to be taken into consideration when speaking about extremist converts' rehabilitation paths.

Tailor-made programmes and multi-agency approaches are essential and generally accepted elements on which all the strategies suggested in this paper should be based <sup>(12)</sup>. They are pivotal for a fruitful implementation of P/CVE strategies and need to be paired with periodic and *ad hoc* training of the involved practitioners regarding the specifics and potential additional risks and needs related to working with extremist converts. However, when looking for good rehabilitation strategies, it becomes apparent that specific experiences involving converts are not common <sup>(13)</sup>. For this reason, drawing from neighbouring fields that have been much more studied and tested can be useful, such as, for example, work on young, radicalised individuals, or more general criminology literature on the rehabilitation of young offenders or female convicts.

### Challenge #1: Converts radicalised are often very young

Young people at the margin of the society and in a condition of isolation (exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic), are the favourite target group of extremists, who reach them with messages of belonging and identity, with the aim to recruit new forces for the Jihad <sup>(14)</sup>.

According to one of the few available studies, <sup>(15)</sup> insights into a sample of Dutch converts suggests that converts seem to embrace the new faith very early in their life and another study refers that among 131 American, Canadian and European extremist converts, 79% were 25 or younger at the age of the conversion <sup>(16)</sup>. Moreover, their family background is often defined as unstable or unhealthy <sup>(17)</sup>, making them an easy target for extremist propaganda. In this regard, also a RAN special overview paper emphasises family issues and other personal and relational problems as facilitators towards radicalisation <sup>(18)</sup>.

Also troubling experiences with peers at school or with neighbours (i.e., being bullied or marginalised) are highly represented in the mentioned studies <sup>(19)</sup>.

#### Suggested rehabilitation approaches:

- 1) "Regular" religious support
- 2) Projects involving family support to improve family relations <sup>(20)</sup>
- 3) Mentoring programmes
- 4) Peer-to-peer support
- 5) Involvement of non-formal learning environments (such as sports<sup>21</sup>)
- 6) Psychological support for the management of the previous victimisation (if applicable)
- 7) Engagement of (former) radicalised converts in P/CVE projects

<sup>(12)</sup> RAN Issue Paper. *Multi-agency working. The word « converts » is mentioned one time in more than 500 pages of approaches.*

<sup>(13)</sup> RAN Collection of approaches.

<sup>(14)</sup> Azani, Koblenz Stenzler. *Muslim Converts who turn to Global Jihad.*

<sup>(15)</sup> Geelhoed, Staring, Schuurman, *Understanding Dutch Converts to Islam.*

<sup>(16)</sup> CEP. *Extremist Converts.*

<sup>(17)</sup> Geelhoed, Staring, Schuurman, *Understanding Dutch Converts to Islam.*

<sup>(18)</sup> RAN Activities on Youth Work and education.

<sup>(19)</sup> Azani, Koblenz, Stenzler. *Muslim Converts who turn to Global Jihad.*

<sup>(20)</sup> Molenkamp, *The role of family.*

<sup>(21)</sup> Handle, Scheuble. *The role of sport.*

Table 2 - Challenge #1: Young radicalised converts

Specific challenges	Practitioners to involve	Possible rehabilitation strategies
<b>a) Troubled Family</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Family (when possible)</li> <li>● School</li> <li>● Exit workers</li> <li>● Regular Muslim Communities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Supporting projects that involve family support and counselling (including conflict resolution) or finding alternative <i>significant others</i> as well as strengthening the social environment of young people</li> <li>● Offering psychological support</li> </ul>
<b>b) Isolation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Specific Professionals (i.e. psychologists, mediators)</li> <li>● Non-formal learning environment</li> <li>● Neighbours</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Involving schools in social inclusion projects</li> <li>● Involving regular Muslim communities who can offer alternative narratives beyond extremist interpretations</li> <li>● (Re)building a positive social network with all the different subjects at stake</li> <li>● Involving (radicalised) converts in non-formal learning environments and neighbours (i.e. sport)</li> </ul>
<b>c) Discrimination</b> Youngster converted to Islam can be persuaded into believing that extremist claims are the answer to their experience of suffering, discrimination and marginalisation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Family (when possible)</li> <li>● School</li> <li>● Exit workers</li> <li>● Specific professionals (i.e. psychologists, mediators)</li> <li>● Non-formal learning environment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Offering specialised psychological support to face the victimisation suffered prior to conversion in order to challenge the idea that radicalisation can be the right answer to protect themselves and have justice.</li> <li>● Applying alternative narratives approaches.</li> <li>● Fostering relationships with regular Muslim communities in general and peers in particular.</li> <li>● Involving former young radicalised converts in P/CVE (when possible).</li> </ul>



## Challenge #2: Radicalised converted women

The fact that conversion and subsequent radicalisation also happens to women demands a gender-oriented analysis of each personal path towards extremist religious interpretations. However, big parts of the academic literature and media seem to be more related to the reasons that can lead Western, supposedly free and emancipated women to renounce their autonomy, for embracing an extremist ideology that oppresses them in a variety of manners <sup>(22)</sup> rather than to the specific and still not very clear push and pull factors relevant for their radicalisation.

Women's conversion, often much more quickly visible than men's, simply due to religiously oriented clothing choices, can exacerbate heinous anti-Muslim reactions in Western societies. In this regard, Saeed, while dismantling the presumption of a higher risk of radicalisation among converted women, argues that non-Muslim women "become presumably too religious through conversion to Islam, and thereby have to prove their innocence, least they are thought to be extremists" <sup>(23)</sup>. Moreover, the narrative often presented by media, about radicalised converted women generates the overestimated idea that female converts are potentially dangerous because of their eagerness to be part of a tradition which is incompatible with Western society <sup>(24)</sup>.

### **Suggested rehabilitation approaches:**

- 1) "Regular" religious support
- 2) Projects that empower the role of converted women inside the family
- 3) Mentoring programmes
- 4) Involvement of non-formal gender-oriented learning environment
- 5) Psychological support for the management of previous victimisation (if applicable) Gender-oriented use of alternative narratives
- 6) Engagement of (former) radicalised women converts in P/CVE projects

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<sup>(22)</sup> McGinty. *Formation of alternative femininities through Islam*.

<sup>(23)</sup> Saeed. *Islamophobia and Securitisation*.

<sup>(24)</sup> Fadil, de Koning, Ragazzi. *Radicalisation in Belgium and the Netherlands*.

Table 3 - Challenge #2: Radicalised converted women

Specific challenges	Practitioners to involve	Possible rehabilitation strategies
<b>1) Troubled biography, also related to family ties</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Exit workers</li> <li>● Specific professionals</li> </ul>	<p><b>Two level of interventions:</b></p> <p><b>a) Direct:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Considering family mediation, if feasible.</li> <li>○ Offering specific gender oriented counter/alternative narratives.</li> <li>○ Applying mentoring models to strengthen/develop ties with new, positive social environments.</li> <li>○ Strengthening the relationship with regular Muslim communities and empowering them about the need to be part of rehabilitation strategies.</li> <li>○ Offering regular religious support.</li> <li>○ Fostering gender-oriented/gender-specific informal educational approaches (i.e. CSOs and sport associations that involve primarily women and any other group that deals with or is managed by women).</li> <li>○ Involving former (radicalised) converted women in P/CVE.</li> </ul> <p><b>b) Indirect:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Dismantling of the stereotype of Muslim women as generally overly vulnerable</li> <li>○ Fighting against Muslim women's discrimination</li> <li>○ Develop further specific research on (radicalised) converted women</li> </ul>
<b>2) Isolation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Family (when possible)</li> <li>● Exit workers</li> <li>● Specific professionals</li> <li>● Regular Muslim community</li> <li>● Neighbours</li> </ul>	
<b>3) Gender Discrimination</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Family (when possible)</li> <li>● Exit workers</li> <li>● Specific professionals</li> <li>● Non-formal learning environment</li> <li>● CSOs</li> </ul>	

## Challenge #3: Radicalised converts often have never known/lived moderate Islam

The lack of knowledge of moderate Islam is often due to:

- **Language barriers** – The lack of knowledge of the languages spoken in regular mosques and surrounding communities can represent a risk factor while approaching Islam because this strongly limits the possibility to have access to moderate religious material and communities.
- **Different cultural background** – Converts belong to different culture and this can complicate the comprehension of the precepts of Islam and how it is lived and interpreted by regular Muslim communities.
- **Absence of a guide/a positive cultural and religious community during the conversion process** A large number of conversions happened between a strict group of persons or in complete isolation. This means that converts often seek and find religious sources by themselves and online, without evaluating the possibility of different interpretations of religious concepts outside of extremist notions.
- **Exclusive or quasi-exclusive use of internet to look for religious information** – The net seems to be the first place in which converts get in touch with their new religion but they do not have adequate tools to protect themselves from indoctrination and extremist views (see Box n. 1).
- **Conversion path started in prison** – The prison environment has been generally considered a place at risk of radicalisation dynamics, due to a well-known number of challenging factors such as the *search of significance* <sup>(25)</sup>, the overcrowding, sometimes the violation of fundamental rights, the presence of prisoners who proclaim themselves Imams/religious authorities and propose extremist teachings. People with a history of crime and violence are relatively easy and sought-after target groups to involve in the Jihad <sup>(26)</sup>: they already have the criminal background that may be helpful in violent terrorist acts.

### Box 1

#### Experience: intensive use of internet made by a convert who is involved in jihadist movements.

“(…) I started searching for preachers and at a certain moment I stumbled on ‘jihadist preachers’ [...] as they call them and they were talking about the war against the Arabic Spring that had just started and a very emotional sermon saying that we now should stand up for ourselves, for our country, for this and that. And I really enjoyed watching it. It really does something with you. It is almost as if you go to war and you are being warmed up by a commander...” <sup>(27)</sup>

#### Suggested rehabilitation approaches:

- 1) “Regular” religious support structures within the prison system and a mechanism to ensure support throughout the prison-release continuum
- 2) Mentoring programmes
- 3) If imprisoned: Ensuring availability of mentoring upon release (at the latest).
- 4) Implementing non-formal learning environments aiming to strengthen social and personal skills in order to empower participants to develop/strengthen positive social networks.
- 5) Psychological support for previous victimisation (if applicable)
- 6) If imprisoned: Increased attention to potential further stigmatisation within the prison system.

<sup>(25)</sup> RAN practitioners working paper. *Dealing with radicalisation in a prison and probation context.*

<sup>(26)</sup> Azani, Koblenz, Stenzler. *Muslim Converts who turn to Global Jihad.*

<sup>(27)</sup> Geelhoed, Staring, Schuurman. *Understanding Dutch Conversion to Islam.*

- 7) C/a narratives specifically focused on conversion experiences (rereading the radical choice through the lenses of specific needs and difficulties faced by converted extremists).
- 8) Involvement of (former) radicalised converts in P/CVE projects.

**Table 4 – Challenge #3: Radicalised converts who have never know moderate Islam**

Specific challenges	Practitioners/stakeholders to involve	Possible rehabilitation strategies
<p>a) Language barriers</p> <p>b) Cultural background</p> <p>c) Absence of a mentor during the conversion process</p> <p>d) Exclusive or quasi-exclusive use of internet to look for religious information</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Regular Muslim communities</li> <li>● Mentors/peer-to-peer trainers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Strengthening the relationship with regular Muslim communities and empowering them about the need to support converts in general and those wanting to leave extremist scenes in particular.</li> </ul> <p>The support can be developed in many different ways:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Preparing informative material in the main languages of the respective country.</li> <li>2) Creating permanent support centres and strengthening the link with regular Muslim communities.</li> <li>3) Offering counter-alternative narratives against indoctrination.</li> </ol>
<p>e) Conversion path started in prison</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Regular Muslim communities</li> <li>● Religious counselling</li> <li>● Prison staff</li> <li>● Probation staff</li> <li>● Exit workers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Granting the presence of Imam coming from the outside in prison.</li> <li>● Offering mentoring programmes within the prison system.</li> <li>● Offering counter alternative narratives against indoctrination.</li> <li>● Prison and Probation staff, together with Exit workers (if available) have to work as soon as possible in a multi-agency team for the application of a tailor-made rehabilitation programme<sup>28</sup>.</li> </ul>

<sup>(28)</sup> RAN. *Collection of Approaches and Practices*.

## Challenge #4: Converts may experience double stigmatisation: a) from the society to which they belong to and b) from the Muslim community

### a) Rejection by white mainstream society

For white Westerners, conversion to Islam, and a corresponding change in appearance and style, determine, in many cases, a change in how society looks at them. This new way of being considered as “others/foreigners” (see box. n. 2) to a certain extent eliminates the possibility to enjoy the privileges reserved to white Westerners and may lead to discrimination. Parts of Western societies, who hold anti-Muslim sentiments, may see Western converts as “different” from other white members of society. In extreme instances, this may lead to the perception and declaration of them not only as “traitors to the nation”, but also as “race traitors”.

### Box 2

#### Experience: loss of Westerners' status

“It’s like I’m white but they can’t believe it. I was at a wedding once and there was a guy sat next to me and about twenty times he must have said: ‘You’re Muslim but you’re a white man?’, and I’m shaking my head [to indicate yes] and he’s like: ‘You’re a white man and you’re a Muslim!?’ , and he wasn’t even saying it to me, he was just shocked and couldn’t believe it ... He was like: ‘So you’re English?’, and I’m like: ‘Yeah!’, and he asked: ‘So you’re born in England and your parents are English; but you’re a Muslim?’”<sup>(29)</sup>

Converts often face the disagreement of the family that can turn even into a substantive refusal of the converted family member (see box n. 3) <sup>(30)</sup>. At the basis of this hostility, there is a widespread distrust around Islam in many European societies. This rejection is one of the most difficult challenges for new converts. Kose <sup>(31)</sup> observed that “converting to Islam in a non-Muslim society may mean ‘social suicide’ because Islam is still seen as something foreign that has nothing in common with Western culture. Converting to Islam means experiencing the effects of Islamophobia in one’s life with double consciousness, having had the chance to live, for a certain period, from the other side of the fence”.

### Box 3

#### Experience: family disappointment

A respondent of the ICCT study said: “I was just like ‘Look, I’ve got something to tell you... I’ve been thinking about religion... I’ve become Muslim’. And then there was... everyone was quiet. You know, and I got looked at... I went on defending myself for maybe 10 minutes or so. I remember looking up and my mum was just balling, you know, tears running down her cheeks and everything and my dad was just... he was just, err... very angry... I hadn’t expected it to be so severe a reaction... I thought it would be negative, but I didn’t think it would be like this scale man. They were just utterly, like, shocked... So, it was like: ‘What’s happening!? What’s happened to our son!?’” <sup>(32)</sup>

<sup>(29)</sup> Moosavi. *The Racialisation of Muslim Converts*.

<sup>(30)</sup> Zebiri. *British Muslim Converts*.

<sup>(31)</sup> Kose. *Conversion to Islam*.

<sup>(32)</sup> Moosavi. *The Racialisation of Muslim Converts*.

## b) Rejection by regular Muslim communities

After the Shahada<sup>33</sup>, converts may face the non-acceptance of local Muslim communities (in particular, of people belonging from an older generation that doubt the seriousness of the conversion and the real knowledge of Islam) that tend to be rigid in welcoming newcomers. In these cases, the search for “identity” and “belonging” that, according to Bartoszewicz (<sup>34</sup>), are key in understanding the involvement of converts in radical movements, can be strongly hindered (see box n. 4) and converts may be drawn to extremist groups that often make openness towards new converts a key point of their outreach work.

### Box 4

#### Experience: Identity crisis due to a difficult relationship with the Muslim community and the community of origin.

One of the respondents of the study developed by the ICCT, while considering the cost of converting to Islam, said that being a Muslim can foster a sense of identity crisis *“not so much because you have difficulties with your identity, but because other people have difficulties with your identity, because (...) you’re not a Moroccan nor a Turk, but sometimes some Muslims think so, as if you suddenly have to live in accordance with their culture. So, you have an identity crisis within the Islamic community. (...) But also in Dutch society, your identity is taken away from you. (...) When you start with Islam, you suddenly are someone else, even though you aren’t.”* (<sup>35</sup>)

#### Suggested rehabilitation approaches:

- 1) “Regular” religious support by Muslim communities
- 2) Family and community mediation projects to (re)build a safe network of relationships
- 3) Mentoring programmes
- 4) (two steps of involvement: 1) training of non-formal learning environment about the need and importance to be part of the extremist converts rehabilitation paths; 2) facilitating extremist converts participation in non-formal learning environment activities
- 5) Psychological support for the management of feelings of abandonment and grief
- 6) Involvement of (former) radicalised converts in anti-discrimination campaigns

**Table 5 – Obstacles and strategies to rehabilitate radicalised converts who suffered double discrimination**

Specific obstacles	Involved practitioners	Possible rehabilitation strategies
a) Refusal from family members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Family (when possible)</li> <li>● Specific professionals (e.g. psychologists, mediators)</li> <li>● Family mediators</li> <li>● CSOs</li> </ul>	Two different levels of intervention:  <b>Short-term strategies –individual level:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Reopening of family dialogue (or searching for alternative significant others) through family mediation and family support centres.</li> </ul>

<sup>(33)</sup> The declaration of the Islamic faith in the Oneness of God and the recognition of the Prophet Muhammad as his messenger.

<sup>(34)</sup> Bartoszewicz. *Controversies of Conversions*.

<sup>(35)</sup> Geelhoed, Staring, *Schuurman. Understanding Dutch Converts*.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Offering psychological support.</li> </ul> <p><b>Long-term strategies – society level:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Working on the perception of conversion as something “foreign”.</li> <li>● Dismantling of the stereotype of converts as “traitors” and “terrorists”.</li> <li>● Fighting Islamophobia.</li> </ul>
<p><b>b) Discrimination by members of the Western society</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Exit workers</li> <li>● CSOs</li> <li>● Media</li> </ul>	<p><b>Short-term strategies – individual level:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Working on the individual’s ability to tolerate ambiguities without feeling the need to resort to dichotomous worldviews.</li> <li>● Offering psychological support for dealing with trauma resulting from discrimination.</li> </ul> <p><b>Long- term strategies – society level:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● See suggestions subpoint a)</li> </ul>
<p><b>c) Marginalisation by members of the Muslim community</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Exit workers</li> <li>● Regular Muslim</li> <li>● Community</li> <li>● CSOs</li> </ul>	<p><b>Short-term strategies – individual level:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Mediation between (formerly) extremist converts and regular Muslim communities to strengthen relationships among them.</li> <li>● Implementing the participation of regular Muslim to multi-agency teams that work with radicalised converts.</li> <li>● Offering different narratives of reaction toward discrimination.</li> </ul> <p><b>Long-term strategies – society level:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Train regular Imam about the available strategies for P/CVE for converts to Islam.</li> <li>● Creating awareness in the regular Muslim community of the importance to support rehabilitation paths involving (according to tailor-made rehabilitation path) (former) radical converts in P/CVE strategies.</li> </ul>

## Key Lessons

The studies about the security context and the potential threat that extremist European converts can pose are still in their infancy. However, some useful starting points can be identified:

### 1) Converts are not a homogenous group.

They differ from each other for personal motivations towards conversion as well as for the conversion path. Knowing their personal experiences can help practitioners in the definition of a tailor-made rehabilitation programme. Understanding the motivations leading to conversion and the experience made throughout is key to understanding the individual's biography, their needs and grievances and therefore to design targeted rehabilitation measures.

### 2) Converts are a minority among Muslims in Europe and extremist converts represent a minority inside a minority. There is the need to fight against the message conveyed by media that tend to present all converts as a threat for Western societies.

The idea that people start a conversion path with the specific aim to become terrorists and that conversion to Islam "is something that a normal person would not consider" is still present in the societal discourse. This may foster dynamics of discrimination and Islamophobia.<sup>(36)</sup>

Shifting from security policy to strategies that aim at strengthening converts' potential can be key while working for the rehabilitation of extremist converts. Moreover, working on inclusion and tolerance can reduce/eliminate the sense of rejection and exclusion and offer a supportive environment for the rehabilitation of radicalised converts.

### 3) Conversion should be considered as a process, not as one singular point in time.

Everything that happens before and after the *Shahada* is important to understand the conversion path, to assess the possible risk of radicalisation and to implement tailor-made rehabilitation strategies in case a person turned to extremism.

### 4) Mainstream Muslim communities should be partners in rehabilitation and reintegration processes.

These communities may play a pivotal role in the (re)integration of formerly extremist converts who wish to remain religious. However, Muslim communities in Europe are often still presented with many challenges themselves, creating a reluctance to take on this additional burden. Ways need to be found on the local level to enable and empower communities to play a more active role.

### 5) Consider a role for family mediation and conflict resolution within the rehabilitation process.

Radicalisation processes are often marked by strained family relationships. This may be even more the case for converts in largely non-Muslim Western societies. Mending family relationships to improve the social networks of a vulnerable individual may be a key step towards rehabilitation.

<sup>(36)</sup> Brice. *A minority within a minority.*



## Gaps:

- 1) **Lack of systematic studies on the general topic (converts)<sup>37</sup> and on the specific one (extremist converts):** There is currently no possibility to clarify the eventual link between conversion and radicalisation and, in turn, de-radicalisation and rehabilitation.
- 2) **Lack of specific best practices for extremist converts:** A lack of data and experience to understand what works in the rehabilitation of this specific target group.
- 3) **Lack of understanding of the possible pivotal role of converts (in general and of de-radicalised converts in particular) in P/CVE approaches.**

## Next steps: New research is needed, especially to better define:

- 1) The real numbers of converts to Islam and of radicalised converts, at least in Europe.
- 2) The dynamics of converts' radicalisation and the role of converts in terrorist organisations.
- 3) Converts' narrative in Europe and the different push and pull factors that lead to violent/non-violent radical converts.
- 4) The link between converted women and radicalisation.
- 5) The efficacy of existing P/CVE strategies applied to converts.

## Further reading

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2. Ferguson, N. and Binks, E. (2015). *Understanding Radicalisation and Engagement in Terrorism through Religious Conversion Motifs*. Journal of Strategic Security, n. 1, Volume 8. [Understanding Radicalisation and Engagement in Terrorism through Religious Conversion Motifs \(national.edu\)](#)
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<sup>(37)</sup> Azani, Koblentz – Stenzler, Muslim Converts who turn to Global Jihad.

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