

# Understanding Radicalization and Engagement in Terrorism through Religious Conversion Motifs

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# Understanding Radicalization and Engagement in Terrorism through Religious Conversion Motifs

## **Author Biography**

Neil Ferguson (D.Phil., Ulster, 1998) is Professor of Political Psychology at Liverpool Hope University. He has been the Director of the Desmond Tutu Centre for War and Peace Studies, a visiting lecturer to Lock Haven University of Pennsylvania and the University of York, a Research Fellow at University of St Andrews, and previously lectured at the University of Ulster. His research and writings deal with moral development and a number of topics located within political psychology. Professor Ferguson is currently serving on the Governing Council of the International Society of Political Psychology, as the President of the MOSAIC - Moral and Social Action Interdisciplinary Colloquium and is a trustee of the Journal of Moral Education Trust. Eve Binks, (PhD, Liverpool, 2007) is a Senior Lecturer at Liverpool Hope University. Her research is focused on social psychology and the psychology of religion.

## **Abstract**

Although research into the processes and outcomes of radicalization has yielded significant discoveries regarding antecedent risk factors and the role played by societal circumstances and individual variables, research regarding the process of radical conversion remains in its infancy. We believe that the psychology of religion may hold the key to unlocking new insights into this conversion process. As a result of assessing both Lofland and Skonovd's religious conversion motifs and Rambo's integrative model of religious conversion, we suggest that issues of culture, society and the individual which are prevalent in first-hand accounts of conversion to terrorism provide crucial insight into the application of theories of religious conversion to the process of radicalization, and that this application is ripe for helping to further develop existing pyramid and staircase models of radicalization.

## Introduction

In order to counter violent extremism, efforts must be made to stem the tide of new recruits. To do this effectively, more needs to be known about the radicalization processes involved in people altering their beliefs and moving towards engaging in violent extremism.<sup>1</sup> With regards to these issues, the present article will initially explore the antecedent factors of radicalization and involvement in violent extremism, which are well supported by research. The article will then suggest how research from the psychology of religion could be incorporated into this work to provide a model for further exploring radicalization and engagement in terrorism.

Since 9/11 there has been an increase in both the supply and demand for research focusing on terrorism, and the rise of Islamic terrorism. A particular fascination has been with the psychology of the terrorist and the radicalization process that transforms normal young men into fanatics determined to kill for ideology.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, research on terrorism and radicalization has a tendency to lack adequate data or utilize poor methodological practices.<sup>3</sup> This poor practice, the problematic nature of the terms under investigation—such as ‘terrorism’ or ‘radicalization’—plus the lack of dedicated researchers working in the area, has led to a media-centric focus purveying incorrect assumptions of psychological instability.<sup>4</sup>

A comprehensive review of the research suggests that an understanding of a terrorist’s mind and motivations requires a more thorough and comprehensive analysis of factors; an analysis that moves away from the readily available intra-individual explanations toward an understanding of social factors and the socio-political history of the community that play into the radicalization process.<sup>5</sup> Although much research is hindered by its reliance on secondary data, or lack of direct contact with the individuals in question, there have been salient discoveries made by researchers.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Randy Borum, “Radicalization into violent extremism I: A review of social science theories,” *Journal of Strategic Security* 4 (2011): 7–36.

<sup>2</sup> Horgan, John, *The psychology of terrorism* (London: Routledge, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid; Andrew Silke, “The Devil you know: Continuing problems with research on terrorism,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 13 (2001): 1–14.

<sup>4</sup> Borum, “Radicalization into violent extremism”; Andrew Silke, “Preface” in A. Silke (ed.), *Terrorists, victims and society: Psychological perspectives on terrorism and its consequences* (Chichester, England: John Wiley & Sons Ltd., 2003), xiii–xxi; Mark Burgess, Neil Ferguson and Ian Hollywood, “A social psychology of defiance: From discontent to action,” in Marget Sönser-Breen (eds.), *Minding evil: Explorations of human iniquity* (Amsterdam/New York: Rodolpi, 2005), 19–38.

<sup>5</sup> Jeff Victoroff, “The mind of the terrorist: A review and critique of psychological approaches,” *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 49:1 (2005): 3–42.

<sup>6</sup> Andrew Silke, “Cheshire-cat logic: The recurring theme of terrorist abnormality in psychological research,” *Psychology, Crime and Law* 4:1 (1998): 51–69.

## Antecedents of Terrorism

Research has developed a range of antecedent risk factors that consistently have the potential to increase the likelihood of individuals' involvement with terror groups or a campaign of armed insurrection.<sup>7</sup> Many of these factors are well documented, for example, the repeated existence of a grievance or perceived injustice by a subgroup of the population.<sup>8</sup> Age and gender are also important considerations, with terrorist acts generally committed by young males aged fifteen to twenty-five. Jihadist movements primarily focus their recruitment on unmarried males in their late teens or early twenties.<sup>9</sup>

An individual's family and friends having a past involvement with or showing support for the movement have also been shown to be key, with strong bonds with family and friends, rather than behavioral disorders, suggested as the key motivating factor for young Muslims joining the jihad.<sup>10</sup> Indeed recent research discussed by Bond has further demonstrated that three out of every four foreign fighters currently travelling to Syria to fight, do so as clusters of friends.<sup>11</sup>

High levels of community support for the insurgent group is commonly cited as an important factor in radicalization.<sup>12</sup> Being a terrorist places

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<sup>7</sup> Burgess, Ferguson and Hollywood, "A social psychology of defiance: From discontent to action"; Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, "Mechanisms of political radicalization: Pathways toward terrorism," *Terrorism & Political Violence* 20 (2008): 425-433.

<sup>8</sup> Burgess, Ferguson and Hollywood, "A social psychology of defiance: From discontent to action"; Martha Crenshaw, "The causes of terrorism" in Charles W. Kegley, Jr. (ed.), *The new global terrorism: Characteristics, causes, controls* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003), 92-138.

<sup>9</sup> Andrew Silke, "Becoming a terrorist," in A. Silke (ed.), *Terrorists, victims and society: Psychological perspectives on terrorism and its consequences* (Chichester, England: John Wiley & Sons Ltd. 2003), 29-53; Horgan John, "The search for the terrorist personality," in A. Silke (ed.), *Psychological perspectives on terrorism and its consequences* (Chichester, England: John Wiley & Sons Ltd., 2003), 3-27.

<sup>10</sup> Rachel, Brett and Irma Specht, *Young soldiers: Why they choose to fight* (UK: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 2004); Colin, Crawford, *Inside the UDA: Volunteers and violence* (London: Pluto Press, 2003); Anne Speckhard, "Defusing human bombs: Understanding suicide terrorism," in J. Victoroff (Ed.), *Tangled roots: Social and psychological factors in the genesis of terrorism* (Amsterdam: IOS Press, 2006), 277-291; Sageman, Mark, *Understanding terror networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

<sup>11</sup> Michael Bond, "Why Westerners are driven to join the jihadist fight," *News Scientist*, September 10, 2014, available at: [http://www.newscientist.com/article/mg22329861.700-why-westerners-are-driven-to-join-the-jihadist-fight.html#.VQLIAvysX\\_E](http://www.newscientist.com/article/mg22329861.700-why-westerners-are-driven-to-join-the-jihadist-fight.html#.VQLIAvysX_E).

<sup>12</sup> Mark Burgess, Neil Ferguson and Ian Hollywood, "Rebels' perspectives of the legacy of past violence and of the current peace in post-agreement Northern Ireland: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis," *Political Psychology* 28:1 (2007): 69-88; Jerrold M. Post, Ehud Sprinzak, and Laurita M. Denny, "The terrorists in their own words: Interviews with 35 incarcerated Middle Eastern terrorists," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 15 (2003): 171-184.

immense physical, psychological, and social burdens on the individual; they can be isolated, face death, or imprisonment.<sup>13</sup> Yet these risks are outweighed by gaining status, respect, and esteem within their community and the possibility that membership may also bring financial and/or sexual rewards, as well as increased social status.<sup>14</sup>

One of the most consistent findings from research dealing with the reasons people engage in terrorism is having a need for vengeance or reporting a desire to ‘hit back’ and right wrongs.<sup>15</sup> The personal histories of armed insurgents from across the globe are frequently filled with stories about incidents in which they, their acquaintances, or communities are victimized by ‘the other’—pushing the protagonist to take action, seek revenge, and join an armed group.

The routes into violence may be long, and eventual membership tends to be the result of an incremental process of increasing acts of insurgence.<sup>16</sup> This process may start with relatively mundane behavior such as stone throwing or spray painting graffiti before progressing to destroying property and finally becoming involved in injuring and killing opponents.<sup>17</sup> For example, many of the paramilitaries and ex-combatants Ferguson, Burgess, and Hollywood interviewed discussed how they would begin on the fringes of the conflict, perhaps running with gangs and getting involved in riots, before being approached by or approaching armed groups and becoming involved in assassinations or bombings.<sup>18</sup>

However, while the route into engaging in a terror attack may be long, many current and former combatants report the importance of ‘critical incidents’ or ‘trigger moments’ in directing them down this route.<sup>19</sup> These critical incidents were normally attacks on themselves, their family or the

<sup>13</sup> Neil Ferguson, Mark Burgess and Ian Hollywood, “Who are the Victims? Victimhood Experiences in Post Agreement Northern Ireland,” *Political Psychology* 31:6 (2010): 857-886.

<sup>14</sup> Horgan, *The psychology of terrorism*; Silke, “The Devil you know.”

<sup>15</sup> Ibid; Borum, “Radicalization into violent extremism I; Laia Balcells, “Rivalry and revenge: Violence against civilians in conventional civil wars,” *International Studies Quarterly* 54 (2010): 291-313; Burgess, Ferguson and Hollywood, “A social psychology of defiance”; Silke, “Preface” in *Terrorists, victims and society*; Horgan, “The search for a terrorist personality”; Bond, “Why Westerners are driven to join the jihadist fight”; Silke, “Becoming a terrorist”; Rachel and Specht, *Young soldiers: Why they choose to fight*; Speckhard, “Defusing human bombs”; Burgess, Ferguson and Hollywood, “Rebels’ perspectives of the legacy of past violence”; Post, Sprinzak and Denny, “The terrorists in their own words.”

<sup>16</sup> Burgess, Ferguson and Hollywood, “A social psychology of defiance: From discontent to action.”

<sup>17</sup> Anthony Oberschall, “Explaining terrorism: The contribution of collective action theory,” *Sociological Theory* 22 (2004): 26–37.

<sup>18</sup> Burgess, Ferguson, Hollywood, “A social psychology of defiance: From discontent to action.”

<sup>19</sup> Ibid; Horgan, *The psychology of terrorism*.

wider community they identified with. For example, Burgess *et al.* report examples of former Northern Irish Loyalist and Republican paramilitaries whose narratives pinpoint their involvement due to violent trigger events. Likewise, Horgan reports that ninety percent of militants from the Swat Valley in Pakistan included a drone attack as a trigger moment in their narratives of becoming involved. While these recollections of critical incidents fuelling recruitment into armed groups were widely reported and also recognized by non-combatants, the retrospective nature of research makes it difficult to unpack whether this choice of rationale is accurate or devised to justify the violent actions undertaken as a militant.<sup>20</sup>

Witnessing violence against family, friends or the wider group an individual identifies with, directly, indirectly or vicariously could suggest that exposure to these events may cause trauma and possibly Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Speckhard further argues that these traumatic events can also cause dissociation (a feeling of separation from the body, thoughts, perceptions and/or emotions), which has been offered as an explanation for a number of cognitive responses to trauma. Such trauma may cause an individual to become fixated on revenge and the defense of the group regardless of risk to one's life or well-being.<sup>21</sup>

Clearly, wishing to join an armed group involves identifying with the people that the group represents, so prospective members need to perceive themselves as categorically interchangeable with other in-group members. This heightened identification allows them to become stereotypical in-group members, taking on the group ideology, culture, and values. Research has also revealed how, in addition to the individual strongly identifying with his or her group, identification with role models who support the actions of the armed group is important in sustaining and committing the individual to political violence. Burgess and colleagues found that some Northern Irish paramilitaries were moved to engage in political violence due to 'idols' in their community openly supporting armed confrontation.<sup>22</sup> After interviews with members of armed Palestinian groups, such as Hamas, Post *et al.* reflected upon how the interviewees had upheld religious figures who espoused violence or revolutionaries such as Ché Guevara as heroes.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Speckhard, "Defusing human bombs: Understanding suicide terrorism"; Etzel Cardena and David Spiegel, "Dissociative reactions to the San Francisco Bay area earthquake of 1989," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 150 (1993): 474-478.

<sup>22</sup> Burgess, Ferguson and Hollywood, "A social psychology of defiance: From discontent to action."

<sup>23</sup> Post, Sprinzak, and Denny, "The terrorists in their own words."

Research evidence on the role of ideological commitment to a ‘cause’ in driving engagement in violence, however, has been mixed.<sup>24</sup> Recent research on the role of ideology in pushing people towards involvement in politically motivated violence has argued that devotion to sacred political or religious values, particularly when they are fused to a collective identity, are important factors in distinguishing those willing to fight and die, from those who are less willing.<sup>25</sup>

Additionally, numerous other antecedent factors were reported, which received less attention or garnered less support, such as a need for a reduction of uncertainty, to overcome cognitive and emotional dissonance or create more limited ‘black’ versus ‘white’ choices, which help simplify the world into good and evil, the just and unjust, heretic and true believer.<sup>26</sup> Kruglanski and colleagues also suggest that a quest for personal significance constitutes a major motivational force in pushing individuals towards violent extremism.<sup>27</sup>

Many of these antecedent factors can be seen to play a role in the detailed accounts of jihadists such Mubin Shaikh, former al-Qaida (AQ) sympathizer and undercover counter-terrorism operative for the Canadian Security Intelligence Service. Shaikh was involved in the arrest of the Toronto 18 in 2006 and suggested the perceived injustices in his life, his crisis of identity and his need to right the wrongs as he saw them played into his decision to join AQ.<sup>28</sup> While Mohammed Emwazi aka ‘Jihadi John’ who is currently fighting in Syria with the Islamic State (IS) forces, reported systematic harassment by the British Security Services to an advocacy group and points to events during his arrest in Tanzania as a key

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<sup>24</sup> Sageman, *Understanding terror networks*; Bond, “Why Westerners are driven to join the jihadist fight”; McManus, John, *The deadly brotherhood: The American combat soldier in World War II* (New York: Presidio Press, 2003)

<sup>25</sup> Scott Atran, Hammad Sheikh and Angel Gomez, “For cause and comrade: Devoted actors and willingness to fight,” *Cliodynamics* 5:1 (2014): 41-57; Wagdy Loza, “The psychology of extremism and terrorism: A Middle-Eastern perspective,” *Aggression & Violent Behavior* 12 (2007): 141-155; Francisco G. Sanin, Elizabeth J. Wood, “Ideology in civil war: Instrumental adoption and beyond,” *Journal of Peace Research* 51 (2014): 213-226.

<sup>26</sup> Michael J. Hogg and Janice Adelman, “Uncertainty-identity theory: Extreme groups, radical behavior, and authoritarian leadership,” *Journal of Social Issues* 69 (2013): 436-454; Hudson, Rex A. *The sociology and psychology of terrorism: Who becomes a terrorist and why? Federal Research Division* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1999), 20540-24840.

<sup>27</sup> Arie W. Kruglanski, Michele J. Gelfand, Jocelyn J. Belanger, Ama Sheveland, Malkanthi Hetiarachchi and Rohan Gunaratna, “The psychology of radicalization and deradicalization: How significance quest impacts violent extremism,” *Advances in Political Psychology* 1 (2014): 69-93.

<sup>28</sup> Speckhard, Anne and Mubin Shaikh, *Undercover Jihadi: Inside the Toronto 18 – Al Qaida Inspired, Homegrown, Terrorism in the West* (McLean, VA: Advances Press, 2014).

critical trigger moment.<sup>29</sup> While Emwazi's claims are contested, they illustrate that narratives around perceived injustices, collective identity, and critical incidents persist in individual accounts of radicalization, and as social psychology has consistently shown us, what people believe is a motive for their conduct is at least as important as the actual sequence of events.

While this search for an understanding of how an individual can become radicalized into committing politically or religiously motivated violence is in its infancy, the search for a model of the conversion process, where the individual goes from a place of non-engagement to one where he is committed to the organization and involved in their activities, is not new and many well-researched suggestions have been made regarding this process.<sup>30</sup> The psychology of religion may offer new insights into this conversion process, drawing on established frameworks to offer a deeper and more thorough understanding of the process of radicalization.

### Viewing Radicalization through Religious Conversion Motifs

Similar to the area of terrorism, the psychology of religion is a complex and multi-dimensional phenomenon. The process of religious conversion has many similarities with the processes involved in radicalized conversion.<sup>31</sup> For example, both conversions are arguably a transformational process whereby the individual goes from believing in and adhering to and/or practicing one set of values/teachings, to believing in, adhering to, and practicing another set of values/teachings.<sup>32</sup> Similar to radicalization, religious transformation also occurs in a 'dynamic force field' of people, events, ideologies, institutions, expectations and experiences.<sup>33</sup> Importantly, the research within the psychology of religion suggests several major types of conversion that resonate with examples of radicalization.

Lofland and Skonovd identified six unique religious conversion motifs, each of which offers a distinct, defining experience that makes the process of conversion discrete and individual, and which echoes the antecedent factors discussed previously. The six motifs that they suggest are:

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<sup>29</sup> "Case file: Mohammed Emwazi," *Cage UK*, May 1, 2015, available at: <http://www.cageuk.org/case/mohammed-emwazi>.

<sup>30</sup> Borum, "Radicalization into violent extremism I."

<sup>31</sup> Hood, Ralph W., Bernard Spilka, Bruce Hunsberger and Richard Gorsuch, *The Psychology of Religion* (New York: Guilford Press, 1996).

<sup>32</sup> Raymond F. Paloutzian, "Religious conversion and spiritual transformation: A meaning-system analysis," in Raymond F. Paloutzian and Crystal L. Park (eds.), *Handbook of the psychology of religion and spirituality* (New York: Guilford, 2005), 331-347.

<sup>33</sup> Raymond F. Paloutzian, James T. Richardson and Lewis R. Rambo, "Religious conversion and personality change," *Journal of Personality* 67: 6 (1999): 1047-1079.

intellectual, mystical, experimental, affectional, revivalist, and coercive.<sup>34</sup> While these motifs will be discussed individually, it is important to remember that many converts will combine aspects of multiple motifs in their conversion.

*Intellectual conversion* involves the pursuit of knowledge about the group that the individual plans to join, although this knowledge is usually derived from secondary sources (books, media, etc.) rather than from one-on-one contact with people that can lay claim to group membership. In terms of radicalization processes, this would clearly map onto the routes of many Islamist militants from Europe and elsewhere who initially engaged with IS, or jihadist sites online in what Neumann refers to as ‘self-recruitment’ where an individual becomes radicalized ‘virtually’ without personal contact with other likeminded individuals or militant groups.<sup>35</sup>

*Mystical conversion* is viewed as the prototypical conversion motif, and is exemplified by Saul’s conversion to Paul whilst on the road to Damascus and reported in Acts 9 in the New Testament Bible. Mystical conversion involves a critical event or period of stress which triggers a dramatic feeling of change and signals the onset of new beliefs and behaviors associated with the new religion.<sup>36</sup>

While Lofland and Skonovd title this conversion ‘mystical’, it should be viewed as ‘transformational’ as it comprises of a cognitive rather than spiritual re-organization. The philosopher Jaspers also recognized the importance of these “grenzsituationen” or “boundary situations” created by having to deal with a situation that prior knowledge or rational objective reasoning cannot prepare a person to overcome.<sup>37</sup> Jaspers believed having to deal with these critical events (such as facing death, the death of a child, or an inevitable struggle) causes a radical change in an individual’s thinking, rousing them from normal spontaneous instinctive thinking, creating a radical change in personality and worldview in which they take responsibility for their new future. This ‘Pauline’ motif is very similar to the critical incidents reported by Northern Irish paramilitaries and Swat Valley militants discussed earlier in this article, and resonate

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<sup>34</sup> John Lofland and Norman Skonovd, “Conversion motifs,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 20:4 (1981): 373-385.

<sup>35</sup> Neumann, Peter R. “Joining al-Qaida: jihadist recruitment in Europe,” Adelphi Paper, *The International Institute for Strategic Studies* (London: IISS, 2008).

<sup>36</sup> Lofland and Skonovd, “Conversion motifs.”

<sup>37</sup> Jaspers, Karl, *Existential Elucidation, vol. 2 of Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

with Liht and Savage's view of radicalization processes that involve fomented changes in integrative complexity.<sup>38</sup>

*Experimental conversion* involves the individual actively exploring their religious options where the individual may 'try on' different aspects of the new beliefs, experimenting with the ideologies and practices before deciding on one. K€use and Loewenthal, in a study of British Muslim converts, found that sixty percent of the converts reported 'trying out' different aspects of Muslim religious practice, such as dress, prayer, diet, abstention from alcohol or sexual relations before committing to the faith.<sup>39</sup> Interestingly, Richard Reid, aka the shoe bomber, initially converted to Islam for better prison food, before joining Brixton and Finsbury Park Mosques on his release. For terror converts, this behavior may also involve assessing the available active groups and comparing their ideologies, courses of action, and track record before making a conversion decision.

*Affectional conversion* highlights the importance of interpersonal relationships in the process of conversion. Indeed, Lofland and Skonovd argue that personal attachments or a strong liking for members of the convert's new faith are central to the process of driving that conversion. As discussed earlier, interpersonal and familial links are well documented antecedents to joining armed groups.<sup>40</sup>

*Revivalist conversion* relies on the use of crowd conformity to generate conversion behavior, making use of powerful and emotive speeches and witnessing family and friends exerting direct pressure on the individual to convince them to convert. Research with Loyalist paramilitaries illustrates the role that protest marches and political rallies organized by Protestant demagogues such as Ian Paisley in radicalizing and mobilizing individuals to join loyalist paramilitary groups in conjunction with other conversion processes.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Horgan, *The psychology of terrorism*; Burgess, Ferguson and Hollywood, "A social psychology of defiance"; Liht, Jose, Savage, Sara. "Preventing violent extremism through value complexity: Being Muslim being British." *Journal of Strategic Security* 6, no. 4 (2013): 44-66.

<sup>39</sup> Ali K€use and Kate M. Loewenthal, "Conversion motifs among British converts to Islam," *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 10 (2000): 101-110.

<sup>40</sup> Rachel and Specht, *Young soldiers: Why they choose to fight*; Speckhard, "Defusing human bombs"; Sageman, *Understanding terror networks*; Bond, "Why Westerners are driven to join the jihadist fight."

<sup>41</sup> Neil Ferguson and James W. McAuley, "Ulster Loyalist Accounts of Armed Mobilization, Demobilization and Decommissioning," in Lorenzo Bosi and Gianluca De Fazio (eds.), *The Troubles: Northern Ireland and Social Movements Theories* (Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam Press, pending publication).

*Coercive conversion*, sometimes previously known as ‘brainwashing’, was conceived of as being rare by Lofland and Skonovd because specific conditions are required for it to take place, including but not limited to food and/or sleep deprivation and, in more severe cases, psychological and physical torture. Although outright coercive conversions may be rare, depending on the amount of social, personal, or familial pressure brought to bear on the individual, many conversions could be said to contain an element of coercion. Similarly, while many individuals volunteer to join armed groups, some, such as child soldiers, are clearly coerced, while others face Hobson’s choice and join groups because they have no other obvious means of dealing with the poverty and precarious existence they face in under developed or chaotic war torn countries.

### Utilizing Conversion Motifs

It must also be remembered that Lofland and Skonovd highlight that there is not necessarily one single path to conversion, but that the process is necessarily multi-layered and complex. So, the present authors often find a combination of motifs reported amongst converts, for example, Kase and Loewenthal demonstrate that British Muslim converts report a combination of intellectual, experiential, and affectional motifs in their biographies.

Rambo builds on Lofland and Skonovd motifs to create an integrative model of conversion which considers the role of cultural, social, personal, and religious systems in charting an individual’s conversion experience (see Table 1).<sup>42</sup> The stages involved in Rambo’s systemic stage model map very closely onto the well-known antecedents of terrorism: With the demographic suggestions and history of perceived injustices identified by any number of radicalized individuals represented by the *Context*; the critical incident identified by researchers closely resembling the *Crisis* stage; and with the incidents encountered at this stage having the potential to lead to intentional engagement (*Quest*), prior to making contact with the new movement (*Encounter*), and interacting with this movement in a meaningful and deliberate way (*Interaction*). The subsequent identity construction and assimilation into the movement (*Commitment*) leads to the consolidation of the identity and experiences and an intention to act (*Consequences*).

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<sup>42</sup> Rambo, Lewis R., *Understanding Religions Conversion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993)

**Table 1: Rambo's (1993) Integrative Model of Conversion**

<b>Stage of Conversion Process</b>	<b>Factors to be Evaluated</b>
<b>1. Context</b>	Historical, religious, social, cultural and personal factors are assessed based on their ability to promote or impede conversion
<b>2. Crisis</b>	Personal / social (or both) disruption that stimulated quest
<b>3. Quest</b>	Intentional engagement with crisis and its resolution
<b>4. Encounter</b>	Recognition of and contact with new movement
<b>5. Interaction</b>	Multi-layered extended exchange between convert and movement
<b>6. Commitment</b>	Construction of new identity and become a valid member of the movement
<b>7. Consequences</b>	Conversion as a result of new commitment and consolidation of experiences, identities and commitments

This systemic stage model highlights the complex and multifaceted conditions that combine to result in radicalization. Each of the stages are visible to varying degrees in the cases of individuals who have experienced the process of radicalization, from al-Shabaab supporter Zachary Chesser's acknowledgement of the social context as a key driver in his radicalization to the well-documented online encounters with IS activists by three underage girls who fled the United States in 2014 to join IS in Syria.<sup>43</sup> The consequences of successful completion of these stages are all too evident, when the commitment to new identities, beliefs, and ideologies manifest themselves in the bombing of public areas, the murder of civilians, and the intent to further proselytise.

If religious conversion motifs are useful in aiding the understanding radicalization, it would appear that Rambo's suggestions provide a rational and effective starting point—issues of culture, society, and the individual are important not only to religious conversion, but are prevalent in the first-hand accounts of conversion to terrorism by researchers that have sought face-to-face interactions. We suggest that those interested in

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<sup>43</sup>“Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs,” Zachary Chesser: A case study in online Islamist radicalization and its meaning for the threat of homegrown terrorism,” Testimony before the Majority and Minority Staff Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, *U.S. Senate*, February 2012, available at: <https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=701274I>; Rita Katz, “From Teenage Colorado Girls to Islamic State Recruits: A Case Study in Radicalization via Social Media,” *Rethinking Islam-with new age Islam.blogspot*, November 20, 2014, available at: [news.siteintelgroup.com/blog.index.php/emtry/309-from-teenage-colorado-girls-to-islamic-state-recruits-a-case-study-in-radicalization-via-social-media](http://news.siteintelgroup.com/blog.index.php/emtry/309-from-teenage-colorado-girls-to-islamic-state-recruits-a-case-study-in-radicalization-via-social-media).

understanding or countering this process should explore these motifs further to help develop the models of radicalization based on pyramids or staircases which are currently utilized.<sup>44</sup>

## Conclusion

To understand radicalization and engagement in violent extremism, researchers and policy makers require comprehensive models which incorporate micro, meso, macro and exo factors, such as intra-individual psychological motivations, community influences and the role of ideology in the analysis. To achieve this, we propose that scholars and practitioners examine research from across the globe that focuses on a range of groups, both active and disbanded, to explore the processes evident in people who engage in violent extremism.

While viewing this process as a transformation from non-engagement to active commitment, we believe that exploring the psychology of religious conversion research offers useful insights and models for understanding these processes at a variety of levels of abstraction, while integrating a variety of conditions, factors, and actors into the analysis. Radicalization and religious conversion share many similarities and the conversion motifs and models offer ready templates that can assist in building and managing the understanding of the complex, multifaceted radicalization processes currently taking place.

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<sup>44</sup> McCauley and Moskalenko, "Mechanisms of political radicalization: Pathways toward terrorism"; Fathali Moghaddam, "The staircase to terrorism: A psychological exploration," *American Psychologist* 60 (2005): 161-169.