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THESIS

**IN BAD FAITH: THE LINK BETWEEN RELIGIOUS
CONVERSION AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM**

by

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March 2018

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**IN BAD FAITH: THE LINK BETWEEN RELIGIOUS CONVERSION AND
VIOLENT EXTREMISM**

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ABSTRACT

Recent studies found a disproportionate number of converts to Islam taking part in radical activities as opposed to those born into the faith. While research linking conversion to radicalization is available, a gap exists in research examining what in the conversion process is causing this phenomenon. This thesis asks, what is the relationship between religious conversion and violent extremism?

This study explores 38 individuals who converted to Islam and subsequently committed a radical act. The thesis investigates four hypotheses concerning sociological and psychological factors driving religious conversion. These driving factors are a lack of secure attachments, interpersonal connections, significant personal problems, and individuals with perceived grievances being targeted by recruiters.

The most significant driving factor in radicalization was individuals who had significant personal problems in their lives leading up to conversion, especially if a previous connection to a radical milieu existed. Recruiters seeking targets of opportunity among aggrieved individuals to convert was not a significant driving factor.

Religious conversion by itself should not raise red flags, but conversion with other underlying factors indicates a greater risk for radicalization. The underlying factors are the drivers of radicalization, and the conversion gives individuals a reason to manifest their radical tendencies.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AQAP	al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula
AWOL	absent without leave
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
GED	General Equivalency Diploma
ICCT	International Centre for Counter-Terrorism
IED	improvised explosive device
ISIL	Islamic State
JIS	Jamiyyat ul-Islam Is-Saheeh
JROTC	Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps
JTTF	Joint Terrorism Task Force
VBIED	vehicle-borne improvised explosive device

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Recent studies have found a disproportionate number of converts to Islam are taking part in radical activities as opposed to those born into the faith. Forty percent of those arrested in the United States for activities related to the Islamic State in the Levant (ISIL) are converts to Islam.¹ Only about one of five Muslims in the United States, however, converted to the religion.² Another study of Germans traveling to Syria to fight for ISIL found 23 percent were converts, but the German Islamic converts make up less than 1 percent of the German Muslim population.³ While the research linking conversion to radicalization is available, a gap exists in research examining what in the conversion process may be causing this phenomenon. This thesis asks, what is the relationship between religious conversion and violent extremism?

Past research examining the psychological and sociological factors influencing religious conversions were analyzed and four hypotheses were formed:

- Hypothesis 1: Religious conversion borne out of a lack of secure attachments creates a cognitive opening to adopt new worldviews, including radical ones.
- Hypothesis 2: Religious conversion takes place through interpersonal connections, and conversion to extremism takes place through prior associations with radical individuals during the conversion process.
- Hypothesis 3: Personal problems and connections to radical milieus substantially increase the likelihood of religious converts becoming violent extremists.

¹ Lorenzo Vidino and Seamus Hughes, *Isis in America: From Retweets to Raqqa* (Washington, DC: The George Washington University Center for Cyber and Homeland Security—Program on Extremism, 2015), <https://cchs.gwu.edu/isis-in-america>.

² Besheer Mohamed, “New Estimates Show U.S. Muslim Population Continues to Grow,” Pew Research Center, January 3, 2018, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/01/03/new-estimates-show-u-s-muslim-population-continues-to-grow/>.

³ Sean C. Reynolds and Mohammed M. Hafez, “Social Network Analysis of German Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq,” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 2017, 22, doi: 10.1080/09546553.2016.1272456.

- Hypothesis 4: Recruitment among converts to Islam reflects a selection bias on the part of the recruiters seeking targets of opportunity among aggrieved individuals with low levels of religious knowledge.

This study examined 38 individuals who were residents or citizens of the United States, were converts to Islam, and committed or attempted to commit a radical act. The lives of the individuals leading up to the conversion were researched for events and common traits to test the aforementioned hypotheses. This study found the most support for Hypotheses 1 and 3.

The study found 25 of the 38 individuals had personal problems leading up to their decision to convert to Islam. Personal problems were defined as individuals who suffered from any of the following:

- mental illness
- significant past criminal history
- a history of addictive behaviors
- past history of violence
- personal adjustment issues
- relationship problems
- employment problems

Other findings of interest were found. Five of the 38 subjects were females, and all converted due to a lack of secure attachments. All five females had a romantic catalyst as the cause of their conversion. The average age of the subjects at conversion was just over 22 years. Also found in the study was little evidence supporting Hypotheses 2 and 4.

While clear convincing support for any of the four hypotheses was not found, this study did find common variables in the subjects' lives pre-conversion occurring at a higher rate than others:

- The average age of the subjects was between 22 and 23.
- Subjects had recently befriended a Muslim.
- Subjects had contact with radical Muslims prior or in close proximity to their conversion.
- Subjects had a strained or no relationship with at least one of their parents.
- Subjects' background indicated they were loners or recluses.
- Subjects had a significant history of criminal activity in their past.
- If the subjects were female, they were converting for romantic or sexual-attraction reasons.

Conversion by itself should not raise red flags, but conversion with other underlying factors indicates a greater risk for radicalization. The underlying factors are the drivers of radicalization, and the conversion gives individuals a reason to manifest their radical tendencies.

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Connor (Buddy) and Alexandra (Babygirl), you missed even more time with your Dad through this process. I hope one day you will understand why, and I will make it up to you tenfold.

Cara, there are no words. All I can say is thank you and I love you. I lucked out.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Basically I got on a plane with a bomb. Basically I tried to ignite it.

~ Richard Reid¹

On December 22, 2001, months after the 9/11 attacks, Richard Reid boarded a flight from Paris to Miami. During the flight, flight attendants saw Reid attempting to use matches to light his shoe on fire. When they attempted to stop him, Reid assaulted the flight attendants. Reid was ultimately subdued and restrained by other passengers, and a doctor on the flight gave Reid a tranquilizer. The plane diverted and made an emergency landing in Boston and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) took Reid into custody.²

After being taken into custody, the FBI discovered Reid was attempting to ignite a fuse protruding out of his shoe because he had covertly hidden explosives between the shoe and sole. Reid converted to Islam in England while serving jail time for various crimes. He attended the same mosque as Zacarias Moussaoui, a convicted 9/11 conspirator. Reid's plot to bring down the aircraft was likely hatched during time he spent in Afghanistan with al-Qa'ida. Reid is now serving a lifetime prison sentence in the United States.³

The Reid case captured media headlines because of its proximity to the 9/11 attacks. It also shone a light on religious converts. Time magazine described Reid as "a convert with a convert's zeal."⁴ Looking beyond the media hype and what the general public assumes, studies have demonstrated converts radicalize at a higher rate than those born into the faith. Left unanswered however in these studies is why do they?

¹ "Shoe Bomber: Tale of another Failed Terrorist Attack," CNN, December 25, 2009, <http://www.cnn.com/2009/CRIME/12/25/richard.reid.shoe.bomber/index.html>.

² United States District Court, *United States v. Richard C. Reid, Criminal Complaint* (Suffolk County, MA: United States District Court, 2001), https://web.archive.org/web/20120301162226/http://nefafoundation.org/miscellaneous/FeaturedDocs/U.S._v_Reid_Complaint.pdf.

³ "Richard Reid Fast Facts," CNN, updated December 19, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2013/03/25/us/richard-reid-fast-facts/index.html>.

⁴ Michael Elliott, "The Shoe Bomber's World," *Time*, February 16, 2002, <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,203478-1,00.html>.

A. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Recent research published by George Washington University found 40 percent of those arrested for Islamic State (ISIL) related activities in the United States were converts to Islam.⁵ Yet, approximately 20 percent of the Islamic population in the United States are converts.⁶ Another study by Reynolds and Hafez found 23 percent of the individuals who traveled from Germany to fight for ISIL were converts, yet less than 1% of the German Muslim population are converts.⁷ A 2016 study by the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) also demonstrates the disproportionality of converts taking part in radical activities.⁸ While the research linking converts to radicalization is available, a gap appears to exist in what causes the converts to radicalize. Identifying linkages between the conversion process and radicalization may be useful in shaping policies and tactics aimed at the prevention of extremism.

B. RESEARCH QUESTION

- What is the relationship between religious conversion and violent extremism?

What makes this an interesting and complex inquiry is most converts do not become radicals, yet converts are disproportionately radical. Therefore, disentangling the perverse aspects of conversion from the typical benign process of exploring and embracing a new or different faith is an analytical challenge. Furthermore, while the study focuses on converts to Islam, the intent is not to suggest Islamic conversion is a problem warranting its own study.

⁵ Lorenzo Vidino and Seamus Hughes, *Isis in America: From Retweets to Raqqa* (Washington, DC: The George Washington University Center for Cyber and Homeland Security—Program on Extremism, 2015), <https://cchs.gwu.edu/isis-in-america>.

⁶ Besheer Mohamed, “New Estimates Show U.S. Muslim Population Continues to Grow,” Pew Research Center, January 3, 2018, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/01/03/new-estimates-show-u-s-muslim-population-continues-to-grow/>.

⁷ Sean C. Reynolds and Mohammed M. Hafez, “Social Network Analysis of German Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq,” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 2017, doi: 10.1080/09546553.2016.1272456.

⁸ Bart Schuurman, Peter Grol, and Scott Flower, “Converts and Islamist Terrorism: An Introduction,” *Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism Studies*, June 17, 2016, doi: 10.19165/2016.2.03.

C. LITERATURE REVIEW

A review of literature on religious conversion yielded numerous theories explaining the process. This literature review focused on three categories I believed would lead to the development of plausible hypotheses linking religious conversion to violent extremism. These categories are psychological, sociological, and relational.

1. Psychological Factors

Psychological theories view religious conversion as essentially a process that leads to cognitive changes. Some of these may be in the direction of greater radicalism. A *Journal of Personality* article examined the effect religious conversion has on an individual's personality.⁹ The study found religious conversion can be the catalyst for a profound change in an individual's attitude, behaviors, and life meanings. It could lead to what Quintan Wiktorowicz terms as "cognitive opening."¹⁰ A cognitive opening drives religious conversion, but religious conversion, in turn, could further incline persons to seek fundamentally new ideas, including radical ones.

Conversion could be borne out of negative psychological states and extreme experiences that push some to seek a new positive direction in life. Researchers have found experiences with attachment can have an effect on religious conversion. Those who have had secure attachment relationships were less likely to convert since they already have a sense of security. Those who experience insecure attachments were more likely to convert due to the need to feel accepted.¹¹ Examples of insecure attachments used in this study center around studying the converts' familial and social support networks, or the lack thereof. For example, had the convert recently experienced the loss of a romantic relationship, desperately seeking a romantic relationship in an effort to create a secure attachment, grew up with the lack of a father figure, or where they a loner

⁹ Raymond F. Paloutzian, James T. Richardson, and Lewis R. Rambo, "Religious Conversion and Personality Change," *Journal of Personality* 67, no. 6 (December 1999): 1047–1079, doi: 10.1111/1467-6494.00082.

¹⁰ Quintan Wiktorowicz, *Joining the Cause: Al-Muhajiroun and Radical Islam* (Memphis, TN: Rhodes College Department of International Studies, 2013), <http://insct.syr.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Wiktorowicz.Joining-the-Cause.pdf>.

¹¹ Ibid.

or recluse? Many early researchers concluded those who converted were fighting inner demons, which made them feel divided inside, and discovering a new religion they felt completed them and made them feel whole again.¹² If this viewpoint is true, then one possible mechanism linking conversion to radicalism is a history of personal grievances with the status quo. To the extent radical religious ideologies point a way forward that fulfills a quest for meaning and significance, then some prospective converts may find them appealing.

- Hypothesis One: Religious conversion borne out of a lack of secure attachments creates a cognitive opening to adopt new worldviews, including radical ones.

2. Sociological Factors

John Lofland and Rodney Stark did the first significant study related to the sociological factors of religious conversion. The study, “Becoming a World-Saver,” highlighted the importance social networks play in an individual’s decision to convert religions.¹³ They found deviant religious groups need to develop interconnected social networks within the community for successful conversions. An individual’s conversion is heavily dependent on the group’s ability to maintain a strong social bond with the individual. As an important note, the term “deviant” does not refer to the immoral intent of the group, but rather that the group went against the social norms of the community. Subsequent studies would build upon this research.¹⁴

Richard White’s 1968 article “Toward a Theory of Religious Influence” further confirmed the results of the World-Saver study and the importance social bonds play in religion. White’s study did not focus on conversion, but rather the reliance of religion on social bonds, as a means of social control, to ensure commitment to a group’s religious standard. White found the greater an individual’s ties, whether through family or

¹² Wiktorowicz, *Joining the Cause: Al-Muhajiroun and Radical Islam*.

¹³ John Lofland and Rodney Stark, “Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective,” *American Sociological Review* 30, no. 6 (1965): 862–875, doi: 10.2307/2090965.

¹⁴ Ibid.

friendship, within the religious community, the individual's commitment to the religious norms increased. This finding provides an explanation for how deviant groups are still able to thrive in secular society.¹⁵

In the 1980s, Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge examined the role social relationships play in the role of recruitment to cults, sects, or other deviant religions, by examining several previous studies and drawing out commonalities between them. The study revisits Stark's "Becoming a World-Saver" in which it was discovered interpersonal bonds were essential in the successful recruitment of individuals to a cult. The study states, "When such bonds did not exist and failed to develop, newcomers failed to join. When such bonds did exist or develop (and when they were stronger than bonds to others who opposed the individual's recruitment), people did join."¹⁶ It further described a Lofland and Stark discovery about the specific cult studied. When the cult leader made his first successful American conversion, all subsequent conversions stemmed from the convert's immediate social network, until the commune moved from one state to another. Further research found that after the commune relocated, its recruitment rate dramatically slowed until new social networks could be forged.¹⁷

The study went into detail on three previously studied religious groups that were defined as "deviant." First, it noted a 1960s study of a religious cult that lived in underground shelters to survive an Armageddon type event they believed was coming. Seventy-five percent of the members who were convinced to go underground had familial ties to one of the cult's leaders. The second group was a religious sect studied in 1978, in which a questionnaire was given to the members. The results noted prior to joining the sect, the studied individuals could be described by "social withdrawal or introversion." This description meant the individuals had little support structure to prevent them from joining the sect and the sect provided them with "companionship unavailable in the large

¹⁵ Richard H. White, "Toward a Theory of Religious Influence," *The Pacific Sociological Review* 11, no. 1 (1968): 23–28, doi: 10.2307/1388521.

¹⁶ Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion: Secularization, Revival and Cult Formation* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985), 308.

¹⁷ Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, "Networks of Faith: Interpersonal Bonds and Recruitment to Cults and Sects," *American Journal of Sociology* 85, no. 6 (1980): 1376–1395, doi: 10.1086/227169.

society.” The third group was a 1970s study of members of the Mormon religion in the State of Washington. It noted when missionaries simply went door to door seeking converts, the conversion rate was only 0.1 percent, but when contact with missionaries took place in a friend’s or families’ home, the conversion rate jumped to 50 percent.¹⁸

- Hypothesis 2: Religious conversion takes place through interpersonal connections, and conversion to extremism takes place through prior associations with radical individuals during the conversion process.

David Smilde seems to merge the psychological factor with the sociological ones. He observes little was known concerning how and why these networks are influential. He went on to study the conversion of 55 men to Evangelicalism in Venezuela. Eighty-five percent of those who converted were found to have experienced life problems shortly before their conversion. Smilde defined these problems as “addictive behavior, involvement in violence, relationship problems, or problems of personal adjustment.” In the cases where the convert did not have any problems, it was found that the convert lived with another Evangelical. Further examination of the 55 men also demonstrated a substantive number of the men who experienced life problems who converted were not living with their families of origin. Thus, Smilde found two of the following three variables needed to be met for conversion to take place: (1) does not live with the family of origin and lives with an evangelical, (2) experiencing life problems and does not live with the family of origin, and (3) experiencing life problems and lives with an evangelical.¹⁹

- Hypothesis 3: Personal problems and connections to radical milieus substantially increase the likelihood of religious converts becoming violent extremists.

¹⁸ Stark and Bainbridge, “Networks of Faith: Interpersonal Bonds and Recruitment to Cults and Sects.”

¹⁹ David Smilde, “A Qualitative Comparative Analysis of Conversion to Venezuelan Evangelicalism: How Networks Matter,” *American Journal of Sociology* 111, no. 3 (2005): 757–796, doi: 10.1086/497306.

3. Prison Conversion and Radicalization

A plethora of literature is available on radicalization within penal institutions. A 2010 study in the FBI Bulletin examines prisoners converting to Islam while incarcerated, and those who then develop radical beliefs.²⁰ According to the authors, the combination of disaffected youth, lack of religious knowledge, and confinement with radical individuals is a perfect situation for recruiters seeking to convert ordinary prisoners into religious extremist causes.

Prisons literally provide a captive audience of disaffected young men easily influenced by charismatic extremist leaders. These inmates, mostly minorities, feel that the United States has discriminated against them or against minorities and Muslims overseas. This perceived oppression, combined with a limited knowledge of Islam, makes this population vulnerable for extremists looking to radicalize and recruit.²¹

- Hypothesis 4: Recruitment among converts to Islam reflects a selection bias on the part of the recruiters seeking targets of opportunity among aggrieved individuals with low levels of religious knowledge.

D. RESEARCH DESIGN

This thesis intends to develop an understanding of what in the religious conversion process causes converts to become radical at such a disproportionate rate as compared to those born into the faith. The focus is on Islamist extremists, but the findings of this thesis may be generalized to other denominations as well. The research uses several detailed case studies to test the four hypotheses and possibly refine them for future studies. This thesis uses several case studies of U.S. converts to Islam who also took part in violent extremism.

In an effort to find a link between religious conversion and violent extremism, 38 individuals who were converts to Islam and took part in radical activities were studied.²² These 38 subjects were pulled from different studies on individuals who had committed

²⁰ Dennis Ballas, "Prisoner Radicalization," Federal Bureau of Investigation, November 11, 2010, <https://leb.fbi.gov/2010/october/prisoner-radicalization>.

²¹ Ibid.

²² These 38 individuals are listed in the appendix of this report.

some form of Islamic radical activity. The reports used to develop these 38 case studies were the following.

- **60 Terrorist Plots since 9/11: Continued Lessons in Domestic Counterterrorism.** This report was published by the Heritage Foundation in 2013 and authored by Steven Bucci, James Carafanoand, and Jessica Zuckerman and can be found online at: <http://www.heritage.org/terrorism/report/60-terrorist-plots-911-continued-lessons-domestic-counterterrorism>.
- **ISIS in America; From Retweets to Raqqa.** This report was published by George Washington University's Program on Extremism. It was authored by Lorenzo Vidino and Seamus Hughes and can be found online at: <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/extremism.gwu.edu/files/downloads/ISIS%20in%20America%20-%20Full%20Report.pdf>.
- **Extremist Converts.** This report was published in 2017 by the Counter Extremism Project and can be found online at: https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/themes/bricktheme/pdfs/CEP_Extremist_Converts.pdf:

The Counter Extremism Project is a not-for-profit, non-partisan, international policy organization formed to combat the growing threat from extremist ideologies. Led by a renowned group of former world leaders and diplomats it combats extremism by pressuring financial and material support networks; countering the narrative of extremists and their online recruitment; and advocating for smart laws, policies, and regulations.²³

Using these three studies, subjects were selected for this thesis' field of study if they met the following requirements. These requirements were chosen to limit the focus of the study and make the field of study manageable:

- Subject was a U.S. citizen or legal resident at the time of conversion

²³ "About," Counter Extremism Project, accessed November 12, 2017, <https://www.counterextremism.com/about>.

- The subject's radical activities took place after September 11, 2001
- The radical activities were carried out, or attempted to be carried out, in the name of Islam
 - Radical activities are defined as:
 - Carried out a terrorist attack
 - Took substantial steps to carry out an attack but was unsuccessful
 - Traveled overseas to provide support for an Islamic foreign terrorist organization as defined by the United States Department of State
 - Provided or attempted to provide support for an Islamic foreign terrorist organization as defined by the United States Department of State without traveling outside of the United States.

The details on the life of the 38 converts leading up to their conversion were drawn only from publicly available material. It avoided the use of any classified or sensitive information. Relevant information from previous research, court records, and media reporting was gleaned to determine if enough evidence was available to test how the cases support or do not support the hypotheses. The case studies were limited to U.S. citizens who were Islamic converts, and committed their extremist activities in the United States, travelled or attempted to travel overseas to fight for a foreign terrorist organization, or provided or attempted to provide material support to a terrorist organization. The primary rationale for this limited scope was both keeping the sample manageable and the ease of being able to gather relevant details on the subjects' backgrounds, particularly in cases where examining publicly available court records is necessary. Specifically, the following elements in the subjects' backgrounds were searched for:

- Similar trends and commonalities
- If the subject displayed radical behaviors in the past but was lacking a cause
- Where or how the subjects converted

- By person/recruiter
- Prison
- Internet
- Subjects' life status immediately prior to the conversion process
 - Social disaffection
 - If the subjects' support structures were strong or lacking
 - If a recent loss of status had occurred
 - End of significant relationship
 - Death of close friend or family member
 - Loss of employment
 - Past criminal history
 - Past religious affiliations or lack thereof (Networks of Faith study)
 - Past behaviors indicating the subjects felt violence or radical behavior was acceptable
- Subjects' life status immediately after conversion
 - If the subjects were ostracized by a support structure due to conversion
 - If the conversion led the subjects to view radical activities as acceptable

Examining these aforementioned elements in the subjects' backgrounds allowed for hypothesis testing. The intended output of this thesis was to identify a common trait in the conversion process, which caused an individual to become an extremist. This identification would be useful in learning to shape policy aimed at the prevention of extremism.

II. PATHWAYS TO RADICALIZATION—DATA AND FINDINGS

The study of these 38 subjects' lives pre-conversion, during conversion, and immediately after their conversion yielded ample data. Some of this data was not relevant to the four hypotheses, but the findings were also worthy of reporting. These findings are described in Figure 1, and help to paint the picture of those who convert and radicalize.

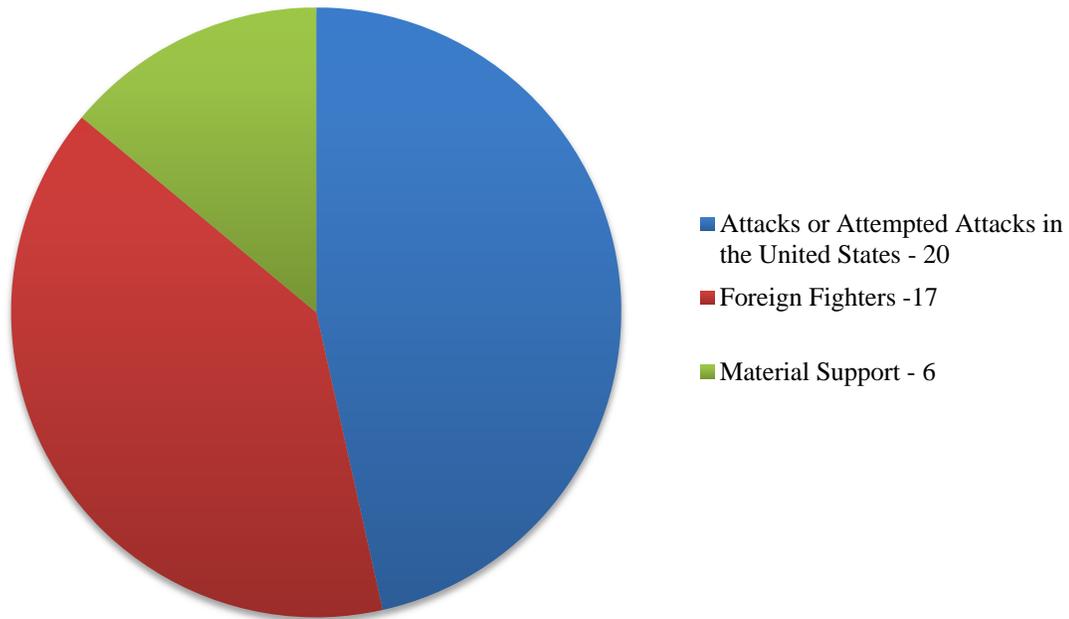


Figure 1. Types of Radical Activities

Of the 38 subjects, 20 either conducted their attack or attempted to conduct an attack within the United States. Seventeen of these subjects were foreign fighters or attempted foreign fighters. In other words, they were unable to get to their planned destination, either through the intervention of U.S. law enforcement or other foreign government entities. Five of these foreign fighters also attempted to provide some other material support to foreign terrorist organizations.

Only one of the subjects, Robert McCollum (a.k.a. Amir Said Abdul Rahman al-Ghazi) solely provided material support without attempting to conduct an attack in the

United States, or traveling overseas to partake in radical activities. McCollum was arrested in a sting operation with the FBI when he bought a rifle, which he planned to use in a propaganda video, but he was already a convicted felon. He was also charged with providing material support to a terrorist organization for attempting to incite attacks and expressing his desire to conduct a terror attack in the United States. Prior to the sting operation, he swore allegiance to an ISIL leader, and even stated he would behead his own son, who was not Muslim, if necessary.²⁴

As shown in Figure 2, of the 38 case studies, only five were female. All five females had many data points in common. None of the five either carried out or attempted attacks within in the United States. All five either traveled or attempted to travel outside of the United States to conduct their radical activities.

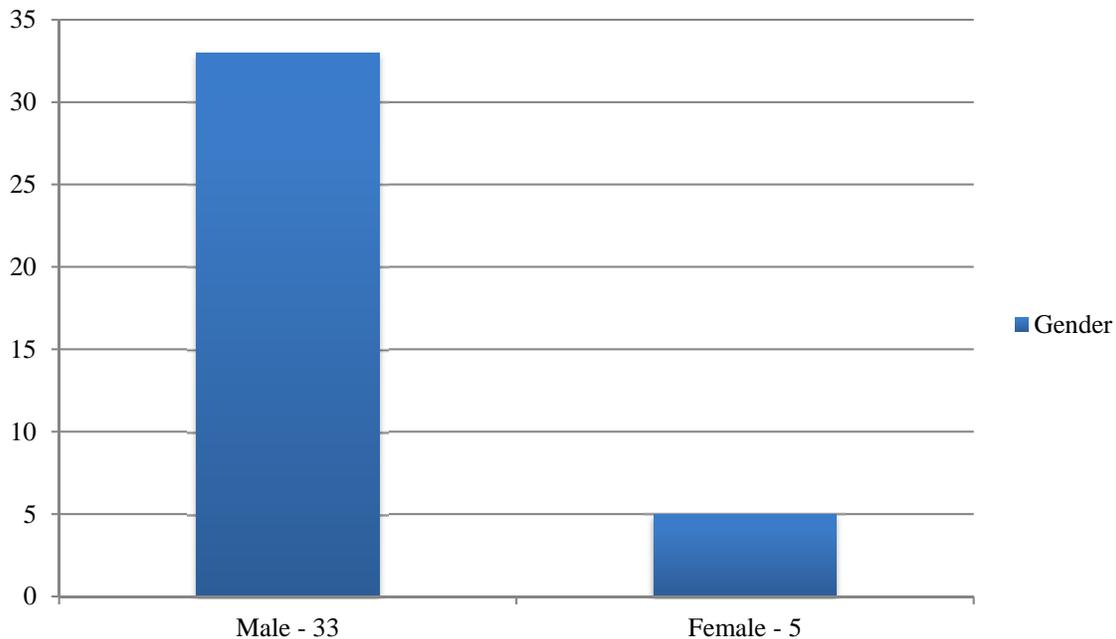


Figure 2. Male and Female Converts

²⁴ United States District Court for the Northern District of Ohio, *United States of America v. Amir Said Rahmna Al-Ghazi, aka Robert C. McCollum* (Washington, DC: Investigative Project on Terrorism, 2015), https://www.investigativeproject.org/documents/case_docs/2762.pdf.

The five women are described as follows.

- Ariel Bradley, an American citizen who converted to Islam and is now living in Syria supporting her husband as he fights for ISIL.²⁵
- Shannon Conley, a 19-year old Muslim convert from Colorado who was arrested when she attempted to board a plane to fly overseas and make her way to Syria to join ISIL.²⁶
- Colleen LaRose, who became widely known in the U.S. media by her self-given on-line moniker “Jihad Jane” was arrested, convicted, and in 2014, sentenced to 10 years in prison for plotting to kill a Swedish cartoonist.²⁷
- Jamie Paulin-Ramirez was involved in the same plot as Colleen LaRose. Paulin-Ramirez moved from Colorado to Ireland with her son and married the man LaRose was living with where they plotted to kill the Swedish cartoonist.²⁸
- Jaelyn Young was a sophomore in college at Mississippi State University, when she converted to Islam after she began dating Muhammad Dakhlalla. A short time later, she would marry Dakhlalla.²⁹ Eventually, the two decided they wanted to travel to the Levant and join ISIL.³⁰ They made

²⁵ Elli Hall, “How One Young Woman Went from Fundamentalist Christian to ISIS Bride,” BuzzFeed News, July 20, 2015, https://www.buzzfeed.com/elliethall/woman-journey-from-chattanooga-to-isis?utm_term=.quAZIEez35#.mmORO3k9DP.

²⁶ “Arvada Woman Pleads Guilty to Conspiracy to Provide Material Support to a Designated Foreign Terrorist Organization,” United States Department of Justice, September 10, 2014, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/arvada-woman-pleads-guilty-conspiracy-provide-material-support-designated-foreign-terrorist>.

²⁷ “Federal Judge Sentences “Jihad Jane” to 10 Years in Prison for Role in Plot to Commit Murder Overseas,” United States Attorney’s Office, Eastern District of Pennsylvania, January 6, 2014, <https://www.justice.gov/usao-edpa/pr/federal-judge-sentences-jihad-jane-10-years-prison-role-plot-commit-murder-overseas>.

²⁸ “Extremist Converts,” Counter Extremism Project, accessed November 8, 2017, <https://www.counterextremism.com/extremist-converts>.

²⁹ “How Two Mississippi College Students Fell in Love and Decided to Join a Terrorist Group,” *Atlantic*, May 1, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/05/mississippi-young-dakhlalla/524751/>.

³⁰ Scott Bronstein and Drew Griffin, “Young ISIS Recruit: I Was Blinded by Love,” CNN, December 6, 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/12/02/us/mississippi-isis-muhammad-dakhlalla-interview/index.html>.

their plans to travel to the Middle East and were arrested at the airport in Mississippi as they were boarding their flight.³¹

None of these women had a past history of violence. Their average age at conversion was between 27 and 28 years old. The youngest was Conley at approximately 18 and the oldest was LaRose who was between 45 and 46 years old.

Romance or sexual attraction or both fueled all five of these women's conversions. Bradley started working at a pizza restaurant owned by a Palestinian, which began to spark her interest in Islam. She then developed a romantic interest on a frequent customer from Syria who was a Muslim. He befriended her and taught her about Islam but rebuffed her romantic advances. It was after this rebuke that she began to study Islam more intensely. Bradley studied Islam via the Internet and trips to the local mosque. She ultimately converted a few months later in a ceremony at the pizza store. After her conversion, she began to look for a husband, and ultimately struck up an online relationship with a man in Sweden. She would eventually fly to Sweden and marry him.³²

During Conley's online conversion process, she was introduced to a 32-year old man, Yousr Mouelhi, and developed a romantic relationship. During their cyber courtship, the two recognized they felt bound to carry out a violent jihad against non-believers. She told her father about the relationship and Conley arranged a Skype conversation so the two could meet. During this conversation, Mouelhi asked for his blessing to marry Conley and stated the plan was for her to move to Syria so they could dedicate their lives to ISIL. Conley's dad forbade the marriage, yet Conley still made plans to travel to the Middle East and meet Mouelhi, and was arrested at the airport attempting to board the flight.³³

In 2007, LaRose was in Amsterdam with her boyfriend of five years. One evening, the two were in a bar when they began to argue. He left leaving LaRose in the

³¹ "Jaelyn Young—Overview," Counter Extremism Project, accessed November 12, 2017, <https://www.counterextremism.com/extremists/jaelyn-young>.

³² Hall, "How One Young Woman Went from Fundamentalist Christian to ISIS Bride."

³³ Brandi Lynn Evans Monroe, "Brand Caliphate and Recruitment between the Genders" (master's thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2016).

bar by herself. While alone in the bar she was approached by a Middle Eastern man who was also a Muslim. To spite her boyfriend, and to satisfy her curiosity, she went home with the man. This encounter stimulated her interest in Islam and when she got home, she began to research the religion secretly in more depth, something she kept secret from her boyfriend. LaRose signed up for a Muslim dating site; she had become infatuated with Islamic men.³⁴

Paulin-Ramirez's brother stated her conversion was probably influenced romantically. "Any man that came along in my sister's life, she kind of followed like a lost puppy."³⁵ Paulin-Ramirez moved to Ireland with her son specifically to marry a man she had never met.³⁶

Young began dating a man when she was in college. He was friends with Muhammad Dakhlalla, which is how Young met her future husband. Young and Dakhlalla would spend a lot of time together without her boyfriend's knowledge, and when he found out, he ended the relationship. After the break up, Young and Dakhlalla began dating, which isolated them from other friends, as they disapproved of how the relationship began.³⁷ She began to inquire about Islam in depth and it was on a trip back to Dakhlalla's parents' house that she chose to convert with Dakhlalla's dad who was an Imam.³⁸

The vast majority of these case studies, 34 to be exact, resulted in arrests and convictions by U.S. authorities. Three of these individuals were killed due to their activities.

³⁴ Reuters Staff, "Special Report: From Abuse to a Chat Room, a Martyr is Made—Jane's Jihad," Reuters, December 7, 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-jihadjane/special-report-from-abuse-to-a-chat-room-a-martyr-is-made-janes-jihad-idUSBRE8B60GP20121207>.

³⁵ Corky Siemaszko, "Paulin-Ramirez's Family Feels 'Pity' for 'Jihad Jamie'; Say She Was Likely Egged on to Join Plot," *NY Daily News*, March 15, 2010, <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/paulin-ramirez-family-feels-pity-jihad-jamie-egged-join-plot-article-1.174766>.

³⁶ Counter Extremism Project, "Extremist Converts."

³⁷ Emma Green, "How Two Mississippi College Students Fell in Love and Decided to Join a Terrorist Group," *Atlantic*, May 1, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/05/mississippi-young-dakhlalla/524751/>.

³⁸ Bronstein and Griffin, "Young ISIS Recruit: I Was Blinded by Love."

- Adam Gadahn was killed as part of a drone strike while overseas.³⁹
- Douglas McCain died in a battle in the northern city of Marea while fighting the Free Syrian Army.⁴⁰
- Elton Simpson was killed by police when he attacked a “Draw Mohammad” contest in Garland, Texas, with his roommate Nadir Soofi.⁴¹

Ariel Bradley is the only subject to not be prosecuted or killed in this study, as seen in Figure 3. She ended up moving to Syria and would post of her new life on various social media platforms about everything from being an ISIL wife to innocuous posts about her kids.⁴²

³⁹ Matthew Grimson, “Adam Gadahn, al Qaeda Leader Killed in U.S. Drone Strike, Was a Wanted Man,” NBC News, April 23, 2015, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/american-al-qaeda-leader-adam-gadahn-dead-drone-strike-state-n346891>.

⁴⁰ James Warren, Thomas Tracy, and Larry Mcshane, “American Who Joined ISIS Killed in Syria Gunfight, Relative Says it Was ‘His Destiny’,” *NY Daily News*, August 27, 2014, <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/world/u-s-isis-member-douglas-mcauthor-mccain-s-family-knew-syria-trip-article-1.1917205>.

⁴¹ Brian Ross, Rhonda Schwartz, and Randy Kreider, “Garland Shooting Suspect Elton Simpson’s Father Says Son ‘Made a Bad Choice’,” ABC News, May 4, 2015, <http://abcnews.go.com/US/garland-shooting-suspect-elton-simpsons-father-son-made/story?id=30782088>.

⁴² Hall, “How One Young Woman Went from Fundamentalist Christian to ISIS Bride.”

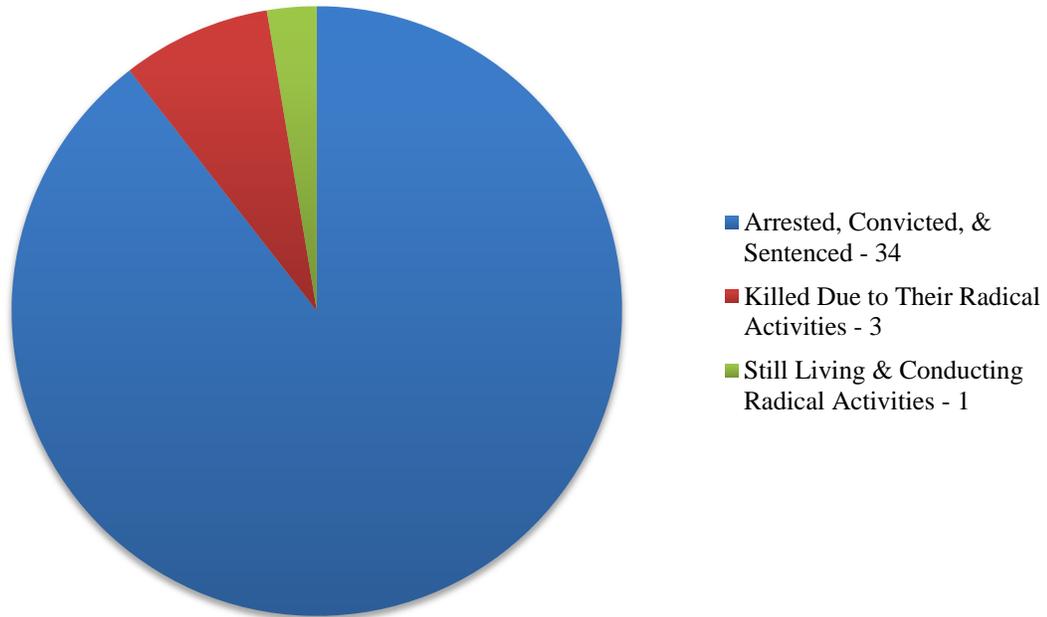


Figure 3. How it Ended—Justice Served

Research was unable to determine the conversion age of three of subjects. As shown in Figure 4, the remaining 35 subjects had an average conversion age of 22.4 years. The oldest convert (Colleen LaRose) was between 45 and 46 at the time of conversion. The youngest (Hasan Edmonds) was between 12 and 13 years of age at the time of conversion.

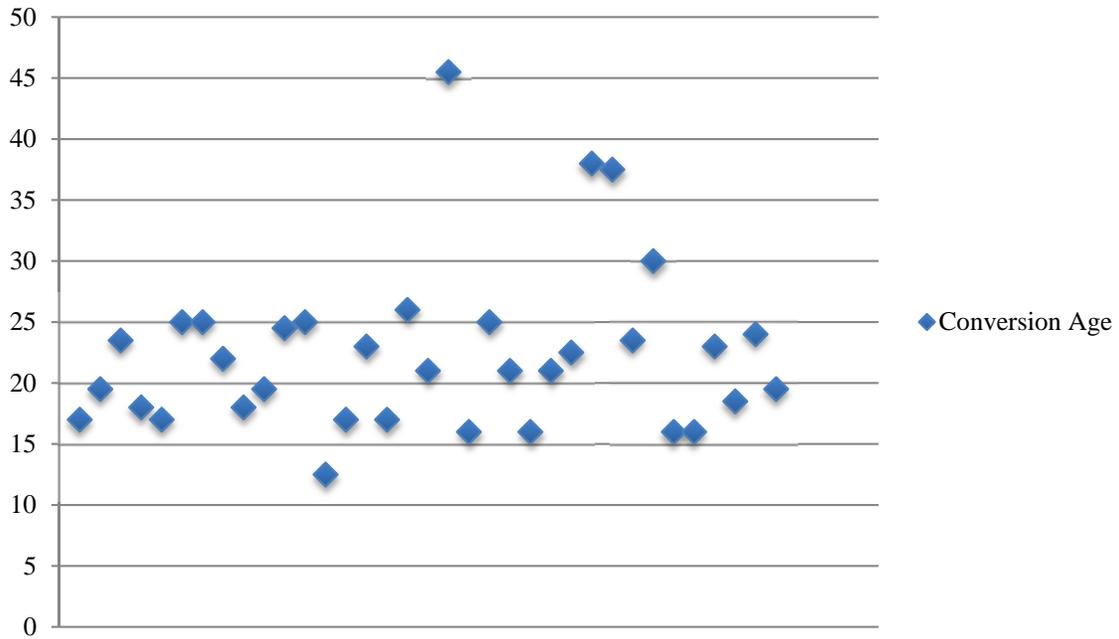


Figure 4. Conversion Age

The role the internet played in the conversion, not in their radicalization, of the subjects was examined, as demonstrated in Figure 5. According to the research, only 10 (slightly over a quarter) subjects had the internet play a significant role in their conversion.

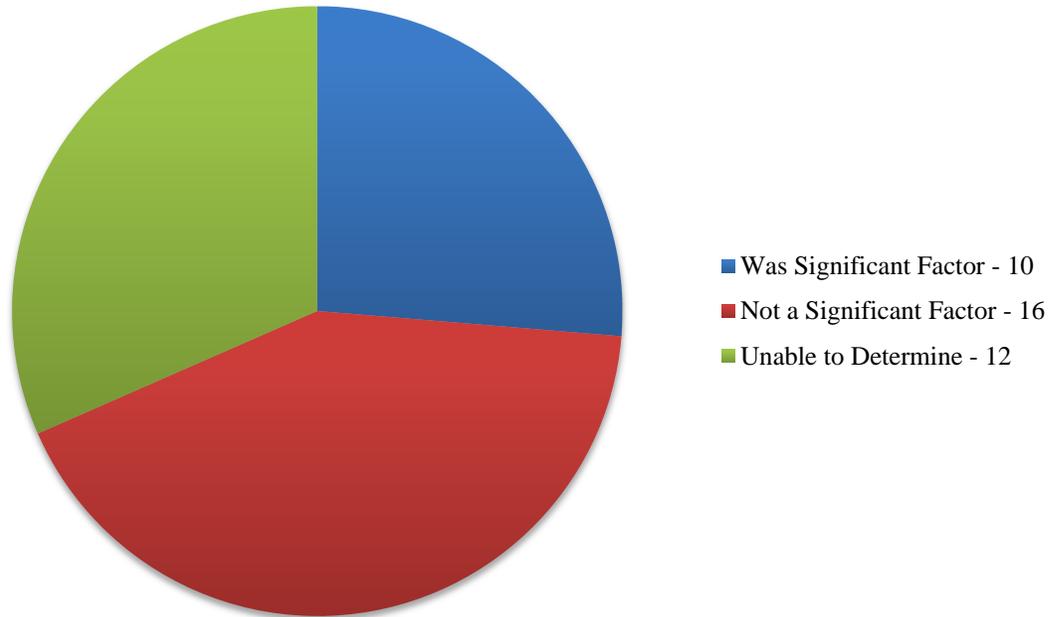


Figure 5. Use of the Internet?—Did the Internet Played Significant Role in Conversion?

One of these examples is Harlem Suarez. Harlem Suarez was arrested in a FBI sting operation. During the sting operation, he made an ISIL recruitment video with an FBI informant, and attempted to buy explosives from an undercover FBI agent. He planned to use the explosives to conduct an attack on a beach in Florida, and place others under police cars in the area.⁴³ Suarez was arrested, convicted, and sentenced to life in prison.⁴⁴

Around 2014 or 2015, Suarez became infatuated with the ISIL internet chat rooms and fell for their rhetoric and recruitment tactics. At some point during this time, Suarez converted to the radical Islam that the ISIL recruitment videos portrayed.⁴⁵

⁴³ United States District Court, *United States of America v. Harlem Suarez a/k/a Almiak Benitez* (Washington, DC: Investigative Project on Terrorism, 2015), https://www.investigativeproject.org/documents/case_docs/2788.pdf.

⁴⁴ Gwen Fiolsa, “Keys Bomb Plotter Suarez Gets Life in Prison,” *Miami Herald*, April 18, 2017, <http://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/community/florida-keys/article145265609.html>.

⁴⁵ Jessica Lipscomb, “How Harlem Suarez Went from Cuban Immigrant to Wannabe ISIS Jihadi,” *Miami News Times*, September 3, 2017, <http://www.miaminewtimes.com/news/harlem-suarez-goes-from-cuban-immigrant-to-wannabe-isis-jihadi-9643881>.

As seen in Figure 6, around 60 percent of the case studies were Christian prior to conversion; yet this percentage is unsurprising, as 75 percent of Americans describe themselves as Christians.⁴⁶ All 38 case studies were either U.S. citizens or living in the United States as a legal resident.

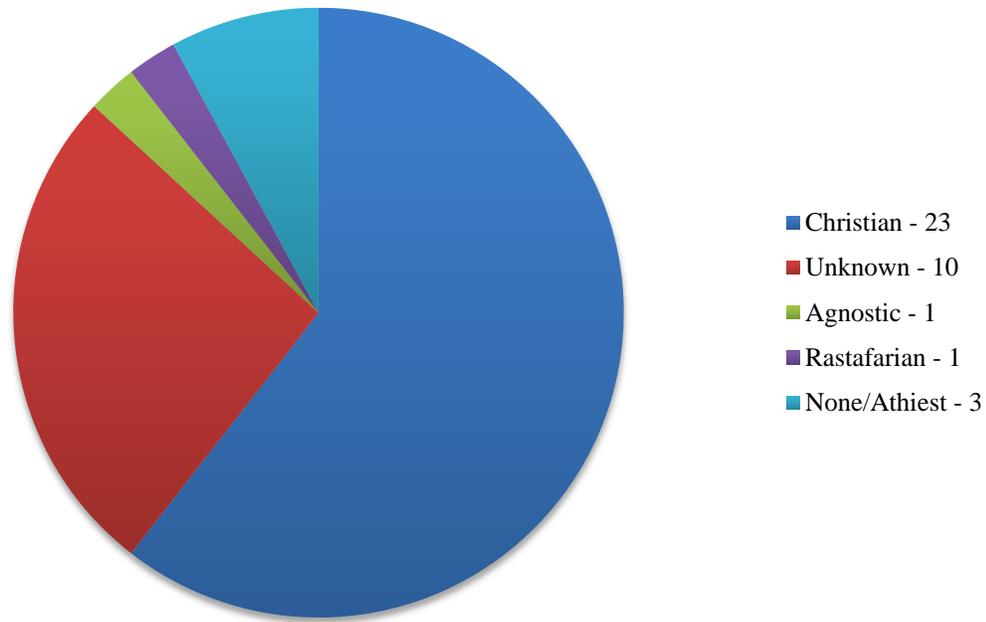


Figure 6. Previous Religion Prior to Conversion

The difficulty of uncovering the factors driving radicalization of converts is evident in the aforementioned findings. Not one glaringly obvious finding points to a specific driver of radicalization. This data even makes it difficult to build a profile of what a radical convert's demographic and background may be. From the field of study, it can be stated that the radical convert is likely to be male and in his early twenties.

The one constant factor found with the female converts was that romance or sexual attraction or both were the catalyst for all five of their conversions. Without

⁴⁶ Frank Newport, "Percentage of Christians in U.S. Drifting Down, but Still High," Gallup, December 24, 2015, <http://news.gallup.com/poll/187955/percentage-christians-drifting-down-high.aspx>.

further research, it cannot be said that romance or sexual attractions is a definitive driver of radicalization.

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III. TESTING THE HYPOTHESES—WHAT DOES THE DATA TELL US?

This chapter assesses the four hypotheses and if they held true when tested against the 38 case studies.

- Hypothesis 1: Religious conversion borne out of a lack of secure attachments creates a cognitive opening to adopt new worldviews, including radical ones.
- Hypothesis 2: Religious conversion takes place through interpersonal connections, and conversion to extremism takes place through prior associations with radical individuals during the conversion process.
- Hypothesis 3: Personal problems and connections to radical milieus substantially increase the likelihood of religious converts becoming violent extremists.
- Hypothesis 4: Recruitment among converts to Islam reflects a selection bias on the part of the recruiters seeking targets of opportunity among aggrieved individuals with low levels of religious knowledge.

The markers or casual factors looked for in the case studies to test each hypothesis are described in detail under each hypothesis section.

A. HYPOTHESIS 1

- Hypothesis 1: Religious conversion borne out of a lack of secure attachments creates a cognitive opening to adopt new worldviews, including radical ones.

For the first hypothesis, I looked for signs the subjects were lacking secure attachments, or were in search of secure attachments in their lives leading up to their conversion. The following markers were searched for and the results are shown in Figure 7:

- Had the subjects recently experienced the loss of a romantic relationship?
- Was the subjects' conversion an effort to secure an attachment through a romantic relationship? Was a romantic relationship the catalyst for the conversion?
- Did the subjects have a strained relationship with one or both of their parents?
- Did the subjects come from a broken home, and the subjects were lacking the first secure attachment many people have?
- Were the subjects loners or recluses leading up to the conversion, and the conversion was an effort to build a social bonds among peers?

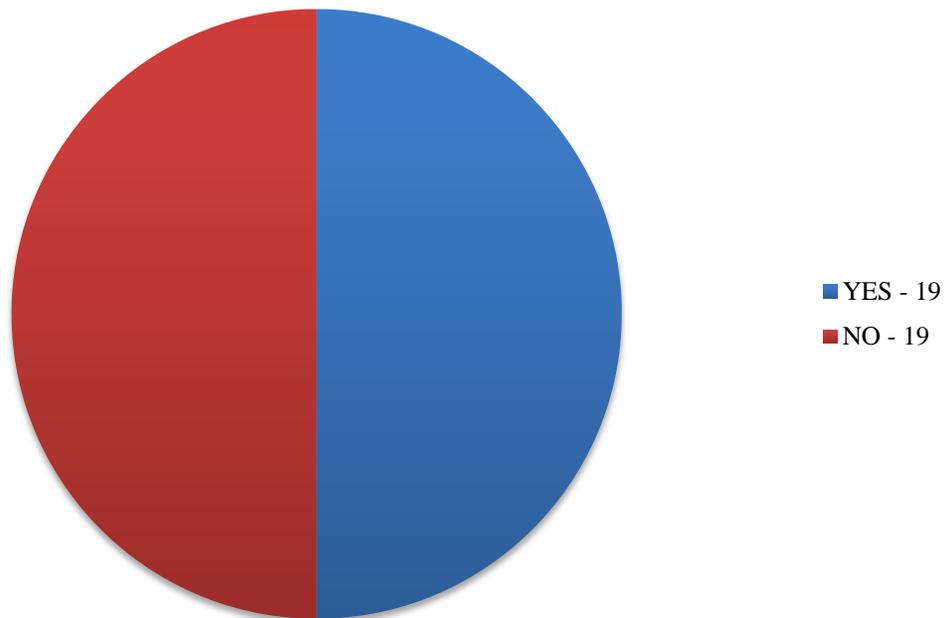


Figure 7. Hypothesis 1

As pictured in Figure 8, in the 38 cases studied, exactly half of the subjects were found to be lacking secure attachments. In search of these attachments missing in the

subjects' lives, they found Islam and were able to form the attachments lacking in their lives.

In the 19 cases where a lack of secure relationships was found, 11 of the cases had a strained relationship with one or more parents. In two of these cases, research was unable to determine the quality of the subjects' relationships with their parents.

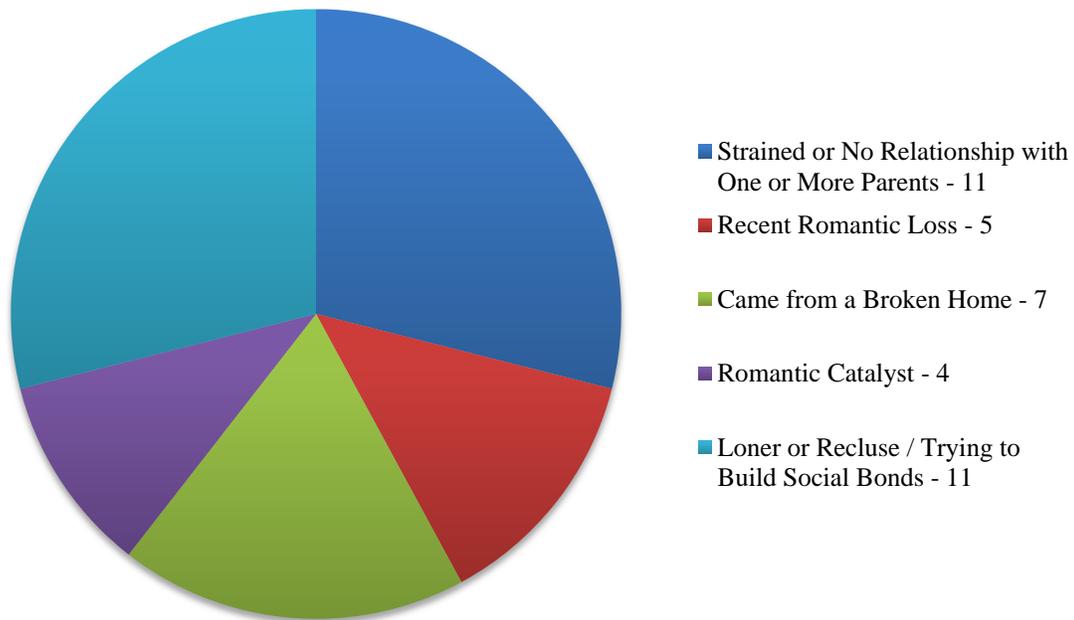


Figure 8. Strained or No Relationship with One or More Parents—What Were the Lacking Attachments?

Colleen LaRose is one of the subjects, which demonstrates the lack of attachments with her parents prior to converting to Islam. Colleen LaRose, who became widely known in the U.S. media by her self-given on-line moniker “Jihad Jane” was arrested, convicted, and in 2014, sentenced to 10 years in prison for plotting to kill a Swedish cartoonist.⁴⁷ LaRose is a U.S. citizen and convert to Islam.

⁴⁷ United States Attorney’s Office Eastern District of Pennsylvania, “Federal Judge Sentences “Jihad Jane” to 10 Years in Prison for Role in Plot to Commit Murder Overseas.”

LaRose's childhood was tragic, which led to problems the rest of her life. LaRose's parents divorced when she was three years old. Her father got custody of LaRose, and it does not appear her mother was active in her life. When she turned eight, her father began routinely raping her and her 11-year old sister. In the seventh grade, LaRose ran away from home to escape her father. She prolifically used cocaine and heroin when she left home and turned to prostitution as a teenager. She became pregnant and miscarried, which caused her to never be able to have children. At 16, she briefly married a man twice her age. She would eventually find her way to a teen shelter, but never had a true attachment to any of her parents.⁴⁸

1. Recent Romantic Loss

In five of the case studies where the subjects lacked secure relationships, the subject had recently exited a romantic relationship.

Donald Morgan was an attempted foreign fighter who unsuccessfully tried to enter Syria to fight for ISIL. He is one of the examples who converted shortly after his romantic relationship ended and he lost an important secure attachment. Before getting married, Morgan had spent several years incarcerated. Upon his release from prison, he gained employment and became immersed in bodybuilding. He married another bodybuilder, and in 2001, they had a son together. In 2007, they divorced, and in 2008, he converted to Islam. He stated he first learned about Islam in a college class. During his conversion, he realized that "Islam presented this package that said: 'This is, this is it...this is the path and this is the way you're going to go. There is not going to be this way, that way.'"⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Reuters Staff, "Special Report: From Abuse to a Chat Room, a Martyr Is Made—Jane's Jihad."

⁴⁹ "EXCLUSIVE: American Extremist Reveals His Quest to Join ISIS," NBC News, September 3, 2014, <https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/isis-terror/exclusive-american-extremist-reveals-his-quest-join-isis-n194796>.

2. Came from a Broken Home

Research found seven of the 19 subjects lacking secure attachments came from a broken home. In three of the 19 instances, research was unable to determine the quality of the subjects' home life during their formative years.

Naser Jason Abdo is an example of a subject who came from a broken home. Abdo was absent without leave (AWOL) from the U.S. Army when he was arrested in July 2011 in a Killeen, TX hotel room. He was charged and convicted of plotting to attack the Ft. Hood military base. A search of his hotel room revealed a pressure cooker and other Islamic extremist literature, including *Inspire* magazine.⁵⁰ The copy of *Inspire* Abdo had in his possession is the same issue that detailed the steps to building a pressure cooker improvised explosive device (IED).⁵¹ Abdo, a Muslim convert, planned to bomb a restaurant near Fort Hood popular with soldiers, and then shoot the survivors as they fled the building.⁵²

Abdo was born in Garland, Texas and his parents divorced when he was three years old. Abdo's mother was a U.S. citizen and a Christian, while his father had emigrated from Jordan and was a Muslim. However, it appears Abdo was raised non-religious.⁵³ Neighbors who knew Abdo in his adolescence described the house as "broken and abusive." They recalled he was making the best of a bad situation and remembered him as reclusive. A friend of his sister's said Abdo "didn't fit in" but his sister was very popular.⁵⁴ After his parents' divorce, Abdo and his sister lived with their father because

⁵⁰ United States District Court Western District of Texas, *United States of America v. Naser Jason Abdo* (Washington, DC: Investigative Project on Terrorism, 2011), https://www.investigativeproject.org/documents/case_docs/1617.pdf.

⁵¹ Jason Ryan and Lee Ferran, "Naser Jason Abdo, Ft. Hood Plotter, Gets Life in Prison," ABC News, August 10, 2012, <http://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/naser-jaon-abdo-ft-hood-plotter-life-prison/story?id=16978363>.

⁵² John Mueller, "Case 45: Abdo," in *Terrorism since 9/11, The American Cases*, ed. John Mueller (Columbus, OH: Mershon Center, Ohio State University, 2014), 647; Nicole Spaetzel, "Case 45: Abdo," in *Terrorism since 9/11, The American Cases*, ed. John Mueller (Columbus, OH: Mershon Center, Ohio State University, 2014), 653.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Peter Daut, "Terror Suspect Grew Up in Broken North Texas Home," KDFZW, Dallas-Fort Worth, July 29, 2011, <https://web.archive.org/web/20110919145858/http://www.myfoxdfw.com/dpp/news/072911-terror-suspect-grew-up-in-broken-garland-home>.

his mother was seeking help for drug addiction. However, in 2004, his father was arrested for soliciting sex from a minor over the internet.⁵⁵ He served five years in prison before being deported to Jordan.⁵⁶ Two years after his conversion, Abdo joined the military. Reporting indicates this enlistment was precipitated by lack of job prospects rather than a sense of duty to his country.⁵⁷

3. Romantic Catalyst

Five of these 19 subjects converted to Islam in an effort to find or cement a romantic relationship, and create a secure attachment for themselves. One of these examples is Ariel Bradley. Bradley is an American citizen who converted to Islam and is now living in Syria supporting her husband as he fights for ISIL. Bradley grew up outside Chattanooga, Tennessee in a strict Pentecostal Christian homeschool house. Bradley's mother oversaw the homeschooling and reportedly did a substandard job, as she did not even begin to learn how to read until her preteen years. By the time she was a teenager, she was constantly fighting with her mother, and she eventually moved out of her parents' house when she was about 15 or 16 years old.⁵⁸

Bradley would eventually begin working at a pizza restaurant owned by a Palestinian, which began to spark her interest in Islam. She then developed a romantic interest with a frequent customer from Syria who was a Muslim. He befriended her and taught her about Islam but rebuffed her romantic advances. She began to study Islam more intensely after this rebuke via the internet and trips to the local mosque, and ultimately converted a few months later in a ceremony at the pizza store. After her conversion, she began to look for a husband, and ultimately struck up an online

⁵⁵ Manny Fernandez and James Dao, "Soldier Arrested in Suspected Bomb Plot Had Series of Disputes with Army," *New York Times*, July 29, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/30/us/30awol.html>.

⁵⁶ Mueller, "Case 45: Abdo," 649.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 650.

⁵⁸ Hall, "How One Young Woman Went from Fundamentalist Christian to ISIS Bride."

relationship with a man in Sweden. She would eventually fly to Sweden, without ever having met him in person, and marry him.⁵⁹

It appears Bradley was desperate for a romantic relationship and would conform to whatever she needed to in order to secure one. Her interests varied depending on with whom she was romantically linked at the time. Her friend described:

It was like, when I first met her she was a Christian, and then she was a socialist, and then she was an atheist, and then a Muslim. As far as I could tell it was always in relation to whatever guy she was interested in, so if she meets a guy that's an atheist then she's an atheist, falls into that for a year. Then the guy leaves and she meets somebody new, and it starts all over again...It seemed like whatever guy she was with, she would just crawl into his skin and kind of become him.⁶⁰

4. Loner or Recluse—Attempting to Build Social Bonds

Much like having a strained parental relationship was a large factor in cases that fit into the first hypothesis, subjects lacking social bonds with peer groups appeared to be a catalyst for conversion. This category was tied for the highest with the strained parental relationships with 11 subjects having a history of reclusive behavior and difficulty trying to fit into a group. Background on one of the case studies did not provide enough information to determine if the subject was a loner or had difficulty forming bonds with peers.

Enrique Marquez is an example of an individual trying to build social bonds. Marquez was friends and next door neighbor with Syed Rizwan Farook. Farook, along with his wife, carried out the 2015 terrorist attack in San Bernardino, California, when they conducted a mass shooting on the County Health Department's holiday party. Marquez purchased two of the rifles for Farook that were used in the attack, and the smokeless powder Farook used to build IEDs.

⁵⁹ Hall, "How One Young Woman Went from Fundamentalist Christian to ISIS Bride."

⁶⁰ Ibid.

In 2005, as a teenager, Marquez moved with his family to Riverside, California where he met Farook, who introduced him to Islam.⁶¹ In 2007, Marquez converted to Islam.⁶² Marquez was described as a loner until he met and developed a bond with Farook who was four years older than him. At school, Marquez did not appear to have any close friends, and only appeared to bond with one person close to his age, Farook.⁶³

5. Other Findings with Hypothesis One

Of those subjects who fit into the first hypothesis, the highest markers of lacking secure attachments were strained relationships with one or more of the parents and the subjects being described as loners or recluses prior to their conversion. Eleven of these subjects demonstrated the strained parental relationship marker and 11 demonstrated the loner/recluse marker. Six of these subjects demonstrated both the strained parental relationship and loner/recluse markers.

B. HYPOTHESIS 2

- Hypothesis 2: Religious conversion takes place through interpersonal connections, and conversion to extremism takes place through prior associations with radical individuals during the conversion process.

As shown in Figure 9, evidence of the second hypothesis was present in less than a third of the case studies. Evidence or markers looked for in the case studies to support this hypothesis were the following:

- Were the subjects related to a Muslim prior to their conversion?
 - Was this individual influential in the subject's conversion?
- Did the subject recently befriend a Muslim

⁶¹ United States District Court, *United States of America v. Enrique Marquez, Jr.* (Riverside County, CA: United States District Court, 2015), <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/2648603-Marquez-Complaint-Charging-Documents-12-17.html#document/p1>.

⁶² "Enrique Marquez—Overview," Counter Extremism Project, accessed November 3, 2017, <https://www.counterextremism.com/extremists/enrique-marquez>.

⁶³ David Montero, "Enrique Marquez, San Bernardino Shooter's Friend, Described as Loner Who Wanted to Belong," *Los Angeles Daily News*, updated August 28, 2017, <http://www.dailynews.com/2015/12/19/enrique-marquez-san-bernardino-shooters-friend-described-as-loner-who-wanted-to-belong>.

- Was this individual influential in the subjects' conversion?
- Did the subjects have interactions with radical Muslims in close proximity to their conversion (i.e., just prior, during, or shortly after)?

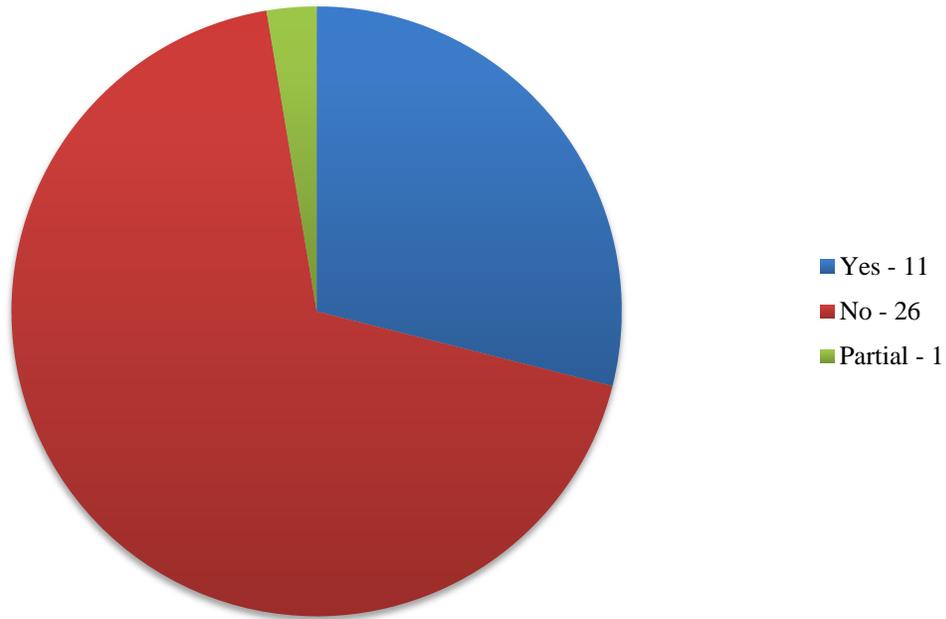


Figure 9. Hypothesis 2

James Elshafay was one of the subjects who only partially demonstrated evidence supporting this hypothesis. Elshafay, a U.S. citizen and Muslim convert, along with a Pakistani immigrant, Shahwar Matin Siraj, were arrested and convicted for plotting to detonate an IED at the New York City Herald Square subway station on the days leading up to the 2004 Republican National Convention.⁶⁴ Both Islamic men planned the attacks as revenge for America's treatment of prisoners at the Abu Ghraib Prison in Iraq. The

⁶⁴ "Shahawar Matin Siraj Convicted of Conspiring to Place Explosives at the 34th Street Subway Station," United States Attorney's Office Eastern District of New York, May 24, 2006, <https://www.justice.gov/archive/usao/nye/pr/2006/2006may24.html>.

men conducted surveillance of the subway station and drew sketches prior to attempting to purchase materials for the IED from an undercover law enforcement officer.⁶⁵

Elshafay's conversion is a complicated story. His father was an Egyptian immigrant and practicing Muslim and his mother was Irish Catholic.⁶⁶ His parents separated when he was two years old and he primarily lived with his mother, who battled psychiatric issues. At the age of 12, his father forced him to convert to Islam, although it does not appear he embraced the faith at that time.⁶⁷

When he was 17, he traveled with his father to visit relatives in Egypt. After this trip, it seems he truly converted, as he came back much more interested in his heritage and Islamic faith. He grew a beard and began praying and attending the Mosque regularly. At the mosque, he met Siraj, his co-conspirator. At the time he met Siraj, he was unemployed with no friends or other attachments.⁶⁸

While he was related to a Muslim, the influence his father had on his conversion is questionable. While he converted at the age of 12, this conversion was forced on him and does not appear as though he truly embraced the religion. It could be said he truly converted at 17 when he went to Egypt, but again, his father's role in this is questionable. Research also indicates Elshafay suffered from mental illness. He was diagnosed with schizophrenia, abused drugs, and claims to have been sexually abused by an uncle.⁶⁹ His father could have less influenced his embrace or conversion to Islam at 17 and his other issues were the catalyst.

Figure 10 shows the markers looked for in hypothesis 2 in the case studies.

⁶⁵ Associated Press, "Would Be Subway Bomber Awaits Sentencing," USA Today, January 7, 2007, http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/nation/2007-01-07-subway-plot_x.htm.

⁶⁶ William K. Rashbaum, "Staten Island Man Describes Shattered Life, Then a Plot to Bomb a Subway Station," *New York Times*, May 10, 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/10/nyregion/10herald.html>.

⁶⁷ John Mueller, "Case 12: Herald Square," in *Terrorism since 9/11, The American Cases*, ed. John Mueller (Columbus, OH: Mershon Center, Ohio State University, 2011); Surili Sheth, "Case 12: Herald Square," in *Terrorism since 9/11, The American Cases*, ed. John Mueller (Columbus, OH: Mershon Center, Ohio State University, 2011).

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Rashbaum, "Staten Island Man Describes Shattered Life, Then a Plot to Bomb a Subway Station."

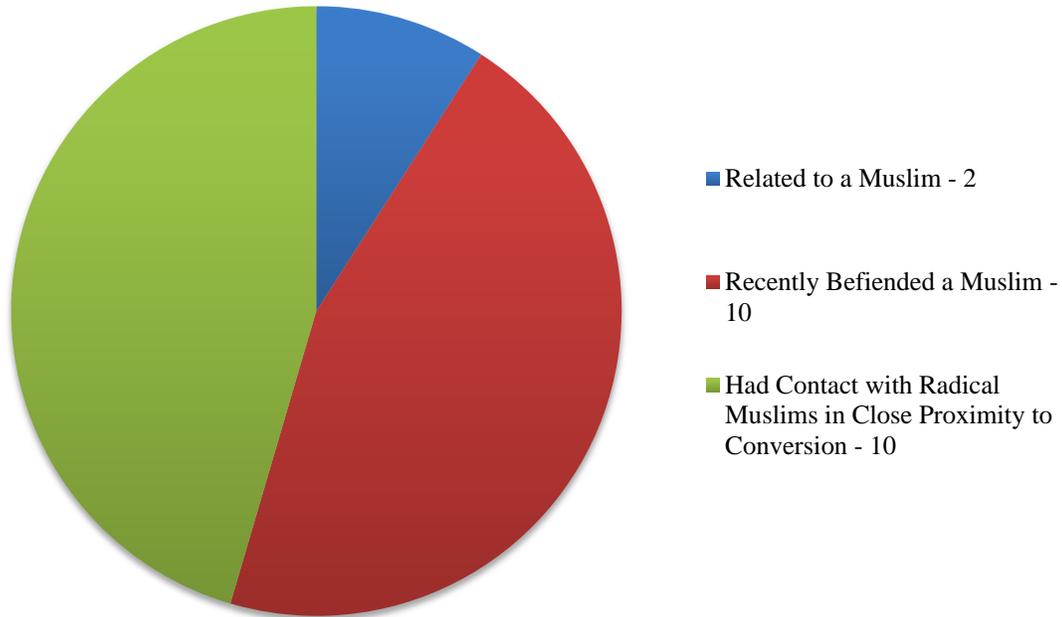


Figure 10. Hypothesis 2 Markers

Kevin James met all three of the aforementioned markers and is the strongest case study supporting this hypothesis. Kevin James led the radical Islamic group Jamiyyat ul-Islam Is-Saheeh (JIS) while incarcerated in a state prison in California.⁷⁰ In 2005, members of JIS were arrested for conspiring to attack National Guard sites and synagogues in the Los Angeles, California area.⁷¹ James orchestrated this plot while he was incarcerated.⁷²

James grew up in South Central Los Angeles, California.⁷³ His father was a member of the Nation of Islam, although he disavowed the teachings.⁷⁴ He was a

⁷⁰ Mark Hamm, "Prisoner Radicalization: Assessing the Threat in U.S. Correctional Institutions," Office of Justice Programs, National Institute of Justice, October 27, 2008, <https://www.nij.gov/journals/261/pages/prisoner-radicalization.aspx>.

⁷¹ Jessica Zuckerman, Steven Bucci, and James Jay Carafano, "60 Terrorist Plots since 9/11: Continued Lessons in Domestic Counterterrorism," The Heritage Foundation, July 22, 2013, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2013/07/60-terrorist-plots-since-911-continued-lessons-in-domestic-counterterrorism>.

⁷² Hamm, "Prisoner Radicalization: Assessing the Threat in U.S. Correctional Institutions."

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Demetrius Daniels-Hill, "Case 15: JIS," in *Terrorism since 9/11, The American Cases*, ed. John Mueller (Columbus, OH: Mershon Center, Ohio State University, 2011).

member of the 76th Street Crips street gang, and at the age of 21, began serving a 10-year prison sentence for robbery.⁷⁵

Once in prison, James converted to Islam, initially following the teaching of his father's Nation of Islam. However, he ended up being drawn to the more radical Sunni teaching that other inmates in the prison were following. These inmates belonged to JIS, and James would eventually take over as the head of the group.

Although support for Hypothesis 2 is lacking, a finding of note is present in the last two markers:

- Did the subject recently befriend a Muslim?
- Did the subject have interaction with radical Muslims in close proximity to his conversion (i.e., just prior, during, or shortly after)?

Only 11 of the case studies found evidence supporting the second hypothesis, but nine of these case studies showed the individuals had both recently befriended a Muslim prior to their conversion, and had contact with radical Muslims in close proximity to their conversions. In some instances, the recently befriended Muslims were different than those who the subjects came into contact with that were radical. Also, in some instances, the befriending was personal face-to-face while the contact with radicals was done online.

Jose Padilla is an example of an individual who befriended a Muslim, which peaked his interest in Islam, but was then in contact with another radical Muslim during his conversion. Jose Padilla was arrested in 2002 at Chicago's O'Hare Airport upon returning from Pakistan where he had met with 9/11 mastermind Khalid Sheikh

⁷⁵ Hamm, "Prisoner Radicalization: Assessing the Threat in U.S. Correctional Institutions."

Mohammed.⁷⁶ Padilla was charged with and ultimately convicted of plotting to detonate a radioactive device in the United States.⁷⁷

Padilla spent some years in prison and was released in 1992. He began working at a Taco Bell with his girlfriend (who he would end up marrying). The restaurant manager, Mohammad Javed, was a Muslim who became a mentor to Padilla. Padilla asked about how to convert to Islam, and Javed claimed he had no role in Padilla's conversion and only told him he had to find his own mosque.⁷⁸

Padilla attended at least two mosques with radical ties in South Florida while exploring Islam. He officially converted at the al-Iman mosque in Sunrise, Florida. The Imam, Raed Awad, was linked to charities known to raise funds for Hamas.⁷⁹ Awad however denied knowing these funds were supporting Hamas.⁸⁰

C. HYPOTHESIS 3

- Hypothesis 3: Personal problems and connections to radical milieus substantially increase the likelihood of religious converts becoming violent extremists.

The third hypothesis was supported 17 times out of the 38 case studies. Seventeen of the case studies provided evidence of both of these elements. However, another eight case studies found the subjects did have personal problems leading up to their conversion, but lacked the connection to radical milieus. This finding correlates to 25 subjects (almost two thirds) experiencing personal problems prior to their conversion, as shown in Figure 11.

⁷⁶ "Profile: Jose Padilla," BBC News, August 16, 2007, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/2037444.stm>.

⁷⁷ United States District Court Southern District of Florida, *United States of America vs. Adham Amin Hassoun a/k/a "Abu Sayyaf," Kifah Wael Jayyousi a/k/a "Abu Mohamed," and Jose Padilla a/k/a "Ibrahim," a/k/a "Abu Abdullah the Puerto Rican," a/k/a "Abu Abdullah Al Mujahir," Defendants* (Washington, DC: Investigative Project on Terrorism, 2007), http://www.investigativeproject.org/documents/case_docs/613.pdf.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ "Former Muslim Leader Who Helped Open Hoover Mosque Dies," Alabama Living, updated April 29, 2016, http://www.al.com/living/index.ssf/2016/04/former_muslim_leader_of_hoover.html.

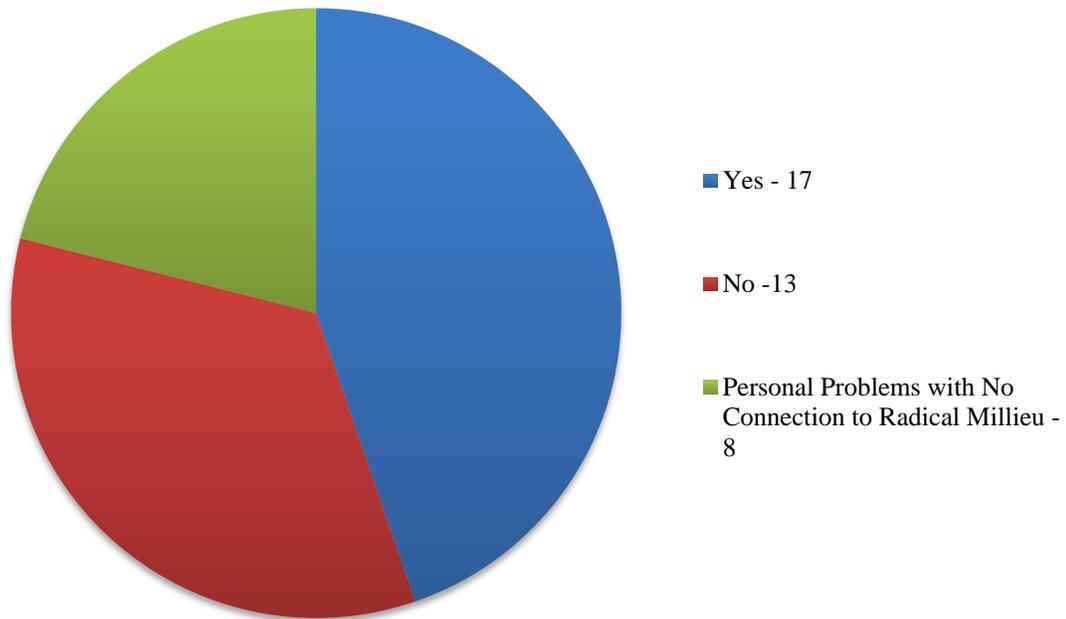


Figure 11. Hypothesis 3

However, the hypothesis was two parts and stated:

- The subject's personal problems and a connection to radical milieus (pre-conversion) would increase the chance of the subject becoming radical

Personal problems, as shown in Figure 12, were defined as the subject experiencing the following pre-conversion:

- Mental illness
- Significant criminal history
- *Addictive behaviors*
- *History of violence or viewing violence as acceptable means to resolution*
- *Personal adjustment issues*
- *Relationship problems*
- Employment problems

The italicized bullet points were included because of David Smilde’s study (described earlier in the literature review) of Evangelical conversion in Venezuela. Eighty-five percent of those who converted were found to have experienced life problems shortly before their conversion. Smilde defined these problems as “addictive behavior, involvement in violence, relationship problems, or problems of personal adjustment.”

Of the 19 subjects experiencing personal problems, research was unable to determine if:

- Five did or did not have significant criminal histories
- Three did or did not have a past history of violence
- One did or did not have relationship problems
- Four did or did not have employment problems

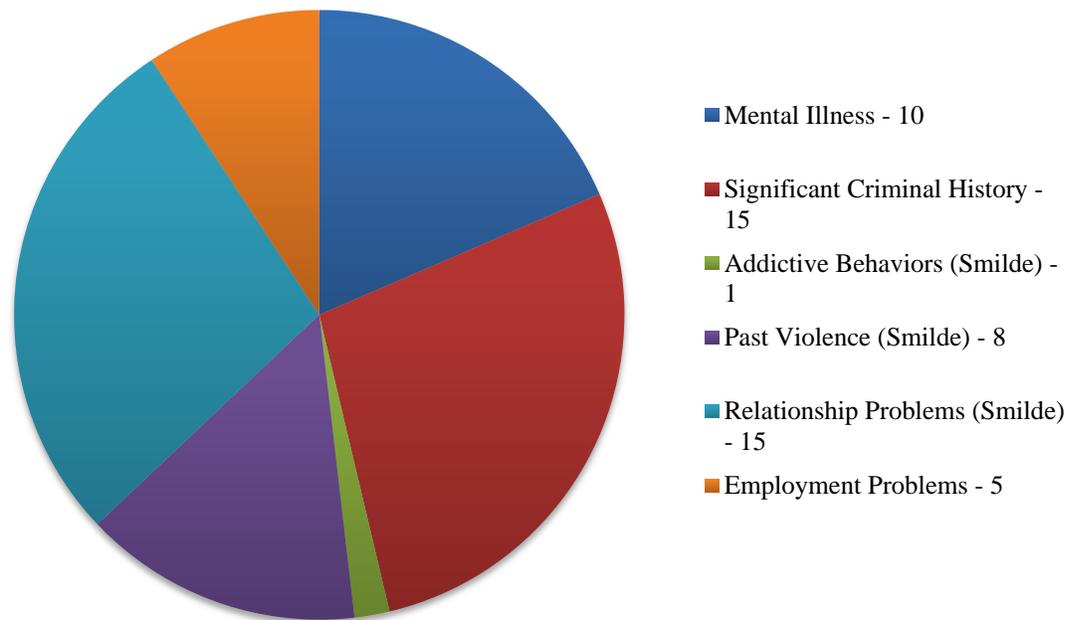


Figure 12. Personal Problems Experienced

The findings of David Smilde’s Venezuelan study were also relevant in these findings. Seventy-six percent of the subjects were experiencing the same personal

problems Smilde described in his study. Carlos Almonte was experiencing three of the four personal problems Smilde described prior to his conversion. He had a past history of assault, alienated his family, and had issues adjusting to adult life upon his 18th birthday.

Almonte was arrested at Kennedy Airport as he and another associate, Mohamed Alesa, were attempting to fly to Egypt, where they planned to proceed to Somalia to join and fight with al-Shabab. Their intentions were given away as they had discussed their plans with an undercover police officer. The two planned for their trip by saving thousands of dollars, purchased equipment, and physically conditioning themselves.⁸¹

Almonte moved to the United States as a child from the Dominican Republic and was a naturalized U.S. citizen. He was described as an “aimless youth” and seemed to spiral downhill when he was 18-years old. During his senior year of high school, he was arrested three times for bringing a knife to school, assault, and drinking beer in a park. After these episodes, he turned to Islam, against his family’s wishes, and he would eventually alienate them. Around the time of his conversion, Almonte also met Alesa, a troubled Muslim youth who was medicated for anger issues, attempted to join a street gang, and had numerous run-ins with the police.⁸²

For the second part of the hypothesis, pictured in Figure 13, determining if the subject had connections to radical milieus, the following markers were looked for in the subjects’ past:

- Did the subject convert in prison?
 - Due to past studies of prisoner radicalization demonstrating inmates have a perceived oppression, combined with a limited knowledge of Islam, makes this population vulnerable for extremists looking to radicalize and recruit.”⁸³ The logical step was

⁸¹ “Two New Jersey Men Sentenced to Decades in Prison for Conspiring to Kill Overseas with Designated Foreign Terrorist Organization Al Shabaab,” United States Attorney’s Office District of New Jersey, April 15, 2013, <https://www.justice.gov/usao-nj/pr/two-new-jersey-men-sentenced-decades-prison-conspiring-kill-overseas-designated-foreign>.

⁸² Kareem Fahim, Richard Pérez-Peña and Karen Zraick, “From Wayward Teenagers to Terror Suspects,” *New York Times*, June 11, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/12/nyregion/12suspects.html>.

⁸³ Ballas, “Prisoner Radicalization.”

made that if a subject converted in prison, it was likely done with radical elements of Islam.

- Did the subjects have contact with Islamic radicals in close proximity to their conversion?
 - This contact could have been immediately prior, during, or closely after (when the subjects were still learning about the religion and susceptible to influence) the subjects' conversion
 - Contact may have been in person or online
- Did the subjects have a previous history with street gangs, which might indicate they were already open to committing violence or other radical activities in the name of a group with which they identified?

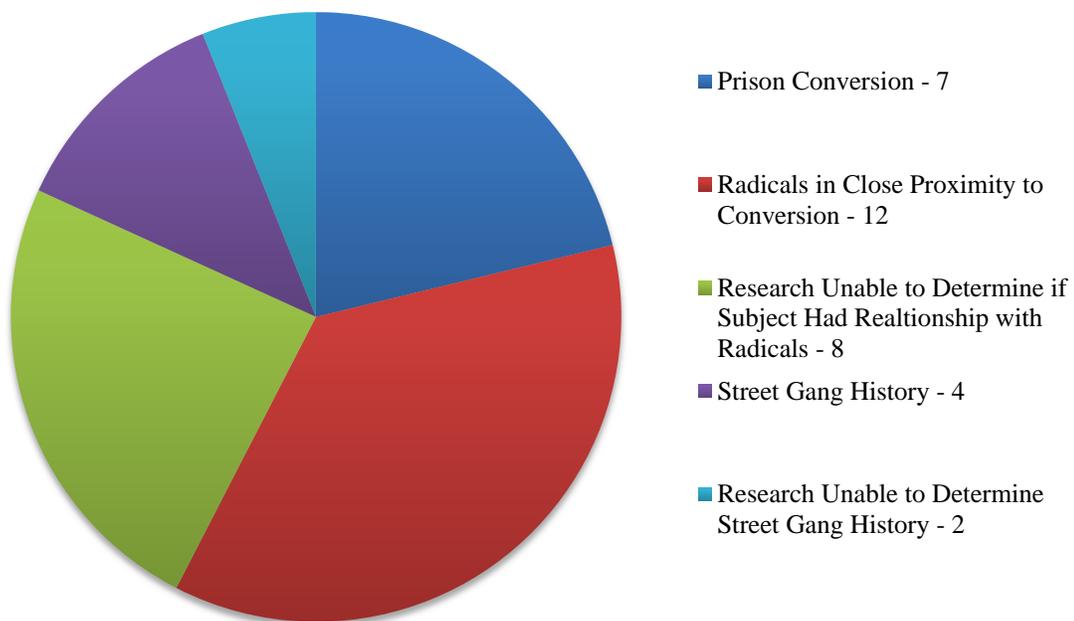


Figure 13. Connections to Radical Milieus

Levar Washington was a subject who was experiencing personal problems due to a significant criminal history and had all three connections to radical milieus. Washington converted in prison, was converted and radicalized by another known radical Islamist, and had a history with street gangs.

Washington was incarcerated with Kevin James (described earlier in this report) at the New Folsom Prison in California. After James formed JIS, he recruited, converted, and radicalized Washington.⁸⁴ James recognized he and Washington came from a similar background, “a street-wise gang member turned Sunni Islamic convert” and knew Washington would soon be paroled, so he tasked Washington with building the JIS cell outside of prison.⁸⁵ Washington was arrested by police for a string of gas station robberies in an attempt to raise funds to buy the equipment necessary to carry out the JIS planned attacks on the National Guard sites and synagogues in the Los Angeles, California area.⁸⁶

D. HYPOTHESIS 4

- Hypothesis 4: Recruitment among converts to Islam reflects a selection bias on the part of the recruiters seeking targets of opportunity among aggrieved individuals with low levels of religious knowledge.

As seen in Figure 14, the fourth hypothesis had little evidence for support. For only five of the 38 cases could evidence be found the subject was even recruited to Islam. Levar Washington discussed previously would be the textbook example of this hypothesis. Washington was a target of opportunity by James who recognized he already held radical beliefs since he was a member of a criminal street gang. James was incarcerated, had a low level of Islam, and taught Washington his form of the faith.

⁸⁴ Daniels-Hill, “Case 15: JIS.”

⁸⁵ Jeffrey B. Cozzens and William Rosenau, “Training for Terror, The “Homegrown” Case of Jami` at al-Islam al-Sahih,” Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, August 15, 2009, <https://ctc.usma.edu/posts/training-for-terror-the-“homegrown”-case-of-jamiat-al-islam-al-sahih>.

⁸⁶ Daniels-Hill, “Case 15: JIS.”

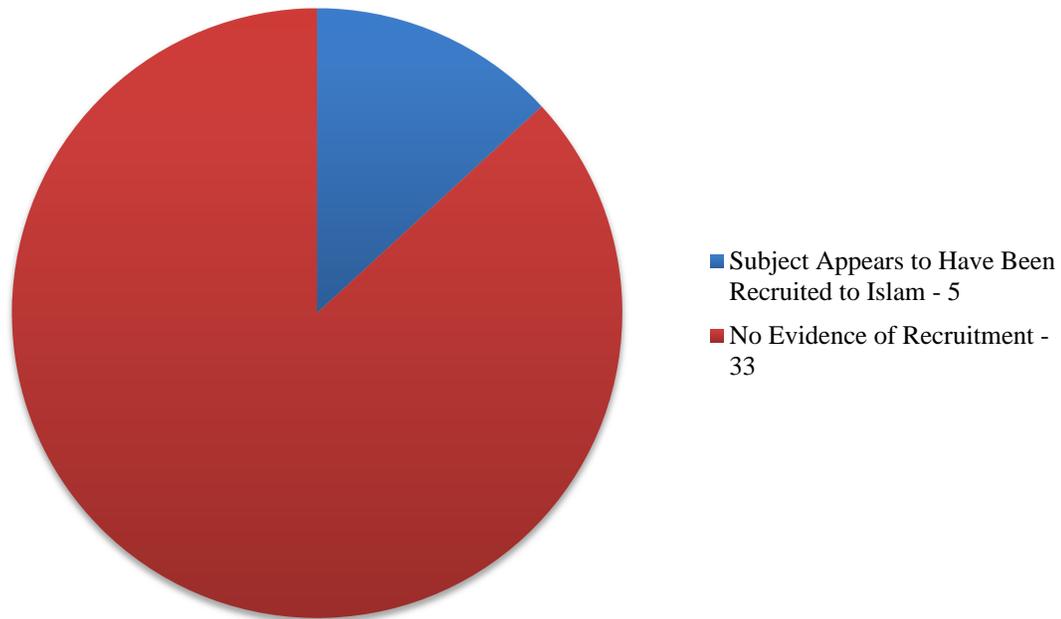


Figure 14. Hypothesis 4

Adam Gadahn is another case study who fits this hypothesis. He was an individual who became widely known as he was an American who was able to climb the ranks of al-Qa’ida. Gadahn (aka Azzam al-Amriki or Azzam the American) is a U.S. citizen who converted to Islam and later made his way to Pakistan and Afghanistan. During his time in those two countries, he attended al-Qa’ida training camps and served as a translator. During his time with al-Qa’ida, Gadahn reportedly spent time with one of the group’s leaders, Abu Zubaydah and another American Islamic convert John Lindh.⁸⁷ Gadahn would go on to become al-Qa’ida’s “official English-language propagandist” and make videos in English to encourage further attacks against the United States and other Western countries.⁸⁸ These videos would lead to Gadahn being the first American since

⁸⁷ “Profile: Adam Gadahn,” Investigative Project on Terrorism, accessed October 24, 2017, <https://www.investigativeproject.org/profile/102/adam-gadahn>.

⁸⁸ Greg Botelho and Ralph Ellis, “Adam Gadahn, American Mouthpiece for al Qaeda, Killed,” CNN, April 23, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/04/23/world/adam-gadahn-al-qaeda/index.html>.

World War II to be indicted for treason.⁸⁹ In 2015, Gadahn was killed as part of a drone strike while overseas.⁹⁰

Gadahn converted under the guidance of Dr. Muzammil Siddiqi in Southern California. Questions regarding Dr. Siddiqi and his involvement in radical activities have arisen in the past. In the early 1990s, Abdel Rahman (aka “The Blind Shiekh”) was invited to speak at the mosque. During this speech, with Dr. Siddiqi translating, Rahman (who would later be convicted for masterminding the first World Trade Center attack) spoke about non-violent jihad being weak, and stated that fighting was obligatory for Muslims. Recordings of the speech were later offered for sale at the mosque’s bookstore.⁹¹

Also tied to the mosque were two individuals, Khalil Deek and Hisham Diab. Gadahn befriended Deek and Diab, and they certainly encouraged his conversion. Deek and Diab lived in an apartment complex together, and Abdel Rahman visited during the time he also spoke at the mosque. According to Diab’s ex-wife, after Rahman’s arrest, the sheikh would call the apartment on Sundays from jail and deliver sermons to those living in the apartment. In 1995, Deek and Diab would create “Charity without Borders,” which reportedly funneled money to extremist groups in the Middle East, and was eventually shut down after the 9/11 attacks.⁹²

Shortly after Gadahn’s conversion, he moved into Diab’s apartment, where Diab’s ex-wife said Gadahn was exposed to more radical propaganda. One of the mosque’s leaders, Haitham Bundakji, claimed Diab was part of a cell at the mosque deemed “disruptive troublemakers” who recruited others. He felt responsible for Gadahn’s radicalization and believed he should have done more to help him by stating, “He

⁸⁹ Greg Krikorian and Richard B. Schmitt, “From the Archives Adam Gadahn Videos Lead to Treason Charge,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 12, 2006, <http://www.latimes.com/la-videos-lead-to-treason-charge-20150423-story.html>.

⁹⁰ Grimson, “Adam Gadahn, al Qaeda Leader Killed in U.S. Drone Strike, Was a Wanted Man.”

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² Greg Krikorian and H. G. Reza, “O.C. Man Rises in Al Qaeda ‘Azzam the American,’ or Adam Gadahn, Has Moved from Translator to Propagandist,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 8, 2006, <http://articles.latimes.com/2006/oct/08/local/me-gadahn8>.

(Gadah) fell in the wrong hands and he became as aggressive as they were (Diab's cell.)"⁹³

Deek reportedly went to Pakistan separately but around the same time as Gadahn.⁹⁴ Deek was a known associate of Abu Zubaydah⁹⁵ and it can be reasonable to assume that he introduced him to Gadahn. Deek would later be arrested in Pakistan and extradited to Jordan in 1999 for plotting terrorist attacks in Jordan.⁹⁶

Despite these two examples of individuals with low levels of religious knowledge being sought out by radicals for recruitment, they are the exception and not the rule in the 38 cases studied. Very little evidence was found of others being recruited specifically for radical activities. However, further research into this area is possible. The vast majority of the converts in this study sought out the religion on their own, and during this time, came into contact with radicals, but the radicals did not initially seek them out as targets of opportunity.

Seven of the 38 case studies found no support for any of the four hypotheses. The infamous John Walker Lindh was among these seven. Lindh gained notoriety as his capture in Afghanistan in the early stages of the war made international headlines and dominated the news cycle for weeks.

Lindh joined the Taliban to fight in Afghanistan's civil war against the Northern Alliance in the months leading up to the 9/11 attacks.⁹⁷ Lindh, who had met Osama bin Laden while training with the Taliban, claimed no prior knowledge of the 9/11 attacks, and was fighting on the front lines of the Afghanistan civil war when the attacks

⁹³ Brian Ross and David Scott, "An American Married to Al Qaeda," ABC News, December 23, 2004, <http://abcnews.go.com/WNT/Investigation/story?id=352268&page=1>.

⁹⁴ Krikorian and Reza, "O.C. Man Rises in Al Qaeda 'Azzam the American,' or Adam Gadahn, Has Moved from Translator to Propagandist."

⁹⁵ Thomas H. Kean and Lee Hamilton, *National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States* (Washington, DC: National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, 2004), 175.

⁹⁶ Krikorian and Reza, "O.C. Man Rises in Al Qaeda 'Azzam the American,' or Adam Gadahn, Has Moved from Translator to Propagandist."

⁹⁷ "United States of America v. John Lindh," United States District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia Alexandria Division, updated March 8, 2017, <https://www.justice.gov/archives/ag/statement-facts>.

happened. After the attacks when the United States bombings of Afghanistan began, Lindh fled and was eventually captured and imprisoned by Northern Alliance fighters in the Mazar-e Sharif prison. Lindh survived the infamous Mazar-e Sharif uprising that killed CIA officer Michael Spann. After the uprising was quelled, Lindh was turned over to U.S. forces and brought back to the United States.⁹⁸ Lindh was indicted on a variety of charges,⁹⁹ pled guilty to two of them, and was sentenced to 20 years in prison.¹⁰⁰

Lindh was born in the Washington, DC area. He was the middle of three children, and in 1991, when he was 10 years old, the family moved to Marin County, just north of San Francisco, California. He did not grow up in a very religious household. His mother was Catholic, and for a while, they attended Catholic mass but she would eventually convert to Buddhism.¹⁰¹ His parents divorced after Lindh had left the house in 1999, but according to his father, the marriage had long been over prior to the divorce.¹⁰² His father would frequently spend nights away from home with another man in San Francisco when Lindh was in high school.¹⁰³

Lindh's parents described him as spiritual and studious.¹⁰⁴ He even transferred to an alternative high school that allowed him to pick his own course of study. He began to study world religions, and the movie "Malcolm X" inspired his exploration of Islam. At the age of 16, after studying the religion, with his parents' support, he converted. A friend who he attended prayer services with him at the Islamic Center near his house said

⁹⁸ "John Walker Lindh, Profile, The Case of the Taliban American," CNN, accessed October 28, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/CNN/Programs/people/shows/walker/profile.html>.

⁹⁹ "September 11, 2001: Attack on America, Indictment of John Walker Lindh, February 5, 2002," Yale Law School, Lillian Goldman Law Library, accessed October 28, 2017, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/sept11/lindh_indictment.asp.

¹⁰⁰ Neil A. Lewis, "American Who Joined Taliban Pleads Guilty," *New York Times*, July 15, 2002, <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/07/15/national/american-who-joined-taliban-pleads-guilty.html>.

¹⁰¹ Josh Tyrangiel, "The Taliban Next Door," *Time*, December 9, 2001, <http://content.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,187564-1,00.html>.

¹⁰² "The Life and Times of John Walker Lindh," *Time*, accessed October 28, 2017, http://content.time.com/time/photogallery/0,29307,1962192_2053699,00.html.

¹⁰³ Larry Catá Backer, "Emasculated Men, Effeminate Law in the United States, Zimbabwe and Malaysia," *Yale Journal of Law & Feminism* 17, no. 1 (2005): 1–60, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=618863.

¹⁰⁴ CNN, "John Walker Lindh, Profile, The Case of the Taliban American."

Lindh stood out because he was a devout Muslim who converted on his own without a referral from another Muslim.¹⁰⁵

Lindh had attachments with his parents despite their rocky marriage, and no evidence was found that he lacked social networks among his peers. He sought out Islam on his own, absent interpersonal connections. No evidence suggests he was suffering from extraordinary personal problems, or that he was targeted for recruitment.

The findings of the data in Chapter III are similar to the findings in Chapter II, and demonstrate the analytical challenge of finding the catalysts of radicalization among converts. The most significant findings in Chapter III are the very little support for Hypothesis 4, “Recruitment among converts to Islam reflects a selection bias on the part of the recruiters seeking targets of opportunity among aggrieved individuals with low levels of religious knowledge.” Also, while definitive support for Hypothesis 3, “Personal problems and connections to radical milieus substantially increase the likelihood of religious converts becoming violent extremists” was lacking, it should be noted almost two thirds of the subjects tested were experiencing personal problems prior to their conversion, regardless of their connection to a radical milieu.

Despite no definitive support for a specific hypothesis, the data did reveal five casual factors that tended to be present in the pre-conversion life of the 38 subjects at a more prevalent rate than others:

- Subjects had recently befriended a Muslim
- Subjects had contact with radical Muslims prior or in close proximity to their conversion
- Subjects had a strained or no relationship with at least one of their parents
- Subjects’ background indicated they were loners or recluses
- Subjects had a significant history of criminal activity in their past

¹⁰⁵ Tyrangiel, “The Taliban Next Door.”

Also seven of the case studies (almost 1/5) not supporting any of the four hypotheses is not insignificant. Initial research found no common trait among these seven individuals, other than the fact they were all male and the average conversion age was between 18 and 19 years. Further study into these seven case studies looking for the common traits among their lives pre-conversion may yield interesting results.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study sought to discover the relationship between religious conversion and violent extremism. Past studies demonstrated a disproportionate number of Islamic extremists who were converts to the faith as opposed to those who were born into the faith and radicalized. This study attempted to find a common link in the converts' lives pre-conversion or during the conversion process that caused the disproportionate amount of radicalization.

Ample existing research is available on religious conversion itself. A review of this literature yielded four hypotheses, which were tested against 38 case studies of Islamic converts who were known to have radicalized. The four hypotheses are the following:

- Hypothesis 1: Religious conversion borne out of a lack of secure attachments creates a cognitive opening to adopt new worldviews, including radical ones.
- Hypothesis 2: Religious conversion takes place through interpersonal connections, and conversion to extremism takes place through prior associations with radical individuals during the conversion process.
- Hypothesis 3: Personal problems and connections to radical milieus substantially increase the likelihood of religious converts becoming violent extremists.
- Hypothesis 4: Recruitment among converts to Islam reflects a selection bias on the part of the recruiters seeking targets of opportunity among aggrieved individuals with low levels of religious knowledge.

The least amount of support and evidence was found for Hypotheses 2 and 4. Hypothesis 4 could only be supported in five of the 38 case studies, or approximately 13 percent. Evidence of individuals already of the Islamic faith seeking out targets of opportunity to convert and then radicalize was scarce. While this practice may be

happening, especially in prisons where recruiters have a captive audience of aggrieved individuals, a significant amount of information just does not exist concerning these individuals targeted for conversion who have in turn carried out radical acts. Hypothesis 4 had such little support and more case studies (seven) offered support for none of the tested hypothesis. Part of the reason for this lack of support could be the individuals who have converted and would be willing to partake in radical activities, are confined long term and unable to carry out an attack due to their imprisonment.

Conversions resulting from interpersonal connections were also lower than expected. Only 11 of the 38 subjects converted as a result of interpersonal connections. Further research into this matter should involve the numbers of people self-converting or converting online compared to those happening from interpersonal connections.

Despite the low occurrence of interpersonal conversions, interesting data was discovered. Of the 11 interpersonal conversions, nine had both recently befriended an individual of the Islamic faith leading up to the conversion, and had interactions with members of the Islamic faith who held radical views of the faith, in close proximity to their conversion. Different factions within the religion could easily sway an individual new to a faith, and still learning about the religion, to certain viewpoints.

Hypothesis 1 had moderate support with evidence in half of the case studies. Nineteen of the individuals lacked secure attachments leading up to their decision to convert. Of these 19 subjects, seven came from broken homes and lacked the first basic secure attachments most people develop at an early age. Eleven had strained relationships with one or both of their parents. Also, 11 subjects were described as loners or recluses, who lacked social bonds with members of their peer groups. (In some cases, the subjects had strained relationships with their parents and lacked social bonds among their peers.) Others were looking to build their romantic bonds through conversion or fill the void caused by a recent romantic loss with the conversion.

The third hypothesis had the most support. Seventeen case studies had evidence supporting the full two-part hypothesis. The study also revealed another eight subjects had significant personal problems but lacked the connection to radical milieus prior to

their conversion. This finding demonstrated almost two thirds of the subjects were experiencing significant personal problems leading up to their conversion. Of these problems, 76 percent of the subjects were experiencing the same personal problems Smilde described in his study of Evangelical converts in Venezuela.

Without clear convincing support for any of the four hypotheses, this study found common variables in the subjects' lives pre-conversion occurring at a higher rate than others. Observations and common variables were:

- The average age of the subjects was between 22 and 23
- Subjects had significant personal problems in their life pre-conversion
- Subjects had recently befriended a Muslim
- Subjects had contact with radical Muslims prior or in close proximity to their conversion
- Subjects had a strained or no relationship with at least one of their parents
- Subjects' background indicated they were a loner or recluse
- Subjects' had a significant history of criminal activity in their past
- If the subjects were female, they were converting for romantic or sexual attraction reasons

Thus, religious conversion by itself should not raise red flags, but conversion with other underlying factors indicates a greater risk for radicalization. It appears the underlying factors in individuals' lives are the drivers of radicalization, and the conversion gives the individuals a reason to manifest their radical tendencies. Further research into these underlying factors should be the next step in studying the link between religious conversion and violent extremism.

The underlying factors found in this thesis were compared with findings in other targeted violence studies, such as the FBI's *Making Prevention a Reality*¹⁰⁶ and the Secret Service's "Exceptional Case Study," which is detailed in the publicly available guide *Protective Intelligence & Threat Assessment Investigations*.¹⁰⁷ These studies also researched subjects who had committed acts of targeted violence and found underlying factors in the subjects' lives indicating they were on a downward spiral and a pathway to violence. If these underlying factors are consistent with the underlying factors found in this thesis, it would further demonstrate the radical acts were not a result of the conversion, but that individuals who commit radical acts in the name of a religion are similar to those committing violence without a religious nexus. This finding would indicate religious converts are already radical; they were just a radical without a cause.

¹⁰⁶ Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Making Prevention a Reality: Identifying, Assessing, and Managing the Threat of Targeted Attacks* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, 2017), <https://www.fbi.gov/file-repository/making-prevention-a-reality.pdf>.

¹⁰⁷ Robert A. Fein and Bryan Vossekuil, *Protective Intelligence and Threat Assessment Investigations: A Guide for State and Local Law Enforcement Officials* (Washington, DC: Office of Justice Programs, National Institute of Justice, U.S. Department of Justice, 2000), <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/179981.pdf>.

APPENDIX. CASE STUDIES

A. NASER JASON ABDO (AGE AT CONVERSION: 17)¹⁰⁸

Abdo was AWOL from the U.S. Army when he was arrested in July 2011 in a Killeen, TX hotel room. He was charged and convicted of plotting to attack the Ft. Hood military base. A search of his hotel room revealed a pressure cooker and other Islamic extremist literature, including *Inspire* magazine.¹⁰⁹ The copy of *Inspire* Abdo had in his possession is the same issue that detailed the steps to building a pressure cooker IED.¹¹⁰ Abdo, a Muslim convert, planned to bomb a restaurant near Fort Hood popular with soldiers, and then shoot the survivors as they fled the building.¹¹¹

Abdo had filed for conscientious objector status after he found he was being deployed to Afghanistan in 2010. The Army had decided to accept his claim and discharge Abdo, but the discharge was delayed after child pornography was found on his government-issued computer. Abdo subsequently went AWOL when he began planning his attack on the soldiers.¹¹² Abdo's motivation for the attack was to defend Muslims worldwide from what he perceived as wrongdoing by the United States.¹¹³ Abdo was convicted and sentenced to life in prison.¹¹⁴

Abdo converted to Islam at the age of 17.¹¹⁵ His conversion and devotion however was self-proclaimed. No evidence found that Abdo visited a mosque or had ties

¹⁰⁸ Counter Extremism Project, "Extremist Converts."

¹⁰⁹ United States District Court Western District of Texas, *United States of America v. Naser Jason Abdo*.

¹¹⁰ Ryan and Ferran, "Naser Jason Abdo, Ft. Hood Plotter, Gets Life in Prison."

¹¹¹ Mueller, "Case 45: Abdo," 647; Spaetzel, "Case 45: Abdo," 653.

¹¹² Mueller, "Case 45: Abdo," 647.

¹¹³ Sarah Netter, "Devout Muslim Soldier Hopes to Avoid Deployment to Afghanistan," August 31, 2010, ABC News, <http://abcnews.go.com/US/muslim-soldier-hoping-avoid-deployment-faith-conflicts-service/story?id=11514381>.

¹¹⁴ Counter Extremism Project, *Extremist Converts* (New York, Brussels, London: Counter Extremism Project, 2017).

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

to a devout Muslim community.¹¹⁶ Abdo was born in Garland, Texas and his parents divorced when he was three years old. Abdo's mother was a U.S. citizen and a Christian, while his father had emigrated from Jordan and was a Muslim. However, it appears Abdo was raised non-religious.¹¹⁷ Neighbors who knew Abdo in his adolescence described the house as "broken and abusive." They recalled he was making the best of a bad situation and remembered him as reclusive. A friend of his sister's said Abdo "didn't fit in" but his sister was very popular.¹¹⁸ After his parents' divorce, Abdo and his sister lived with their father because his mother was seeking help with drug addiction. However, in 2004, his father was arrested for soliciting sex from a minor over the internet.¹¹⁹ He served five years in prison before being deported to Jordan.¹²⁰ Two years after his conversion, Abdo joined the military. Reporting indicates this enlistment was precipitated by lack of job prospects rather than a sense of duty to his country.¹²¹

B. CARLOS ALMONTE (AGE AT CONVERSION: 19 OR 20)¹²²

Carlos Almonte, an Islamic convert, was arrested at Kennedy Airport as he and another associate, Mohamed Alesa, were attempting to fly to Egypt, where they would then proceed to Somalia to join and fight with al-Shabab. Their intentions were given away, as they had discussed their plans with an undercover police officer. The two planned for their trip by saving thousands of dollars, purchased equipment, and physically conditioning themselves.¹²³

¹¹⁶ Spaetzel, "Case 45: Abdo," 657.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 649, 657

¹¹⁸ Daut, "Terror Suspect Grew Up in Broken North Texas Home."

¹¹⁹ Fernandez and Dao, "Soldier Arrested in Suspected Bomb Plot Had Series of Disputes with Army."

¹²⁰ Spaetzel, "Case 45: Abdo," 649.

¹²¹ Ibid., 650.

¹²² Counter Extremism Project, "Extremist Converts."

¹²³ United States Attorney's Office District of New Jersey, "Two New Jersey Men Sentenced to Decades in Prison for Conspiring to Kill Overseas with Designated Foreign Terrorist Organization Al Shabaab."

Almonte moved to the United States as a child from the Dominican Republic and was a naturalized U.S. citizen. He was described as an “aimless youth” and seemed to spiral downhill when he was 18 years old. During his senior year of high school, he was arrested three times for bringing a knife to school, assault, and drinking beer in a park. After these episodes, he turned to Islam against his family’s wishes and he would eventually alienate them. At the time of his conversion, Almonte also met Alesa, a troubled Muslim youth who was medicated for anger issues, attempted to join a street gang, and had numerous run-ins with the police.¹²⁴

C. CRAIG BAXAM (AGE AT CONVERSION: 23 OR 24)¹²⁵

The Kenyan Anti-Terrorism Police Unit arrested Craig Baxam in Kenya as he was transiting through the country from the United States to Somalia where he intended to join al-Shabab. Baxam was a former U.S. Army intelligence officer who admitted to the FBI after his arrest that he had bought a round trip ticket to Kenya in an effort not to arouse suspicion, and threw his computer equipment away when he left the United States to avoid it being searched by authorities. Baxam was extradited back to the United States and was sentenced to a 7-year prison term.¹²⁶

Baxam’s mother described him as very spiritual. She stated on a trip to the beach that as a teenager he stayed in the car and read the bible the whole time.¹²⁷ Baxam was raised Catholic, and lived with his father for the majority of his childhood after his parents divorced when he was eight years old. Details on what led to Baxam’s conversion are unclear. He failed out of two colleges before joining the Army. His mother claims

¹²⁴ Fahim, Pérez-Peña and Zraick, “From Wayward Teenagers to Terror Suspects.”

¹²⁵ Counter Extremism Project, “Extremist Converts.”

¹²⁶ United States Attorney’s Office District of Maryland, “Former U.S. Soldier Who Sought to Join Terrorist Group Convicted and Sentenced to 7 Years in Prison,” January 13, 2014, <https://www.justice.gov/usao-md/pr/former-us-soldier-who-sought-join-terrorist-group-convicted-and-sentenced-7-years-prison>.

¹²⁷ Ian Duncan, “7 Years Prison for Ex-Soldier Accused of Trying to Join Terror Group,” *Baltimore Sun*, January 13, 2014, http://articles.baltimoresun.com/2014-01-13/news/bs-md-baxam-terror-hearing-20140113_1_craig-benedict-baxam-terror-cases-linda-moreno.

Baxam never smoked or drank prior to the Army, but when he returned from a tour in Iraq, he began drinking heavily and using marijuana.¹²⁸

Baxam's second deployment was to South Korea. While in South Korea, Baxam began researching other religions. His mother said they would exchange emails discussing different religions, and when he returned from this deployment (also then discharged from the Army) Baxam came off the plane wearing Muslim garb, and told his mother he had converted. According to an FBI affidavit, Baxam's conversion was quick and happened about 10 days before he left South Korea.¹²⁹ Further, it does not appear as anyone was influential in his conversion, and that he embraced Islam after reading Islamic websites.¹³⁰

D. CARLOS BLEDSOE (AGE AT CONVERSION: APPROXIMATELY 18)¹³¹

Carlos Bledsoe (a.k.a. Abdulhakim Muhammad) attacked two soldiers at a recruiting center in Little Rock, Arkansas. The attack killed one soldier and wounded the second. Bledsoe stated he attacked the soldiers because "what they had done to Muslims in the past."¹³² Before the attack, Bledsoe spent time in Yemen where he was probably radicalized. He traveled to Yemen and taught English, but was imprisoned because he overstayed his visa and had a fraudulent Somali passport. When he returned to the United States, he was interviewed by the FBI about his time in Yemen, but it appears that no further action was taken.¹³³

¹²⁸ Ed Pilkington, "From the U.S. Army to al-Shabaab: The Man Who Wanted to Live under Sharia Law," *Guardian*, October 24, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/24/craig-baxam-al-shab-aab-sharia-law-fbi-army>.

¹²⁹ United States District Court, District of Maryland Southern Division, *United States of America v. Craig Benedict Bazam* (Washington, DC: Investigative Project on Terrorism, 2012), http://www.investigativeproject.org/documents/case_docs/1874.pdf.

¹³⁰ Pilkington, "From the U.S. Army to al-Shabaab: The Man Who Wanted to Live under Sharia Law."

¹³¹ James Dao, "A Muslim Son, A Murder Trial and Many Questions," *New York Times*, February 17, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/17/us/17convert.html>.

¹³² CNN Wire Staff, "Man Pleads Guilty to Recruiting Center Killing, Gets Life," CNN, July 25, 2011, <http://www.cnn.com/2011/CRIME/07/25/arkansas.recruiter.shooting/>.

¹³³ James Dao, "Man Claims Terror in Little Rock Shooting," *New York Times*, January 22, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/22/us/22littlerock.html?hp>.

Bledsoe grew up Baptist and converted to Islam in college. It appears as though he lived a good childhood, and went to college to study business with the goal of one day taking over his father's tour bus company. During his freshman year, he was arrested for carrying a weapon, a charge that was later expunged. According to his family, this incident caused him to explore various religions. He attended a speech by Luis Farrakhan, which piqued his interest in Islam, and ultimately, against his family's wishes, he converted to a Sunni Muslim.¹³⁴

E. JOHN T. BOOKER (AGE AT CONVERSION: APPROXIMATELY 17)¹³⁵

The FBI began investigating John T. Booker in 2014 when he posted on social media "Getting ready to be killed in jihad is a HUGE adrenaline rush!! I am so nervous. NOT because I'm scared to die but I am eager to meet my lord."¹³⁶ Booker had recently enlisted in the U.S. Army, but had yet to leave for basic training, and was interviewed by the FBI. During the interview, he admitted his motivation for joining the Army was to conduct an insider attack against U.S. soldiers. He was subsequently denied entry into the Army. Later that year, Booker began communicating with an FBI informant and planning an attack, in the name of ISIL, against Fort Riley in Kansas. He was arrested in a sting operation when he made the final connections on an inert vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) he believed would arm the device.¹³⁷

Booker was active in his high school's Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps (JROTC) program and described as a "straight-laced cadet." He was raised in a Christian household and converted to Islam while in high school. It is believed to have been a self-sought conversion through the internet. His father was unaware of this conversion, but

¹³⁴ Dao, "A Muslim Son, A Murder Trial and Many Questions."

¹³⁵ John Mueller, "Case 64: Fort Riley," in *Terrorism since 9/11, The American Cases*, ed. John Mueller (Columbus, OH: Mershon Center, Ohio State University, 2016); Alex Rhodes, "Case 64: Fort Riley," in *Terrorism since 9/11, The American Cases*, ed. John Mueller (Columbus, OH: Mershon Center, Ohio State University, 2016).

¹³⁶ Lindsay Dunsmuir and Kevin Murphy, "John T. Booker, Jr., Kansas Man, Arrested in Plot to Suicide Bomb Fort Riley for ISIS," HuffPost, updated June 10, 2015, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/04/10/us-man-arrested-bomb-fort-riley_n_7041960.html.

¹³⁷ "Kansas Man Pleads Guilty in Plot to Explode Car Bomb at Fort Riley in Manhattan, Kansas," United States Department of Justice, February 3, 2016, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/kansas-man-pleads-guilty-plot-explode-car-bomb-fort-riley-manhattan-kansas>.

students at his school had grown concerned as his Islamic beliefs became radical. After his conversion, he began visiting an Islamic center, and the local Imam tried to dissuade Booker's radical beliefs by teaching "the straight, wholesome Koran, and how Islam condemns any kind of terrorist activity." The Imam also learned Booker was diagnosed with a bi-polar disorder, and was non-compliant with his medications. It is unclear if this diagnosis happened before or after his conversion, but the Imam attempted unsuccessfully to get Booker back in compliance with his medications before Booker's arrest.¹³⁸ No other details were available on why or how Booker converted and was radicalized.

F. ARIEL BRADLEY (AGE AT CONVERSION: 25)¹³⁹

Ariel Bradley is an American citizen who converted to Islam and is now living in Syria supporting her husband as he fights for ISIL. Bradley grew up outside Chattanooga, Tennessee in a strict Pentecostal Christian homeschool house. Bradley's mother oversaw the homeschooling and reportedly did a substandard job, as she did not even begin to learn how to read until her preteen years. By the time she was a teenager, she was constantly fighting with her mother, and she eventually moved out of her parents' house when she was about 15 or 16 years old.¹⁴⁰

When Bradley left, she would bounce around between houses of friends and romantic partners. She had several different low wage jobs, and was unable to obtain more lucrative employment because she lacked a General Equivalency Diploma (GED) and did not have the funds to take the test. Her interests varied depending on whom she was romantically linked with at the time. Her friend described:

It was like, when I first met her she was a Christian, and then she was a socialist, and then she was an atheist, and then a Muslim. As far as I could tell it was always in relation to whatever guy she was interested in, so if she meets a guy that's an atheist then she's an atheist, falls into that for a year. Then the guy leaves and she meets somebody new, and it starts all

¹³⁸ Rhodes, "Case 64: Fort Riley."

¹³⁹ Counter Extremism Project, "Extremist Converts."

¹⁴⁰ Hall, "How One Young Woman Went from Fundamentalist Christian to ISIS Bride."

over again...It seemed like whatever guy she was with, she would just crawl into his skin and kind of become him.¹⁴¹

Bradley would eventually begin working at a pizza restaurant owned by a Palestinian, which began to spark her interest in Islam. She then developed a romantic interest with a frequent customer from Syria who was a Muslim. He befriended her and taught her about Islam but rebuffed her romantic advances. After this rebuke, she began to study Islam more intensely, via the internet and trips to the local mosque, and ultimately converted a few months later in a ceremony at the pizza store. After her conversion, she began to look for a husband, and ultimately struck up an online relationship with a man in Sweden. She would eventually fly to Sweden and marry him.¹⁴²

After her marriage, she became very reclusive with her previous friends, even those in Tennessee who were Muslim. She ended up moving to Syria and would post her new life on various social media platforms about everything from being an ISIL wife, to innocuous posts about her kids.¹⁴³ She also praised the 2015 Chattanooga military installation terror attack on Twitter.¹⁴⁴

G. BARRY BUJOL JR. (AGE AT CONVERSION: BETWEEN 21 AND 29)¹⁴⁵

Barry Bujol Jr. was arrested in 2010 for attempting to travel and fight for al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Bujol Jr. drew the attention of the FBI in 2008 when he exchanged emails with Anwar al-Awlaki, the cleric who at the time led AQAP. Al-Awlaki provided Bujol with guidance on how to provide funds to AQAP. Bujol Jr. had attempted to leave the country on a couple of occasions. The first time he was arrested at the airport on a traffic warrant while attempting to fly to Yemen. The second time he was denied entry into Canada by Canadian authorities. He would later admit his

¹⁴¹ Hall, "How One Young Woman Went from Fundamentalist Christian to ISIS Bride."

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ "Ariel Bradley of Hixson Endorses Chattanooga Terrorist Acts," YouTube video, 1:59, posted by WDEF News 12, July 21, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=83lGM4BHh4E>.

¹⁴⁵ Counter Extremism Project, "Extremist Converts."

attempt to go to Canada was to then fly to Egypt. Bujol was arrested the third time in a sting operation when he boarded a boat he believed was bound for the Middle East to meet AQAP operatives.¹⁴⁶

Bujol was raised in a strict Southern Baptist family, he regularly attended Sunday school as a child, and his mother forced him to memorize Psalms.¹⁴⁷ Bujol attended college at Prarie View A&M.¹⁴⁸ As Bujol got older, he began to question his faith, and stopped attending services “out of a sense of searching as opposed to me having lost all belief.”¹⁴⁹

Bujol met a Muslim man while working at Hewlett-Packard, and admired his devotion to the faith. Bujol spoke with him more in depth and learned the basic theories of Islam. This conversation sparked the desire to convert to Islam.

H. ALEXANDER CICCOLO (AGE AT CONVERSION: BETWEEN 21 AND 23)

Alexander Ciccolo was arrested on weapons charges and was reportedly planning to attack students in a university and live stream the executions. Authorities were tipped off that Ciccolo, a Muslim convert, could have been radicalized by his father, who is also a Boston police officer.¹⁵⁰ A search warrant on Ciccolo’s residence revealed he had pressure cookers to manufacture into IEDs. After his arrest, his father released a statement on behalf of his family saying, “While we were saddened and disappointed to

¹⁴⁶ Jason Ryan, “Texas Terror Sting: Feds Say Suspect Was in Contact with Anwar al-Awlaki,” ABC News, June 3, 2010, <http://abcnews.go.com/US/texas-terror-sting-feds-barry-walter-bujol-contact/story?id=10821525>.

¹⁴⁷ Murtaza Hussain, “Texas Man Talks about Going from HP to an Al Qaeda Sting: Prison Dispatches from the War on Terror,” The Intercept, October 13, 2015, <https://theintercept.com/2015/10/13/barry-bujols-story/>.

¹⁴⁸ Ryan, “Texas Terror Sting: Feds Say Suspect Was in Contact with Anwar al-Awlaki.”

¹⁴⁹ Hussain, “Texas Man Talks about Going from HP to an Al Qaeda Sting: Prison Dispatches from the War on Terror.”

¹⁵⁰ Pete Williams and Tracy Connor, “Alexander Ciccolo, Boston Cop’s Son, Busted for Alleged Terror Plot,” NBC News, July 14, 2015, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/boston-cops-son-alexander-ciccolo-busted-alleged-terror-plot-n391246>.

learn of our son's intentions, we are grateful that authorities were able to prevent any loss of life or harm to others."¹⁵¹

Ciccolo had a very troubled childhood. His parents had a contentious divorce when he was five years old and his mother had full custody.¹⁵² As child, Ciccolo attacked other people including students and teachers with drumsticks.¹⁵³ He also attacked others with a knife.¹⁵⁴ It was clear to several people Ciccolo was suffering from a mental illness but his mother refused to have him treated, and threatened his father with legal action if he had Ciccolo treated. Ciccolo's father was eventually given custody, and sought psychiatric help for his son. On a visit however with his mother, after the knife incident, she bought Ciccolo a BB gun, which led to more custody fights.¹⁵⁵ Neighbors stated he had recently converted to Islam (no further details on how this conversion happened) before he was arrested and had become obsessed with the religion.¹⁵⁶ It appears Ciccolo's relationship with his father was not good and the fact his father alerted authorities about his possible radicalism probably chilled it further. In court after his arrest, Ciccolo turned to his mother and said "I love you mom. Thank you for supporting me."¹⁵⁷

I. SHANNON CONLEY (AGE AT CONVERSION: APPROXIMATELY 18)

Shannon Conley was a 19-year old Muslim convert from Colorado who was arrested when she attempted to board a plane to fly overseas and make her way to Syria to join ISIL. In preparation for her trip, she joined the U.S. Army Explorers to learn military tactics, obtained first aid and nursing certifications, and a National Rifle Association certification. A search of her home subsequent to her arrest revealed

¹⁵¹ Michele McPhee, "Boston Cop's Son, an Alleged ISIS Plotter, Pleads Not Guilty," ABC News, July 29, 2015, <http://abcnews.go.com/US/boston-cops-son-alleged-isis-plotter-pleads-guilty/story?id=32759150>.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Counter Extremism Project, "Extremist Converts."

¹⁵⁴ McPhee, "Boston Cop's Son, an Alleged ISIS Plotter, Pleads Not Guilty."

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Counter Extremism Project, "Extremist Converts."

¹⁵⁷ McPhee, "Boston Cop's Son, an Alleged ISIS Plotter, Pleads Not Guilty."

literature on radical Islamic groups, and DVDs containing lectures from Anwar al-Awlaki. Her intent to travel was discovered by her father who notified the authorities.¹⁵⁸

Research indicates Conley was likely suffering from an untreated mental illness. Conley came to the attention of law enforcement a few years prior when she was seen walking around the campus of a church, which had previously been the site of a shooting, taking notes about the layout of the church. Employees were alarmed and called authorities leading the Joint Terrorism Task Force (JTTF) to interview her. She was angered during the interview and stated, “If they think I’m a terrorist, I’ll give them something to think I am.”¹⁵⁹

Conley was raised Catholic and her high school principal said she was “among the brightest kids” at Arvada West High School. The FBI attempted to intervene and work with Conley’s parents to get her help.¹⁶⁰ During these conversations, Conley admitted she had converted to Islam after on-line research into the religion, ISIL, and speaking with ISIL recruiters. During the on-line conversion process, she was also introduced to a 32-year old man, Youssr Mouelhi, and developed a romantic relationship. During their cyber courtship, the two recognized they felt bound to carry out a violent jihad against non-believers. She told her father about the relationship and Conley arranged a Skype conversation so the two could meet. During this conversation, Mouelhi asked for his blessing to marry Conley and stated the plan was for her to move to Syria so they could dedicate their lives to ISIL. Conley’s dad forbade the marriage.¹⁶¹

J. CHRISTOPHER CORNELL (AGE AT CONVERSION: 19 OR 20)¹⁶²

Christopher Cornell was arrested in a sting operation for planning to plant IEDs at the U.S. Capitol and then use a firearm to shoot people fleeing the scene. He planned this

¹⁵⁸ United States Department of Justice, “Arvada Woman Pleads Guilty to Conspiracy to Provide Material Support to a Designated Foreign Terrorist Organization.”

¹⁵⁹ Monroe, “Brand Caliphate and Recruitment between the Genders.”

¹⁶⁰ Jenny Deam, “Colorado Woman’s Quest for Jihad Baffles Neighbors,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 25, 2014, <http://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-high-school-jihadi-20140726-story.html>.

¹⁶¹ Monroe, “Brand Caliphate and Recruitment between the Genders.”

¹⁶² Counter Extremism Project, “Extremist Converts.”

operation with a FBI informant. He was arrested after he purchased a gun to conduct the attack. He attracted the attention of the FBI when he posted supportive ISIL messages on social media platforms.¹⁶³

Few details about his life before the conversion or about the conversion process are publicly available. His father claimed he noticed he had converted when he saw him praying about two months prior to the attack. He was described as someone who stayed at home and played video games and his best friend was his cat.¹⁶⁴ Even after his conversion, people did not know or recognize him at the mosque he supposedly attended.¹⁶⁵ His father said he had posed concerns in the past about the treatment of Muslims, and he also believed the conversion had brought Cornell some peace.¹⁶⁶

K. JAMES CROMITIE (AGE AT CONVERSION: BETWEEN 20 AND 29)¹⁶⁷

James Cromitie, a U.S. citizen and a Muslim convert, was arrested in 2009 with three other individuals for plotting to detonate IEDs near Jewish synagogues in New York City, and shoot a surface to air missile at Air National Guard targets. In a conversation with an undercover officer, Cromitie stated, “The worst brother in the whole Islamic world is better than 10 billion Yahudi (Jews),” Cromitie stated. “With no hesitation, I will kill 10 Yahudis.”¹⁶⁸

Cromitie was born and raised in Manhattan and was one of the middle children in a family of 10 kids. Cromitie’s father left when he was approximately three years old and

¹⁶³ Lindsey Bever, “Christopher Lee Cornell: The Man Who Allegedly Plotted to Attack U.S. Capitol ‘Fulfilling the Directives of Violent Jihadists’,” *Washington Post*, January 15, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2015/01/15/christopher-lee-cornell-the-man-who-allegedly-plotted-to-attack-u-s-capitol-fulfilling-the-directives-of-violent-jihadists/?utm_term=.bfef68be00fb.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Dan Horn, “Terror Suspect a Stranger at Mosque He Claimed as Own,” *cincinnati.com*, January 15, 2015, <http://www.cincinnati.com/story/news/crime/2015/01/15/terror-suspect-stranger-mosque-claimed/21818021/>.

¹⁶⁶ Bever, “Christopher Lee Cornell: The Man Who Allegedly Plotted to Attack U.S. Capitol ‘Fulfilling the Directives of Violent Jihadists’.”

¹⁶⁷ Counter Extremism Project, “Extremist Converts.”

¹⁶⁸ ADL, “‘93 Landmark Plot Foreshowed Domestic Terror Threat,” ADL (blog), June 25, 2013, <https://www.adl.org/blog/93-landmark-plot-foreshowed-domestic-terror-threat>.

did not play a role in his life.¹⁶⁹ Prior to this incident, Cromitie had an extensive criminal history dating back to his first arrest when he was 14 or 15 years old.¹⁷⁰ His criminal record consisted of at least 27 arrests with a dozen being drug related, and had spent approximately 12 years incarcerated in prison during his life. He was born into a Christian faith but did not regularly attend, and appears to have converted while in prison. During his first stints in prison, he had listed his religion as “Baptist,” but subsequent incarcerations show his listed religion as “Muslim.”¹⁷¹ Other conspirators arrested in this plot were also Islamic prison converts.¹⁷² The Imam at the mosque near Cromitie’s residence said, “Cromitie would attend every few months then disappear as quickly as he came.”¹⁷³ At the time of his arrest, it appeared as though he had not been in touch with his family. His mother and a sister were interviewed and stated it had been two to three years since they had contact with Cromitie. His mother said he took her to where he was living and introduced her to a girl he was dating and said he had converted to Islam. His sister stated the last time he had talked to him he was working at a “Wal-Mart or Kmart store.”¹⁷⁴

Cromitie also had a history of lying, especially to bolster his image among others from whom he was seeking acceptance. He told the informant working with law enforcement that his father was from Afghanistan and that his name was Abdul Rahman.¹⁷⁵ He falsely bragged about bombing a New York police department precinct and stealing guns from a store he worked at, although the store did not sell guns.¹⁷⁶

¹⁶⁹ Al Baker, “Suspects in Terror Bombing Plot: Drug Arrests and Prison Conversions,” *New York Times*, May 21, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/22/nyregion/22suspects.html>.

¹⁷⁰ David Bernstein, “Case 25: Bronx Synagogues,” in *Terrorism since 9/11, The American Cases*, ed. John Mueller (Columbus, OH: Mershon Center, Ohio State University, 2011), 392.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷² Eric Gorski and Rachel Zoll, “Plot Renews Fears of Radical Islam in Prison,” *San Diego Union-Tribune*, May 22, 2009, <http://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/sdut-us-rel-prison-islam-052209-2009may22-story.html>.

¹⁷³ Bernstein, “Case 25: Bronx Synagogues,” 393.

¹⁷⁴ Baker, “Suspects in Terror Bombing Plot: Drug Arrests and Prison Conversions.”

¹⁷⁵ Kareem Fahim, “Informer Says Defendant Wanted to Be a Martyr,” *New York Times*, August 27, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/28/nyregion/28plot.html>.

¹⁷⁶ Bernstein, “Case 25: Bronx Synagogues,” 393.

L. ADAM DANDACH (AGE AT CONVERSION: UNKNOWN)¹⁷⁷

Adam Dandach is a Muslim convert from California. He was arrested when he was attempting to board a flight to Turkey where he planned to then cross the border into Syria to fight for ISIL. His mother was aware of his conversion and desire to travel so she took his passport from him. However, he obtained a new passport when he filled an application out asking for a new one, since he had lost his original.¹⁷⁸ Dandach admitted to FBI agents his intent was to pledge his allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, live under ISIL control, and take weapons training.¹⁷⁹

Details on Dandach's conversion are unclear. Authorities found electronic evidence indicating he radicalized on-line, but nothing on how, when, or why he converted. What is evident is Dandach had a troubled childhood. Dandach was homeschooled and lacked social connections.¹⁸⁰ Dandach was treated for a variety of psychiatric disorders; including depression, anxiety, and Asperger's. He also reportedly suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder from years of physical, sexual, and mental abuse from his father.¹⁸¹ Dandach's father was eventually deported. His attorney argued at Dandach's sentencing for leniency because he never had a role model in his life, and turned to the internet for guidance, which is where he became radicalized.¹⁸²

¹⁷⁷ Counter Extremism Project, "Extremist Converts."

¹⁷⁸ CBS/AP, "California Man, 22, Given 15 Years Prison for Trying to Join ISIS," CBS News, July 25, 2016, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/california-adam-dandach-15-years-prison-trying-to-join-isis/>.

¹⁷⁹ Office of Public Affairs, *California Resident Pleads Guilty to Providing Material Support to ISIL and Making False Statements* (Washington, DC: Department of Justice, 2015), https://www.investigativeproject.org/documents/case_docs/2805.pdf.

¹⁸⁰ "United States of America, Plaintiff, vs. Adam Dandach, Defendant," United States District Court, Central District of California Santa Ana Division, 2016, <https://www.unitedstatescourts.org/federal/cacd/594553/131-0.html>.

¹⁸¹ Sean Emery, "O.C. Man Sentenced to 15 Years after He Admitted to Trying to Join ISIS," The Orange County Register, July 25, 2016, <http://www.ocregister.com/2016/07/25/oc-man-sentenced-to-15-years-after-he-admitted-to-trying-to-join-isis/>.

¹⁸² United States District Court, Central District of California Santa Ana Division, "United States of America, Plaintiff, vs. Adam Dandach, Defendant," 5.

M. JOSEPH DAVIS (AGE AT CONVERSION: 25)¹⁸³

Joseph Davis (a.k.a. Abu Khalid Abdul-Latif) is a U.S. citizen and Muslim convert who plotted to attack a military center in a Seattle, Washington federal building because they believed the soldiers would eventually be fighting Muslims overseas.¹⁸⁴ The plot was foiled because another individual with knowledge of the plot went to the police and became an informant.¹⁸⁵ Evidence suggests the original idea to attack the military center was Davis' idea.¹⁸⁶

Davis' mother gave up her parental rights when he was 12 years old and would spend the rest of his adolescence as a ward of the state in California group homes.¹⁸⁷ Davis' father was also absent and served time in prison.¹⁸⁸ Davis would eventually begin battling psychiatric disorders and was hospitalized for treatment. While receiving court ordered care in a psychiatric hospital another patient gave him a copy of the Quran and he subsequently converted to Islam during a three-year prison term for a robbery conviction, in which the issue of his sanity was raised.¹⁸⁹ After his release from prison, Davis married and had a child. He also opened a janitorial business. This business was unsuccessful and he filed bankruptcy about a month prior to his arrest for this plot.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸³ Counter Extremism Project, "Extremist Converts."

¹⁸⁴ "30 Terrorist Attacks and Plots by Homegrown Jihadists," Southern Poverty Law Center, accessed October 3, 2016, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2015/30-terrorist-attacks-and-plots-homegrown-jihadists>.

¹⁸⁵ United States District Court Western District of Washington at Seattle, *United States of America, Plaintiff, v. Abu Khalid Abdul-Latif, Defendant* (Washington, DC: Investigative Project on Terrorism, 2013), https://www.investigativeproject.org/documents/case_docs/2134.pdf.

¹⁸⁶ "To Catch the Devil," FP Group, May 12, 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/05/12/to-catch-the-devil-fbi-informant-program/>.

¹⁸⁷ Levi Pulkine, "18-year Sentence in 'a Classic Crime of Terrorism' Would be Seattle Gunman Faces Prison in Attack Plot," Seattle PI, updated March 25, 2013, <http://www.seattlepi.com/local/article/A-classic-crime-of-terrorism-4377692.php>.

¹⁸⁸ Gene Johnson, "Accused Seattle Attackers Wanted Media Attention," *San Diego Union-Tribune*, June 24, 2011, <http://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/sdut-accused-seattle-attackers-wanted-media-attention-2011jun24-story.html>.

¹⁸⁹ Pulkine, "18-year Sentence in 'a Classic Crime of Terrorism' Would be Seattle Gunman Faces Prison in Attack Plot."

¹⁹⁰ Johnson, "Accused Seattle Attackers Wanted Media Attention."

N. RUSSELL DEFREITAS (AGE AT CONVERSION: UNKNOWN)

In June 2007, Defreitas, a U.S. Citizen who lived in Brooklyn, NY, was arrested for plotting to blow up aviation fuel tanks at New York's JFK Airport.¹⁹¹ Other foreign nationals, with known extremist Islamic ties from Caribbean nations, were also arrested as part of this plot.¹⁹²

Information on Defreitas is sparse. He is a naturalized U.S. citizen who was a cargo worker at JFK airport.¹⁹³ At one time, Defreitas was a Rastafarian but would later embrace Islam.¹⁹⁴ Further details on how and why he converted are unclear. It appears he had close connections as he frequently returned to Guyana, his country of origin, for holidays.¹⁹⁵ He was described as occasionally homeless, and unable to support himself without welfare, and would occasionally sell incense for additional income. Despite these claims, he admitted to being the ringleader of the plot.¹⁹⁶

O. FREDERICK DOMINGUE, JR. (AGE AT CONVERSION: UNKNOWN)

Domingue (a.k.a. Walli Mujahidh) was Joseph Davis' co-conspirator in the plot to attack a Seattle military recruiting center.¹⁹⁷ Domingue, like Davis, also suffered from a mental illness and had been previously diagnosed with a bi-polar disorder.¹⁹⁸ Domingue

¹⁹¹ Chris Michaud, "Four Charged in Plot to Blow up JFK Airport," Reuters, March 2, 2007, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-plot-airport-idUSN0238499820070602>.

¹⁹² Zuckerman, Bucci, and Carafano, "60 Terrorist Plots since 9/11: Continued Lessons in Domestic Counterterrorism."

¹⁹³ Jerome P. Bjelopera, *American Jihadist Terrorism: Combating a Complex Threat* (Collingdale, PA: Diane Publishing, 2010), 96, https://books.google.com/books?id=j5UyYRYWFusC&pg=PA96&lpg=PA96&dq=russell+defreitas+homeless&source=bl&ots=Ih1oh0Zliv&sig=WsIP7eTQ9YxEatdmm0SicbVvDSA&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwic_sr-iuzWAhXoj1QKHad3CSAQ6AEIWTAK#v=onepage&q=russell%20defreitas%20homeless&f=false.

¹⁹⁴ Bryan Straub, "Case 23: JFK Airport," in *Terrorism since 9/11, The American Cases*, ed. John Mueller (Columbus, OH: Mershon Center, Ohio State University, 2011).

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Bjelopera, *American Jihadist Terrorism: Combating a Complex Threat*, 96.

¹⁹⁷ Southern Poverty Law Center, "30 Terrorist Attacks and Plots by Homegrown Jihadists."

¹⁹⁸ Matt Pearce, "California Man Gets 17-year Prison Term in Seattle Terrorist Plot," *Los Angeles Times*, April 8, 2013, <http://articles.latimes.com/2013/apr/08/nation/la-na-nn-seattle-terror-sentencing-20130408>.

was recruited by Davis to join the plot.¹⁹⁹ He took a bus from Los Angeles to Seattle after discussing it on the phone.²⁰⁰ The actual age of Domingue's conversion is unclear but claims he became radicalized after watching the movie/documentary "Fahrenheit 9/11" in 2007.²⁰¹ At the time of his arrest in 2011, Domingue had been separated from his wife since 2007, and prior to his separation, had not yet converted. His estranged wife stated she was still in the process of divorcing him, and court records indicated a past history of domestic violence during the marriage.²⁰²

P. HASAN EDMONDS (AGE AT CONVERSION: 12 OR 13)²⁰³

Hasan Edmonds was in the Illinois National Guard when he was arrested for planning an attack on a National Guard base with his cousin Jonas Edmonds, and for attempting to travel to the Middle East to train and fight with ISIL members. Hasan Edmonds began communicating online with an undercover FBI agent he believed was an overseas ISIL member. Edmonds told him he was in the U.S. National Guard but joined when he was a "non-believer" and had no interest in fulfilling his commitment. (In this case, "non-believer" likely meant he had yet to be radicalized, as detailed later. Edmonds had already converted to Islam prior to joining the National Guard.) Edmonds planned to travel with other (unspecified) family members to an ISIL controlled area where the women would be safe, and he would then begin to fight for ISIL. He was told he would be assigned to Derna, Libya where his previous military experience could be utilized in training other ISIL fighters.²⁰⁴ Hasan was arrested at Midway Airport as he was boarding his flight, and Jonas was arrested a short time later at his residence.

¹⁹⁹ FP Group, "To Catch the Devil."

²⁰⁰ Pearce, "California Man Gets 17-year Prison Term in Seattle Terrorist Plot."

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Susan Kelleher and Steve Miletich, "Suspect's Troubled Past: Rap Sheet, Hallucinations," *Seattle Times*, updated June 24, 2011, <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/suspects-troubled-past-rap-sheet-hallucinations/>.

²⁰³ Patrick M. O'Connell, "Charges against Aurora Cousins in Terror Plot Tearing up Family, Aunt Says," *Chicago Tribune*, March 30, 2015, <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/breaking/ct-terrorism-dentention-hearing-met-20150330-story.html>.

²⁰⁴ Lorraine Swanson, "Federal Complaint Offers Inside Look at Accused Terrorist Cousins," Patch Media, March 27, 2015, <https://patch.com/illinois/joliet/federal-complaint-offers-inside-look-accused-terrorist-cousins-0>.

Hasan Edmonds and his cousin then met with an FBI informant to make concrete plans. Hasan gave detailed information, including training schedules and base layout, to his cousin and the informant. Their concocted plan involved Jonas Edmonds using Hasan's uniform as a disguise to attack the Joliet, Illinois National Guard Base with rifles and grenades, after Hasan had traveled to the Middle East. Hasan purchased a plane ticket to Cairo as he believed it would be easier to get to ISIL controlled territory through Egypt rather than Turkey.²⁰⁵

In depth details on Hasan Edmonds life are lacking. Edmonds aunt gave media interviews after his arrest and she stated he had converted to Islam about 10 years prior (making him about 12 or 13 at the time.) She stated he joined the National Guard to serve his country, and she was surprised by the arrests. Edmonds reportedly had no prior criminal record, excelled in track at high school and graduated in 2011.²⁰⁶

Q. JAMES ELSHAFAY (AGE AT CONVERSION: 17)²⁰⁷

James Elshafay, a U.S. citizen and Muslim convert, along with a Pakistani immigrant, Shahwar Matin Siraj, were arrested and convicted for plotting to detonate an IED at the New York City Herald Square subway station on the days leading up to the 2004 Republican National Convention.²⁰⁸ Both Islamic men planned the attacks as revenge for America's treatment of prisoners at the Abu Ghraib Prison in Iraq. The men conducted surveillance of the subway station and drew sketches, prior to attempting to purchase materials for the IED from an undercover law enforcement officer.²⁰⁹

Elshafay's conversion is a complicated story. His father was an Egyptian immigrant and practicing Muslim and his mother was Irish Catholic.²¹⁰ His parents separated when he was two years old and he primarily lived with his mother, who battled

²⁰⁵ Swanson, "Federal Complaint Offers inside Look at Accused Terrorist Cousins."

²⁰⁶ O'Connell, "Charges against Aurora Cousins in Terror Plot Tearing up Family, Aunt Says."

²⁰⁷ Sheth, "Case 12: Herald Square," 181.

²⁰⁸ United States Attorney's Office Eastern District of New York, "Shahawar Matin Siraj Convicted of Conspiring to Place Explosives at the 34th Street Subway Station."

²⁰⁹ Associated Press, "Would Be Subway Bomber Awaits Sentencing."

²¹⁰ Rashbaum, "Staten Island Man Describes Shattered Life, Then a Plot to Bomb a Subway Station."

psychiatric issues. At the age of 12, his father forced him to convert to Islam, although it does not appear as he embraced the faith at that time.²¹¹

Elshafay's teen years were troublesome. He was diagnosed with schizophrenia, abused drugs, and claims to have been sexually abused by an uncle. He had spent time admitted to a psychiatric hospital just months prior to his arrest.²¹² He failed the ninth grade three times and eventually dropped out of high school. He tried to join the Army, and earned his GED because it was a requirement. However, he was rejected because of his mental health issues and failing a hearing test.²¹³

When he was 17, he traveled with his father to visit relatives in Egypt. After this trip, he seems to have truly converted as he came back much more interested in his heritage and Islamic faith. He grew a beard, and began praying and attending the Mosque regularly. He met Siraj, his co-conspirator, at the mosque. At time he met Siraj, he was unemployed with no friends or other attachments.²¹⁴

R. MICHAEL FINTON (AGE AT CONVERSION: BETWEEN 20 AND 26)²¹⁵

Michael Finton is a U.S. citizen who converted to Islam while incarcerated in Illinois. He was upset Muslims at his mosque were not as militant as those in prison. Finton was arrested in 2009 during a law enforcement sting operation when he attempted to detonate what he thought was a VBIED outside a federal building in Springfield, IL, with the assistance of an undercover law enforcement officer he believed was an al-Qa'ida operative.²¹⁶

Details on Finton's life prior to his conversion are scarce. He was born in California and moved as a child with his family to Michigan. He was reportedly expelled

²¹¹ Sheth, "Case 12: Herald Square," 181.

²¹² Rashbaum, "Staten Island Man Describes Shattered Life, Then a Plot to Bomb a Subway Station."

²¹³ Sheth, "Case 12: Herald Square," 181.

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ Counter Extremism Project, "Extremist Converts."

²¹⁶ United States District Court for the Central District of Illinois, *United States of America v. Michael C. Finton (a/k/a "Talib Islam")* (Washington, DC: Investigative Project on Terrorism, 2009), http://www.investigativeproject.org/documents/case_docs/1073.pdf.

from high school for fighting with a teacher. He later moved to Illinois where he was arrested for robbing a convenience store when he was 19 years old.²¹⁷ He converted to Islam during his incarceration, but no further details are available concerning any influencing figures during this process.²¹⁸ However, a brief glimpse into who may have helped convert him was offered when he told the law enforcement informant the Muslims in prison were much more radical than those at his local mosque. Finton reportedly practiced a militant form of Islam common in prisons but not among the general American Muslim population. He claimed on social media he studied several religions while incarcerated including, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Judaism, before finding and converting to Islam.²¹⁹ No other details on his life pre-conversion were available.

S. ADAM GADAHN (AGE AT CONVERSION: 17)²²⁰

Adam Gadahn (aka Azzam al-Amriki or Azzam the American) is a U.S. citizen who converted to Islam and later made his way to Pakistan and Afghanistan. During his time in those two countries he attended al-Qa'ida training camps and served as a translator. During his time with al-Qa'ida, Gadahn reportedly spent time with one of the group's leaders Abu Zubaydah and another American Islamic convert John Lindh.²²¹ Gadahn would go on to become al-Qa'ida's "official English-language propagandist" and make videos in English to encourage further attacks against the United States and other Western countries.²²² These videos would lead to Gadahn being the first American since

²¹⁷ Bruce Rushton, "Man Accused in Bombing Plot Known for Strong Stance on Islam," *Journal Star*, September 25, 2009, <http://www.pjstar.com/x1800826354/Man-accused-in-bombing-plot-known-for-strong-stance-on-Islam>.

²¹⁸ Dirk Johnson, "Suspect in Illinois Bomb Plot 'Didn't Like America Much'," *New York Times*, September 27, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/28/us/28springfield.html>.

²¹⁹ John Mueller, "Case 29: Springfield," in *Terrorism since 9/11, The American Cases*, ed. John Mueller (Columbus, OH: Mershon Center, Ohio State University, 2011); Ronald Lieberman, "Case 29: Springfield," in *Terrorism since 9/11, The American Cases*, ed. John Mueller (Columbus, OH: Mershon Center, Ohio State University, 2011).

²²⁰ Counter Extremism Project, "Extremist Converts."

²²¹ Investigative Project on Terrorism, "Profile: Adam Gadahn."

²²² Botelho and Ellis, "Adam Gadahn, American Mouthpiece for al Qaeda, Killed."

World War II to be indicted for treason.²²³ In 2015, Gadahn was killed as part of a drone strike while overseas.²²⁴

Gadahn was raised Catholic, and grew up on a goat farm in rural California with both his parents where he was home schooled. Despite belonging to several home school support groups and playing little league baseball, Gadahn was still described as a loner.²²⁵ During his teenage years, Gadahn became obsessed with heavy metal music, and claimed his relationship with his parents became strained. Gadahn would eventually come to believe Christianity was “blind dogmatism” and “charismatic wackiness.” He did not understand why anyone would pray to Jesus.²²⁶ In 1995, at age 16, Gadahn had passed all his required high-school coursework and moved in with his grandparents in Santa Ana, California. He began working at a computer store, and began exploring the internet. While on-line, he began exploring religions and found Islam intriguing.²²⁷

This research in Islam eventually led him to begin attending a mosque in Garden Grove, California where mosque’s Imam, Dr. Muzammil Siddiqi, was influential in his conversion. After attending the mosque and reading the Koran, Gadahn made the decision to convert. Questions regarding Dr. Siddiqi and his involvement in radical activities have arisen in the past. In the early 1990s, Abdel Rahman (aka “The Blind Shiekh”) was invited to speak at the mosque. During this speech, with Dr. Siddiqi translating, Rahman (who would later be convicted for masterminding the first World Trade Center attack) spoke about non-violent jihad being weak, and fighting was obligatory for Muslims. Recordings of the speech were later offered for sale at the mosque’s bookstore.²²⁸

²²³ Krikorian and Schmitt, “From the Archives Adam Gadahn Videos Lead to Treason Charge.”

²²⁴ Grimson, “Adam Gadahn, al Qaeda Leader Killed in U.S. Drone Strike, Was a Wanted Man.”

²²⁵ Raffi Khatchadourian, “Azzam the American, The Making of an Al Qaeda Homegrown,” *New Yorker*, January 22, 2007, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/01/22/azzam-the-american>.

²²⁶ Yahiye Gadahn, “Yahiye Adam Gadahn’s Conversion Story,” Islamic Network, January 1, 2006, https://archive.is/20100529131938/http://www.islamicnetwork.com/index.php/weblog/comments/yahiye_adam_gadahns_conversion_story/.

²²⁷ Khatchadourian, “Azzam the American, The Making of an Al Qaeda Homegrown.”

²²⁸ Ibid.

Also tied to the mosque were two individuals Khalil Deek and Hisham Diab. It is unclear if Gadahn met Deek and Diab during his conversion process, even if it was after, it is clear Gadahn was exposed to a radical Islamic milieu in close proximity to his conversion. Deek and Diab lived in an apartment complex together, and Abdel Rahman visited during the time he also spoke at the mosque. According to Diab's ex-wife, after Rahman's arrest, the sheikh would call the apartment on Sundays from jail and deliver sermons to those living in the apartment. In 1995, Deek and Diab would create "Charity without Borders" which reportedly funneled money to extremist groups in the Middle East, and was eventually shut down after the 9/11 attacks.²²⁹

Shortly after Gadahn's conversion, he moved into Diab's apartment, where Diab's ex-wife said Gadahn was exposed to more radical propaganda. One of the mosque's leaders, Haitham Bundakji, claimed Diab was part of a cell at the mosque who were "disruptive troublemakers" that recruited others. He felt responsible for Gadahn's radicalization and believed he should have done more to help him by stating, "He (Gadahn) fell in the wrong hands and he became as aggressive as they were (Diab's cell.)"²³⁰

Deek reportedly went to Pakistan, separately but around the same time as Gadahn.²³¹ Deek was a known associate of Abu Zubaydah²³² and it can be reasonably assumed he introduced him to Gadahn. Deek would later be arrested in Pakistan and extradited to Jordan in 1999 for plotting terrorist attacks in Jordan.²³³

²²⁹ Krikorian and Reza, "O.C. Man Rises in Al Qaeda 'Azzam the American,' or Adam Gadahn, Has Moved from Translator to Propagandist."

²³⁰ Ross and Scott, "An American Married to Al Qaeda."

²³¹ Krikorian and Reza, "O.C. Man Rises in Al Qaeda 'Azzam the American,' or Adam Gadahn, Has Moved from Translator to Propagandist."

²³² Kean and Hamilton, *National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States*, 175.

²³³ Krikorian and Reza, "O.C. Man Rises in Al Qaeda 'Azzam the American,' or Adam Gadahn, Has Moved from Translator to Propagandist."

T. ERIC HARROUN (AGE AT CONVERSION: 26)²³⁴

In 2013, Eric Harroun, a U.S. citizen and Islamic convert, was indicted on charges related to fighting with the al-Nusrah Front (an organization labeled a foreign terrorist organization by the United States) in Syria.²³⁵ In March 2013, Harroun met with FBI agents on three occasions at the U.S. Consulate in Istanbul, Turkey. During these interviews, he stated he fought with the al-Nusrah Front in about seven to 10 battles over a 25-day period. Harroun estimated he shot approximately 10 individuals in these battles. However, he claimed he hated al-Qa'ida (despite al-Nusrah Front's al-Qa'ida ties) and would fight against any regime who tried to impose Sharia law.

Harroun led a troubled childhood, had a troubled U.S. military career, and his conversion to Islam is also perplexing. Harroun's parents divorced when he was nine years old, although his father stayed active in his life. In the ninth grade, Harroun was arrested for robbery and was found to be carrying concealed knives. After this incident when his mother tried to discipline him, he physically assaulted her. She would later also find him in possession of a firearm. In hopes of improving his life, Harroun's mother moved the family to a small North Dakota town and moved in with his mother's sister. Harroun however never fit in with the kids in North Dakota, and his mother enrolled him in a Christian school for troubled youth where he eventually earned his GED.²³⁶

In 2000, Harroun enlisted in the U.S. Army. At this time, Harroun began to display signs of mental illness. His records indicate he suffered from depression and mood swings and was diagnosed with a "personality disorder." His friend stated Harroun was close to being dishonorably discharged until he was involved in a vehicle accident that fractured his skull. The Army medically discharged Harroun a few weeks after the

²³⁴ Counter Extremism Project, "Extremist Converts."

²³⁵ "U.S. Citizen Indicted for Conspiring to Provide Material Support to a Foreign Terrorist Organization," United States Attorney's Office Eastern District of Virginia, June 20, 2013, <https://www.justice.gov/usao-edva/pr/us-citizen-indicted-conspiring-provide-material-support-foreign-terrorist-organization>.

²³⁶ Nicholas Schmidle, "Lost in Syria, A Troubled Army Vet Clandestinely Joined the Fight against Assad. Then an Adventure Turned into a Tragedy," *New Yorker*, February 16, 2015, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/02/16/lost-syria>.

accident. He was also prescribed antidepressants upon discharge from the hospital. He began dating a girl, but when she broke up with him, he shot himself in the abdomen.²³⁷

In 2008, Harroun flew to Lebanon where he visited a refugee camp. Harroun began falsely stating he was of Lebanese descent. He later returned home to the United States where he converted to Islam. Details on his conversion are unclear but he described himself in a news article as moderate. He said, ““I’m a moderate Muslim...I do smoke. I drink occasionally. I don’t pray five times a day I do have some Christian beliefs, I guess. I celebrate Christmas with my mom’s family.” A journalist who interviewed Harroun described his faith, “Eric was a Muslim in much the same way someone who moves to a new city becomes a fan of a sports team in that city—it’s a way to fit in and relate to those around you when you’re in a strange place.” Harroun died of a drug overdose in 2014.²³⁸

U. KEVIN JAMES (AGE AT CONVERSION: APPROXIMATELY 21)²³⁹

Kevin James led the radical Islamic group JIS while incarcerated in a state prison in California.²⁴⁰ In 2005, members of JIS were arrested for conspiring to attack National Guard sites and synagogues in the Los Angeles, California area.²⁴¹ James orchestrated this plot while he was incarcerated.²⁴²

James grew up in South Central Los Angeles, California.²⁴³ His father was a member of the Nation of Islam, although he disavowed the teachings.²⁴⁴ He was a

²³⁷ Schmidle, “Lost in Syria.”

²³⁸ Robert Young Pelton, “The All-American Life and Death of Eric Harroun,” Vice News, April 11, 2014, <https://news.vice.com/article/the-all-american-life-and-death-of-eric-harroun>.

²³⁹ Counter Extremism Project, “Extremist Converts.”

²⁴⁰ Hamm, “Prisoner Radicalization: Assessing the Threat in U.S. Correctional Institutions.”

²⁴¹ Zuckerman, Bucci, and Carafano, “60 Terrorist Plots since 9/11: Continued Lessons in Domestic Counterterrorism.”

²⁴² Hamm, “Prisoner Radicalization: Assessing the Threat in U.S. Correctional Institutions.”

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Daniels-Hill, “Case 15: JIS.”

member of the 76th Street Crips street gang, and at the age of 21, began serving a 10-year prison sentence for robbery.²⁴⁵

Once in prison, James converted to Islam, and initially followed the teaching of his father's Nation of Islam. However, he ended up being drawn to the more radical Sunni teaching that other inmates in the prison were following. These inmates belonged to JIS, and James would eventually take over as the head of the group.

V. COLLEEN LAROSE (AGE AT CONVERSION: 45 OR 46)²⁴⁶

Colleen LaRose, who became widely known in the U.S. media by her self-given on-line moniker "Jihad Jane," was arrested, convicted, and in 2014, sentenced to 10 years in prison for plotting to kill a Swedish cartoonist.²⁴⁷ LaRose is a U.S. citizen and convert to Islam. Prior to participating in the plot to kill the cartoonist, as revenge for drawing a picture of the Prophet Muhammad as a dog, she recruited and raised funds for an al-Qa'ida cell based in Ireland.²⁴⁸

LaRose, unlike most others in this study, was much older (mid-40s) at the time of her conversion.²⁴⁹ LaRose's childhood was tragic, which led to problems the rest of her life. LaRose's parents divorced when she was three years old. When she turned eight, her father began routinely raping her and her 11-year old sister. In the seventh grade, LaRose ran away from home to escape her father where she prolifically used cocaine and heroin. She turned to prostitution as a teenager, became pregnant, and miscarried, which caused her to never be able to have children. At 16, she briefly married a man twice her age.²⁵⁰

In 2007, LaRose was in Amsterdam with her boyfriend of five years. One evening the two were in a bar when they began to argue. He left leaving LaRose in the bar by

²⁴⁵ Hamm, "Prisoner Radicalization: Assessing the Threat in U.S. Correctional Institutions."

²⁴⁶ Counter Extremism Project, "Extremist Converts."

²⁴⁷ United States Attorney's Office Eastern District of Pennsylvania, "Federal Judge Sentences "Jihad Jane" to 10 Years in Prison for Role in Plot to Commit Murder Overseas."

²⁴⁸ "Colleen Larose-Overview," Counter Extremism Project, accessed October 25, 2017, <https://www.counterextremism.com/extremists/colleen-larose>.

²⁴⁹ Counter Extremism Project, *Extremist Converts*.

²⁵⁰ Reuters Staff, "Special Report: From Abuse to a Chat Room, a Martyr Is Made—Jane's Jihad."

herself. While alone in the bar, she was approached by a Middle Eastern man who was also a Muslim. To spite her boyfriend, and to satisfy her curiosity, she went home with the man. This encounter stimulated her interest in Islam, and when she got home, she began secretly to research the religion in more depth, which she kept a secret from her boyfriend.²⁵¹

LaRose signed up for a Muslim dating site, as she had become infatuated with Islamic men. She believed in God but had never subscribed to an actual religion. While on-line, she met a person who began teaching her about the five pillars of Islam, and she ordered and began reading a Koran, which led to her conversion to Islam, via an on-line conversion, but she still kept it a secret from her boyfriend. She described finally feeling like she “belonged” after her conversion. Shortly after her “conversion,” her interest waned for a few months and she continued to drink, never visited a mosque, and never learned to pray properly. Six months later she would meet Muslims in on-line chat rooms with a radical milieu that would reignite her interest and ultimately convince her to fly to Europe and make plans to kill the cartoonist.²⁵²

W. JOHN WALKER LINDH (AGE AT CONVERSION: 16)²⁵³

John Walker Lindh joined the Taliban to fight in Afghanistan’s civil war against the Northern Alliance in the months leading up to the 9/11 attacks.²⁵⁴ Lindh, who had met Osama bin Laden while training with the Taliban, claimed no prior knowledge of the 9/11 attacks and was fighting on the front lines of the Afghanistan civil war when the attacks happened. After the attacks when the U.S. bombings of Afghanistan began, Lindh fled and was eventually captured and imprisoned by Northern Alliance fighters in the Mazar-e Sharif prison. Lindh survived the infamous Mazar-e Sharif uprising that killed CIA officer Michael Spann. After the uprising was quelled, Lindh was turned over to

²⁵¹ Reuters Staff, “Special Report: From Abuse to a Chat Room, a Martyr Is Made—Jane’s Jihad.”

²⁵² Ibid.

²⁵³ Tyrangiel, “The Taliban Next Door.”

²⁵⁴ United States District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia Alexandria Division, “United States of America v. John Lindh.”

U.S. forces and was brought back to the United States.²⁵⁵ Lindh was indicted on a variety of charges,²⁵⁶ pled guilty to two of them, and was sentenced to 20 years in prison.²⁵⁷

Lindh's background before his conversion is one of the rare examples that does not fit into one of the four hypotheses. Lindh was born in the Washington, DC area and was the middle of the three children. In 1991, when he was 10 years old, the family moved to Marin County, just north of San Francisco, California. He did not grow up in a very religious household. His mother was Catholic, and for a while they attended Catholic mass but she would eventually convert to Buddhism.²⁵⁸ His parents divorced after Lindh had left the house in 1999, but according to his father, the marriage had long been over prior to the divorce.²⁵⁹ His father would frequently spend nights away from home with another man in San Francisco when Lindh was in high school.²⁶⁰

Lindh's parents described him as spiritual and studious.²⁶¹ He even transferred to an alternative high school that allowed him to pick his own course of study. He began to study world religions, and the movie "Malcolm X" inspired his exploration of Islam. At the age of 16, after studying the religion and with his parent's support, he converted. A friend who attended prayer services with him at the Islamic Center near his house said Lindh stood out because he was a devout Muslim who converted on his own without a referral from another Muslim.²⁶²

²⁵⁵ CNN, "John Walker Lindh, Profile, The Case of the Taliban American."

²⁵⁶ Yale Law School, Lillian Goldman Law Library, "September 11, 2001: Attack on America, Indictment of John Walker Lindh, February 5, 2002."

²⁵⁷ Lewis, "American Who Joined Taliban Pleads Guilty."

²⁵⁸ Tyrangiel, "The Taliban Next Door."

²⁵⁹ Time, "The Life and Times of John Walker Lindh."

²⁶⁰ Backer, "Emasculated Men, Effeminate Law in the United States, Zimbabwe and Malaysia."

²⁶¹ CNN, "John Walker Lindh, Profile, The Case of the Taliban American."

²⁶² Tyrangiel, "The Taliban Next Door."

X. EMANUEL LUTCHMAN (AGE AT CONVERSION: APPROXIMATELY 25)²⁶³

Emanuel Lutchman was arrested and pled guilty for planning to attack a restaurant with machetes in Rochester, New York. This attack was inspired when he began an on-line association with another known ISIL member overseas.²⁶⁴ The individual he was communicating with overseas, Abu Issa al-Amriki, was also an American who had gone to Syria to help recruit for ISIL. He told Lutchman being in ISIL was “a dream come true.” Al-Amriki urged Lutchman to carry out an attack in the United States to prove his worthiness. His plot was stopped because others he was planning the attack with were working for the FBI.²⁶⁵

Lutchman was 26 at the time of his arrest and had already spent the better part of a decade in and out of prison. His mother died when he was very young, with no mention of his father being involved in his life, and he bounced around to different relatives’ homes when he was growing up.²⁶⁶ His grandmother said he was raised Christian and suffered from a mental illness that was diagnosed when he was 13 and was prescribed medications.²⁶⁷ He had a history with the prison and street gangs, Bloods and Crypts.²⁶⁸ His conversion to Islam happened in prison. It appears the conversion had more to do with protecting himself from other prisoners than true belief in the faith, as he had no connections to the Muslim community where he lived when he was out of prison.²⁶⁹

²⁶³ Counter Extremism Project, “Extremist Converts.”

²⁶⁴ “New York Man Pleads Guilty to Conspiracy to Provide Material Support to ISIL in Connection with Planned New Year’s Eve Attack,” United States Attorney’s Office Western District of New York, August 11, 2016, <https://www.justice.gov/usao-wdny/pr/new-york-man-pleads-guilty-conspiracy-provide-material-support-isil-connection-planned>.

²⁶⁵ John Mueller, “Case 78: Rochester Panhandler,” in *Terrorism since 9/11, The American Cases*, ed. John Mueller (Columbus, OH: Mershon Center, Ohio State University, 2016), 901.

²⁶⁶ Cassandra Dula, “Case 78: Rochester Panhandler,” in *Terrorism since 9/11, The American Cases*, ed. John Mueller (Columbus, OH: Mershon Center, Ohio State University, 2016), 904.

²⁶⁷ Justin Murphy, “Grandma: FBI Wanted Terror Suspect Lutchman as Informant,” *Tennessean*, updated January 2, 2016, <https://www.tennessean.com/story/news/2016/01/02/emanuel-lutchman-informant-beverley-carridice-henry-rochester-isis-attack/78186568/>.

²⁶⁸ Counter Extremism Project, “Extremist Converts.”

²⁶⁹ Dula, “Case 78: Rochester Panhandler,” 905.

Y. DANIEL MALDONADO (AGE AT CONVERSION: APPROXIMATELY 21)²⁷⁰

Daniel Maldonado is a U.S. citizen and Muslim convert who moved to Egypt to run an Islamic website. Eventually, Maldonado would move with his wife and three kids to Somalia. Maldonado's wife would die of malaria after moving to Somalia.²⁷¹ During his time in Somalia, Maldonado began training with and fighting for al-Qa'ida in the Somali civil war.²⁷² Kenyan forces eventually captured Maldonado and he and his three kids were turned over to U.S. authorities.²⁷³ During FBI interviews, Maldonado claimed he had no issues killing other Muslims if they were apostates, killing Americans who inserted themselves into the war, and had no issues with the 9/11 attacks.²⁷⁴ Maldonado was charged and convicted of supporting al-Qa'ida and sentenced to 10 years in prison.²⁷⁵

Maldonado grew up with his siblings and parents in New Hampshire. Students and teachers at his school remember he stood out as the only kid with dreadlocks. They said he was opinionated, one of the standout soccer players, but did not live up to his academic potential.²⁷⁶ Much like John Walker Lindh however Maldonado's background before his conversion is one of the examples that does not fit into one of the four hypotheses. Maldonado had a cult following as a hip-hop artist when in high school. One of his admirers was Tamekia Cunningham with whom he would begin a romantic

²⁷⁰ Margo Sullivan, "Home-grown Terrorist Hopes for Cell Close to His Kids," Derry News, June 27, 2007, http://www.derrynews.com/news/local_news/home-grown-terrorist-hopes-for-cell-close-to-his-kids/article_926d425e-44ab-5ef1-a935-ff2fa1b4c131.html.

²⁷¹ Cindy George, "Mom Asks Leniency for Man Who Trained for Terror," Chron, July 19, 2007, <http://www.chron.com/news/houston-texas/article/Mom-asks-leniency-for-man-who-trained-for-terror-1843734.php>.

²⁷² United States District Court Southern District of Texas, *United States of America v. Daniel Joseph Maldonado, a/k/a Daniel Aljughaifi* (Houston, TX: United States District Court, Southern District of Texas, 2009), https://www.investigativeproject.org/documents/case_docs/390.pdf.

²⁷³ Cindy George and Rachel Graves, "Terror Suspect's Crusade Comes at Steep Price," Chron, February 16, 2007, <http://www.chron.com/news/houston-texas/article/Terror-suspect-s-crusade-comes-at-steep-price-1567239.php>.

²⁷⁴ United States District Court Southern District of Texas, *United States of America v. Daniel Joseph Maldonado, a/k/a Daniel Aljughaifi*.

²⁷⁵ Counter Extremism Project, "Extremist Converts."

²⁷⁶ George and Graves, "Terror Suspect's Crusade Comes at Steep Price."

relationship and eventually have a child with, later marry, and have two more children with until she died in Somalia.²⁷⁷ After their marriage, the couple began looking deeply into religions and decided to convert to Islam from Christianity.²⁷⁸ His mother stated after the conversion, “The couple stopped smoking, drinking, cursing and eating pork, and began praying five times daily.”²⁷⁹

Z. ENRIQUE MARQUEZ (AGE AT CONVERSION: APPROXIMATELY 16)²⁸⁰

Enrique Marquez was friends and next door neighbors with Syed Rizwan Farook. Farook, along with his wife, carried out the 2015 terrorist attack in San Bernardino, California, when they conducted a mass shooting on the County Health Department’s holiday party. Marquez purchased two of the rifles for Farook that were used in the attack, and the smokeless powder Farook used to build IEDs. Marquez stated he purchased the rifles for Farook so as not to draw attention to Farook “because his appearance was Caucasian, while Farook looked Middle Eastern.”²⁸¹ Farook and Marquez had planned to attack a community college a couple years prior to the San Bernardino attack, but Marquez backed out of the plan.²⁸²

Marquez is a convert to Islam,²⁸³ but details on his life pre-conversion are scarce, as his family had declined many interviews. In 2005, as a teenager, Marquez moved with his family to Riverside, California where he met Farook. Farook introduced him to Islam. However, Marquez was introduced to the radical teachings of Anwar al-Awlaki.²⁸⁴ In

²⁷⁷ George, “Mom Asks Leniency for Man Who Trained for Terror.”

²⁷⁸ Sullivan, “Home-grown Terrorist Hopes for Cell Close to His Kids.”

²⁷⁹ George, “Mom Asks Leniency for Man Who Trained for Terror.”

²⁸⁰ Montero, “Enrique Marquez, San Bernardino Shooter’s Friend, Described as Loner Who Wanted to Belong.”

²⁸¹ Adam Nagourney, Richard Pérez-Peña, and Ian Lovett, “Neighbor of San Bernardino Attackers Face Terrorism Charges,” *New York Times*, December 17, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/18/us/san-bernardino-enrique-marquez-charges-justice-department.html?_r=0.

²⁸² United States District Court, *United States of America v. Enrique Marquez, Jr.*

²⁸³ Counter Extremism Project, “Enrique Marquez—Overview.”

²⁸⁴ United States District Court, *United States of America v. Enrique Marquez, Jr.*

2007, Marquez converted to Islam.²⁸⁵ Marquez was described as a loner until he met and developed a bond with Farook who was four years older than him. At school, Marquez did not appear to have any close friends.²⁸⁶ After the San Bernardino attacks, it was discovered Marquez was involved in an immigration marriage scheme in which a female from Russia was paying him a monthly stipend to be legally married until she could obtain citizenship. His family was unaware of the marriage or his conversion to Islam.²⁸⁷

AA. ANTONIO MARTINEZ (AGE AT CONVERSION: APPROXIMATELY 21)²⁸⁸

Martinez was arrested in December 2010 after he attempted to detonate a VBIED in a Maryland military recruiting center parking lot. Martinez, a U.S. citizen, was a recent convert to Islam and attempted to recruit others to assist with his attack, which drew the attention of law enforcement. Undercover officers provided Martinez with the inert VBIED and he was subsequently arrested after he attempted to detonate it.²⁸⁹ Martinez tried to recruit several people to assist in the attack, but ultimately he was only able to convince an FBI informant.²⁹⁰

Martinez is a naturalized U.S. citizen from Nicaragua. He lived with his mother (with no mention of his father in any available research) in Maryland and attended Prince George's public schools, and would later work a retail job at a children's clothing store. Those who he worked with knew him as a Christian and it surprised them when he

²⁸⁵ Counter Extremism Project, "Enrique Marquez—Overview."

²⁸⁶ Montero, "Enrique Marquez, San Bernardino Shooter's Friend, Described as Loner Who Wanted to Belong."

²⁸⁷ Leticia Juarez and ABC7.com Staff, "Family of Enrique Marquez Unaware of His 2014 Marriage, Conversion to Islam," ABC 7, December 10, 2015, <http://abc7.com/news/family-of-former-neighbor-of-san-bernardino-shooter-speak-out/1117917/>.

²⁸⁸ Counter Extremism Project, "Extremist Converts."

²⁸⁹ "US v. Martinez," The Investigative Project on Terrorism, accessed October 3, 2016, <http://www.investigativeproject.org/case/505/us-v-martinez>.

²⁹⁰ Justin Fenton and Tricia Bishop, "Arrest Made in Plot to Blow up Baltimore-area Military Recruiting Center," *Baltimore Sun*, December 8, 2010, <http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/maryland/bs-md-bomb-plot-arrest-20101208-story.html>.

announced he had converted to Islam.²⁹¹ He was a high school dropout and had only recently embraced a Christian faith prior to his conversion to Islam.²⁹² Prior to his conversion, Martinez had been arrested at least three times and had been rejected from joining the Army for unknown reasons.²⁹³ Details surrounding his conversion are unclear. Coworkers stated he converted after he met other individuals who introduced him to the Quran.²⁹⁴ Authorities did note that he practiced a radical interpretation of Islam and called for violence on social media.²⁹⁵ No other details surrounding his conversion were found.

BB. DOUGLAS MCCAIN (AGE AT CONVERSION: 22 OR 23)²⁹⁶

Douglas McCain, a U.S. citizen and convert to Islam, is believed to be the first American foreign fighter killed, during the summer of 2014, fighting for ISIL in the Syrian civil war. According to family, he converted from Christianity.²⁹⁷ He died in a battle in the northern city of Marea while fighting the Free Syrian Army.²⁹⁸ He traveled to Syria just a couple months prior in the spring of the same year to begin fighting.²⁹⁹

McCain was born in the Chicago, Illinois area and eventually moved with his family to the Minneapolis, Minnesota area. He was a fan of the Chicago Bulls, enjoyed hip hop music, and played basketball but did not play for his high school team. After he left high school, he had minor run ins with the law and racked up some misdemeanor

²⁹¹ John Mueller and Lauren Brady, “Case 40: Baltimore,” in *Terrorism since 9/11, The American Cases*, ed. John Mueller (Columbus, OH: Mershon Center, Ohio State University, 2011).

²⁹² Tricia Bishop, “Maryland Man Pleads Guilty in Terrorist Bomb Plot,” *Baltimore Sun*, January 26, 2012, <http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/breaking/bs-md-co-martinez-plea-20120126-story.html>.

²⁹³ Mueller and Brady, “Case 40: Baltimore.”

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁵ Bishop, “Maryland Man Pleads Guilty in Terrorist Bomb Plot.”

²⁹⁶ Counter Extremism Project, “Extremist Converts.”

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁸ Warren, Tracy, and Mcshane, “American Who Joined ISIS Killed in Syria Gunfight, Relative Says it Was ‘His Destiny’.”

²⁹⁹ Counter Extremism Project, “Extremist Converts.”

convictions.³⁰⁰ He attempted to start a rap career, and at which point he traveled to Sweden to perform. While in Sweden, it appears he had already converted, as people who knew him say he spoke of his religion. After Sweden, he moved to the San Diego, California area where he was known among members of the Masjid Nur Mosque. Details of where and how he converted are not available. The only evidence of when he converted is from his social media accounts. In a 2014 Twitter post he claims to have “reverted” to Islam 10 years prior.³⁰¹

CC. ROBERT MCCOLLUM (AGE AT CONVERSION: APPROXIMATELY 38)³⁰²

Robert McCollum was arrested in a sting operation with the FBI when he bought a rifle, which he planned to use in a propaganda video, but he was already a convicted felon. He was also charged with providing material support to a terrorist organization for attempting to incite attacks and expressing his desire to conduct a terror attack in the United States. Prior to the sting operation, he swore allegiance to ISIL leader, and even stated he would behead his own son, who was not Muslim, if necessary. In early 2015, McCollum legally changed his name to Amir Said Abdul Rahman al-Ghazi.³⁰³

McCollum’s mother stated he was raised Methodist and converted to Islam while in prison. She stated at first she felt the conversion was helping him get his life in order, but his views would eventually turn radical.³⁰⁴ McCollum had a lengthy criminal history prior to his arrest by the FBI. These prior arrests were for weapon possession and

³⁰⁰ Terrence McCoy, “How Douglas McArthur McCain Became the First American to Die Fighting for the Islamic State,” *Washington Post*, August 27, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/08/27/how-douglas-mcarthur-mccain-became-the-first-american-to-die-fighting-for-the-islamic-state/?utm_term=.258e9ff99471.

³⁰¹ Ammar Cheikh Omar and Cassandra Vinograd, “American Douglas McArthur McCain Dies Fighting for ISIS in Syria,” NBC News, August 26, 2014, <https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/isis-uncovered/american-douglas-mcarthur-mccain-dies-fighting-isis-syria-n189081>.

³⁰² Counter Extremism Project, “Extremist Converts.”

³⁰³ United States District Court for the Northern District of Ohio, *United States of America v. Amir Said Rahmna Al-Ghazi, aka Robert C. McCollum*.

³⁰⁴ Eric Heisig, “Mother of Sheffield Lake Terrorism Suspect Says She Had Disagreement with Him over His Islamic Faith,” *Cleveland.com*, June 19, 2015, http://www.cleveland.com/court-justice/index.ssf/2015/06/terrorism_suspects_mother_says.html.

trafficking, and drug related offenses.³⁰⁵ The only clues into McCollum’s life before his conversion come from media interviews with his mother. McCollum was a troubled teen (no further information provided) who attended two high schools and did not graduate. After he went to prison, his relationship with his mother became strained and they would go long periods of time without speaking. No other details regarding his conversion were found.

DD. DONALD MORGAN (AGE AT CONVERSION: 37 OR 38)³⁰⁶

Donald Morgan is an attempted foreign fighter, who tried to enter Syria and join ISIL. Morgan is a U.S. citizen who converted to Islam. He traveled to Lebanon in 2014 and began espousing radical beliefs on social media. He attempted to enter Syria through Turkey but was turned away at the Turkish border. Low on money, he returned to the United States and was arrested at JFK airport because he had attempted to sell a rifle, although he was already a convicted felon.³⁰⁷ He eventually pled guilty to both the firearm charge and providing material support to a terrorist organization.³⁰⁸

Morgan did not convert to Islam until he was in his late thirties. He appears to have been in a constant search for a sense of belonging. He was raised Catholic and attended a military academy for high school. He had dreams of being in the military and a member of the Special Forces. However, he was unable to graduate from boot camp. He became a Sherriff’s deputy in North Carolina and believed this career would offer the brotherhood he had been seeking, but was fired 18 months later for undisclosed reasons. He would later be sentenced to prison for discharging a weapon during a fight in a restaurant.

³⁰⁵ United States District Court for the Northern District of Ohio, *United States of America v. Amir Said Rahmna Al-Ghazi, aka Robert C. McCollum*.

³⁰⁶ Counter Extremism Project, “Extremist Converts.”

³⁰⁷ NBC News, “EXCLUSIVE: American Extremist Reveals His Quest to Join ISIS.”

³⁰⁸ Lee Ferran, “American Wannabe ISIS Fighter Donald Morgan Gets 20 Years in Prison,” ABC News, May 13, 2015, <http://abcnews.go.com/International/american-wannabe-isis-fighter-donald-morgan-20-years/story?id=31009777>.

Upon his release from prison, he gained employment and became immersed in bodybuilding. He married another bodybuilder, and in 2001, they had a son together. In 2007, however, they divorced, and in 2008, he converted to Islam. He stated he first learned about Islam in a college class. During his conversion, he realized “Islam presented this package that said, “this is, this is it...this is the path and this is the way you’re going to go. There is not going to be this way, that way.”³⁰⁹

EE. JOSE PADILLA (AGE AT CONVERSION: 23 OR 24)³¹⁰

Jose Padilla was arrested in 2002 at Chicago’s O’Hare Airport upon returning from Pakistan where he had met with 9/11 mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammed.³¹¹ Padilla was charged with and ultimately convicted of plotting to detonate a radioactive device in the United States.³¹²

Padilla was born in Brooklyn, New York and as a child moved to Chicago, Illinois.³¹³ He lived in a predominately Hispanic neighborhood and regularly attended a Christian church with his mother and siblings.³¹⁴ As a youth, Padilla became involved with the street gang the Latin Kings.³¹⁵ When he was 14, he and other gang members assaulted and robbed a man, which resulted in the victim being stabbed, and later dying. It does not appear as though Padilla’s father played an active role in his life. Padilla was sentenced to juvenile detention until he was 18 for his role.³¹⁶

³⁰⁹ NBC News, “EXCLUSIVE: American Extremist Reveals His Quest to Join ISIS.”

³¹⁰ Counter Extremism Project, “Extremist Converts.”

³¹¹ “Khalid Sheikh Mohammed Met with Jose Padilla, Ex-Chicago Gang Leader, in 2002: WikiLeaks,” HuffPost, updated June 26, 2011, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/04/26/khalid-sheikh-mohammed-me_n_853729.html; BBC News, “Profile: Jose Padilla.”

³¹² United States District Court Southern District of Florida, *United States of America vs. Adham Amin Hassoun a/k/a “Abu Sayyaf,” Kifah Wael Jayyousi a/k/a “Abu Mohamed,” and Jose Padilla a/k/a “Ibrahim,” a/k/a “Abu Abdullah the Puerto Rican,” a/k/a “Abu Abdullah Al Mujahir,” Defendants.*

³¹³ Debra J. Saunders, “Padilla’s Life and Times,” SF Gate, April 27, 2004, <http://www.sfgate.com/opinion/saunders/article/Padilla-s-life-and-Times-3313935.php>.

³¹⁴ Amanda Ripley, “The Case of the Dirty Bomber,” Time, June 16, 2002, <http://content.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,262917,00.html>.

³¹⁵ “Dirty Bomb Suspect’s Criminal Record,” CNN, June 11, 2002, <http://edition.cnn.com/2002/US/06/11/muhajir.background/>.

³¹⁶ Ripley, “The Case of the Dirty Bomber.”

Padilla's criminal life continued into adulthood and the majority of his arrests also included resisting and fighting with the police. Padilla moved to Florida where he was involved in a road rage incident in which he shot at another motorist. When Padilla was released from prison in 1992, he began working at a Taco Bell with his girlfriend (who he would end up marrying). The restaurant manager, Mohammad Javed, was a Muslim who became a mentor to Padilla. Padilla asked about how to convert to Islam, and Javed claimed he had no role in Padilla's conversion and only told him he had to find his own mosque.³¹⁷

Padilla attended at least two mosques with radical ties in South Florida while exploring Islam. He officially converted at the al-Iman mosque in Sunrise, Florida. The Imam, Raed Awad, was linked to charities known to fundraise for Hamas,³¹⁸ although Awad denied knowing these funds were supporting Hamas.³¹⁹

**FF. JAMIE PAULIN-RAMIREZ (AGE AT CONVERSION:
APPROXIMATELY 30)³²⁰**

Jamie Paulin-Ramirez was involved in the same plot as Colleen LaRose, which was detailed earlier in this report. Paulin-Ramirez moved from Colorado to Ireland with her son and married the man LaRose was living with and then they plotted to kill the Swedish cartoonist. Paulin-Ramirez married him the day she landed in Ireland but had not met him in person prior.³²¹ It is unclear if Paulin-Ramirez converted before or after meeting Colleen LaRose in internet chat rooms, but LaRose recruited Paulin-Ramirez to move to Ireland to take part in the plot, and her conversion would have taken place either right before or right after her relationship with LaRose began.³²² She also reportedly had

³¹⁷ Ripley, "The Case of the Dirty Bomber."

³¹⁸ Ibid.

³¹⁹ Alabama Living, "Former Muslim Leader Who Helped Open Hoover Mosque Dies."

³²⁰ Counter Extremism Project, "Extremist Converts."

³²¹ Ibid.

³²² "Manner and Means, in United States of America, Ali Charaf Damache, a/k/a "Theblackflag" Mohammad Hassan Khalid, a/k/a "Abdul Ba'aree 'Abd, Al-Rahman Al-Hassan, Al-Afghani Al-Junoobi, W'at-Emiratee," In the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania, October 20, 2011, https://www.investigativeproject.org/documents/case_docs/1717.pdf#page=3.

struck up an online relationship with Najibullah Zazi, another individual convicted in a separate Islamic terror plot.³²³ Paulin-Ramirez was arrested by Irish authorities, subsequently released, and she voluntarily returned to the United States where she was arrested upon her arrival.³²⁴ Paulin-Ramirez was convicted and sentenced to eight years in prison.³²⁵

In a media interview, Paulin-Ramirez's mother describes her as "a lonely and insecure woman, isolated from others since childhood by a hearing problem...she never really liked herself." She was married at least three times prior to her conversion. Paulin-Ramirez's stepfather was a converted Muslim. He stated that after the 9/11 attacks, she accused all Muslims of being "killers and murderers," and then around Easter in 2009, she announced she had converted to Islam. However, this time she accused him of not being Muslim enough and not properly praying.³²⁶ Paulin-Ramirez's brother stated she was probably influenced romantically as well saying, "Any man that came along in my sister's life, she kind of followed like a lost puppy."³²⁷

GG. DERRICK SHAREEF (AGE AT CONVERSION: 16)³²⁸

Derrick Shareef, an American Muslim convert,³²⁹ was arrested and convicted in Illinois for planning to detonate hand grenades at a shopping mall during the 2006

³²³ Mike McPhee, "Leadville Woman Held in Ireland in Terrorism Plot," *Denver Post*, March 12, 2010, <http://www.denverpost.com/2010/03/12/leadville-woman-held-in-ireland-in-terrorism-plot/>.

³²⁴ CNN Wire Staff, "Colorado Woman Indicted on Terror Charges," CNN, April 3, 2010, <http://www.cnn.com/2010/CRIME/04/02/colorado.mom.terror.case/index.html>.

³²⁵ John Shiffman, "'Jihad Jamie' Gets Eight Years in Jihad Jane Case," Reuters, January 8, 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-jihadjane/jihad-jamie-gets-eight-years-in-jihad-jane-case-idUSBR EA0710J20140108>.

³²⁶ Kirk Johnson and Liz Robbins, "U.S. Women Held in Plot is Released, Family Says," *New York Times*, March 13, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/14/us/14terror.html>.

³²⁷ Siemaszko, "Paulin-Ramirez's Family Feels 'Pity' for 'Jihad Jamie'; Say She Was Likely Egged on to Join Plot."

³²⁸ David Bernstein, "Case 21: Rockford Mall," in *Terrorism since 9/11, The American Cases*, ed. John Mueller (Columbus, OH: Mershon Center, Ohio State University, 2011).

³²⁹ Southern Poverty Law Center, "30 Terrorist Attacks and Plots by Homegrown Jihadists."

Christmas season.³³⁰ Shareef radicalized from downloading and viewing extremist Islamic videos on known extremist websites.³³¹

Shareef's parents divorced when he was very young, and his mother claimed they moved around a lot when Shareef was a child.³³² Shareef's mother raised him, and was a Christian.³³³ She allowed Shareef to explore other religions as a child.³³⁴ Shareef's mother stated a male role model was absent in Shareef's life, when she and his father (who was a member of the Nation of Islam) divorced. At age 16, while living in Detroit, Shareef embraced the Nation of Islam teachings and converted. Shareef never graduated high school, but it is unclear if he dropped out before or after his conversion.³³⁵ No other details are available pertaining to his conversion or life factors that influenced the conversion.

HH. ELTON SIMPSON (AGE AT CONVERSION: BETWEEN 14 AND 18)³³⁶

Elton Simpson is one of the perpetrators who attacked a 2015 "Draw Mohammad" contest in Garland, Texas, with his roommate Nadir Soofi. The pair killed one person and wounded an unarmed security guard before being killed by police.³³⁷ Simpson and Soofi lived in the Phoenix, Arizona area and drove two states to Garland, Texas to conduct the attack on the event hosted by Pam Geller's American Freedom

³³⁰ Zuckerman, Bucci, and Carafano, "60 Terrorist Plots since 9/11: Continued Lessons in Domestic Counterterrorism."

³³¹ Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, *Violent Islamist Extremism, the Internet, and the Homegrown Terrorist Threat: Minority and Majority Staff Report; Joseph Lieberman, Chairman, Susan Collins, Ranking Minority Member* (Washington, DC: U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, 2008).

³³² Natasha Korecki, Annie Sweeney, and Dan Rozek, "Mall a Terror Target: Feds: Muslim Convert Charged with Plotting Rockford Grenade Attack," *Chicago Sun-Times*, December 9, 2006.

³³³ "Mom of Rockford Terror Suspect: Son Involved with 'the Wrong People,'" Daily Journal, December 10, 2006, http://www.daily-journal.com/news/state/mom-of-rockford-terror-suspect-son-involved-with-the-wrong/article_c2ce3888-442a-5e55-b39c-f30af544caec.html.

³³⁴ Bernstein, "Case 21: Rockford Mall."

³³⁵ Ibid.

³³⁶ Claudia Koerner, "The Garland, Texas, Shooters' Quiet Path to Violent Jihad," BuzzFeed News, May 14, 2015, https://www.buzzfeed.com/claudiakoerner/the-garland-texas-shooters-quiet-path-to-violent-jihad?utm_term=.eiOKReANJP#.hmgdwKreQ0.

³³⁷ Ross, Schwartz, and Kreider, "Garland Shooting Suspect Elton Simpson's Father Says Son 'Made a Bad Choice'."

Defense Initiative; a group that tries to counter what it believes is the “Islamization” of the United States.³³⁸

Details of Simpson’s past prior to his conversion to Islam are limited. His family and those close to him offered up very many details into his past. It appears as though his only criminal history is after his conversion when he received probation for lying to FBI agents when questioned if he planned to travel to Somalia and fight for al-Shabab.³³⁹ Simpson’s father simply stated he was always a “good kid.”³⁴⁰ Other people who knew Simpson stated he was born in the Chicago area and moved to Arizona with his family when he was in middle school. He converted to Islam in high school to help him abstain from alcohol and pre-marital sex. He became well known and was a regular at the Islamic Community Center of Phoenix where he participated in community projects and youth events. He played basketball for both his high school and community college team, but little else is known about his past or the conversion process.³⁴¹

II. HARLEM SUAREZ (AGE AT CONVERSION: BETWEEN 22 AND 24)³⁴²

Harlem Suarez was arrested in a FBI sting operation. During the sting operation, he made an ISIL recruitment video with an FBI informant, and attempted to buy explosives from an undercover FBI agent. He planned to use the explosives to conduct an attack on a beach in Florida, and place others under police cars in the area.³⁴³ Suarez was arrested, convicted, and sentenced to life in prison.³⁴⁴

³³⁸ Adam Goldman, Craig Whitlock, and Marice Richter, “One Texas Suspect Was Accused in 2010 FBI Terror Case,” *Washington Post*, May 4, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/suspect-in-texas-attack-previously-face-trial-on-terrorism-charge/2015/05/04/438df596-f279-11e4-bcc4-e8141e5eb0c9_story.html?utm_term=.21a2018ccb19.

³³⁹ Goldman, Whitlock, and Richter, “One Texas Suspect Was Accused in 2010 FBI Terror Case.”

³⁴⁰ Ross, Schwartz, and Kreider, “Garland Shooting Suspect Elton Simpson’s Father Says Son ‘Made a Bad Choice’.”

³⁴¹ Koerner, “The Garland, Texas, Shooters’ Quiet Path to Violent Jihad.”

³⁴² Counter Extremism Project, “Extremist Converts.”

³⁴³ United States District Court, *United States of America v. Harlem Suarez a/k/a Almiak Benitez*.

³⁴⁴ Fiolsa, “Keys Bomb Plotter Suarez Gets Life in Prison.”

Suarez was born in Cuba and raised Catholic by his parents. His parents were able to flee Cuba and make it to Florida when he was 12 years old. His mother said Suarez tested with a very low IQ, was very gullible, and often taken advantage of by his peers. He struggled in high school, reportedly developed a pattern of cutting himself, and dropped out of school in the tenth grade. He bounced around between odd jobs in restaurants and at the Key West airport. Around 2014 or 2015, Suarez became infatuated with the ISIL internet chat rooms and fell for their rhetoric and recruitment tactics. At some point during this time, Suarez converted to the radical Islam ISIL recruitment videos portrayed.³⁴⁵ His girlfriend corroborated his mother's view of Suarez. In an interview with media in Miami, she stated she also thought Suarez could also be gullible. She said he at times spoke of Islam but did not think much of it.³⁴⁶

JJ. BRYANT NEAL VINAS (AGE AT CONVERSION: BETWEEN 18 AND 19

Bryant Neal Vinas was an Islamic convert who left the United States for the Middle East. He made his way to Afghanistan where he trained with al-Qa'ida and began fighting for the Taliban as they battled American forces. While with al-Qa'ida leaders, he discussed the possibility of returning to the United States to conduct attacks on mass transit targets in New York City, as he was from the area. Vinas was arrested by Pakistani authorities when he crossed into the country and extradited back to the United States.³⁴⁷ Vinas served over eight years in prison, but could have served life. He was given a reduced sentence due to his cooperation with the U.S. government after his arrest.³⁴⁸

Vinas was born and raised on Long Island, New York to immigrant parents. He was raised Catholic, and remembered for his love of family, being protective of his sister, and enjoyed baseball. When he was 14, his parents had a bitter divorce, which began his downward spiral. It shook his faith in Catholicism. Vinas was described as a loner with

³⁴⁵ Lipscomb, "How Harlem Suarez Went from Cuban Immigrant to Wannabe ISIS Jihadi."

³⁴⁶ Oralia Ortega, "Ex-Girlfriend of Key West Terror Suspect Speaks Out," CBS Miami, July 28, 2015, <http://miami.cbslocal.com/2015/07/28/ex-girlfriend-of-key-west-terror-suspect-speaks-out/>.

³⁴⁷ John Mueller and David Dawson, "Case 24: Vinas," in *Terrorism since 9/11, The American Cases*, ed. John Mueller (Columbus, OH: Mershon Center, Ohio State University, 2011).

³⁴⁸ Aaron Cooper and Eric Levenson, "American al Qaeda Recruit to Be Released from Prison," CNN, May 11, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/05/11/us/bryant-neal-vinas-sentence/index.html>.

few friends and his opinions easily swayed by any group he happened to be with. His mother said he became very disrespectful and she sent him to live with his father. After the 9/11 attacks, he enlisted in the Army but washed out of boot camp after a month.³⁴⁹

Vinas returned to Long Island after boot camp where he befriended an Islamic convert who was also an amateur boxer. Vinas expressed interest in his religion and was given an English copy of the Quran, which he finished in two days. He quickly converted to Islam at a mosque in Queens known for its charity work. He would later switch to a much larger mosque, which did have a radical element within it. He began Arabic lessons and his views became more fanatical. He even tried to convert his father. He took to boxing with his friend and others at the mosque, but was unable to hold steady employment. Without steady employment, he would spend a lot of time on the internet, which is believed to be the source for his radicalization.³⁵⁰

KK. LEVAR WASHINGTON (AGE AT CONVERSION: APPROXIMATELY 24)³⁵¹

Levar Washington was incarcerated with Kevin James (described earlier in this report) at the New Folsom prison in California. After James formed JIS, he recruited, converted, and radicalized Washington.³⁵² James recognized he and Washington came from a similar background, “a street-wise gang member turned Sunni Islamic convert” and knew Washington would soon be paroled, so he tasked Washington with building the JIS cell outside of prison.³⁵³ Washington was arrested by police for a string of gas station robberies in an attempt to raise funds to buy the equipment necessary to carry out the JIS planned attacks on the National Guard sites and synagogues in the Los Angeles,

³⁴⁹ Mueller and Dawson, “Case 24: Vinas.”

³⁵⁰ Ibid.

³⁵¹ Counter Extremism Project, “Extremist Converts.”

³⁵² Daniels-Hill, “Case 15: JIS.”

³⁵³ Cozzens and Rosenau, “Training for Terror, The “Homegrown” Case of Jami` at al-Islam al-Sahih.”

California area.³⁵⁴ No other information is available on Washington's life pre-conversion and before his incarceration where he met James.

LL. JAELYN YOUNG (AGE AT CONVERSION: 19 OR 20)³⁵⁵

Jaelyn Young was a sophomore in college at Mississippi State University when she converted to Islam after she began dating Muhammad Dakhlalla. A short time later, she would marry Dakhlalla.³⁵⁶ In the spring of 2015, after they were married, Young began watching online ISIL propaganda videos and reading the rhetoric. Dakhlalla would follow Young's lead. Eventually, the two decided they wanted to travel to the Levant and join ISIL.³⁵⁷ They reached out to what they believed were online ISIL recruiters, who were in fact undercover FBI agents. They made their plans to travel to the Middle East, and were arrested at the airport in Mississippi as they were boarding their flight.³⁵⁸

Young was raised in a Christian household with both her parents and a sister in Mississippi.³⁵⁹ In high school, Young seemed to have it all. She was an honors student, on the robotics team, but also popular enough to be on the homecoming court, and was a cheerleader. She quit the cheerleading squad her senior year of high school, but her father, a Vicksburg, Mississippi police officer and Naval veteran, said it was to focus on academics. Her mother, a school administrator, said despite appearances, Jaelyn only had one close friend, who accidentally died her senior year of high school, which made Jaelyn even more of a loner. Jaelyn was under the impression many in her high school disliked her.³⁶⁰

³⁵⁴ Daniels-Hill, "Case 15: JIS."

³⁵⁵ Counter Extremism Project, "Extremist Converts."

³⁵⁶ Green, "How Two Mississippi College Students Fell in Love and Decided to Join a Terrorist Group."

³⁵⁷ Bronstein and Griffin, "Young ISIS Recruit: I Was Blinded by Love."

³⁵⁸ Counter Extremism Project, "Jaelyn Young—Overview."

³⁵⁹ Richard Fausset, "Young Mississippi Couple Linked to ISIS, Perplexing All," *New York Times*, August 15, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/15/us/disbelief-in-mississippi-at-how-far-isis-mes-sage-can-travel.html?_r=0.

³⁶⁰ Green, "How Two Mississippi College Students Fell in Love and Decided to Join a Terrorist Group."

In college, she majored in chemistry and began dating a man. He was friends with Dakhllalla, which is how Young met her future husband. Young and Dakhllalla would spend a lot of time together without her boyfriend's knowledge, and when he found out, he ended the relationship. After the break up, Young and Dakhllalla began dating but became isolated from other friends who disapproved of how the relationship began.³⁶¹ She began to inquire about Islam in depth and it was on a trip back to Dakhllalla's parents' house that she chose to convert with Dakhllalla's dad who was an Imam.³⁶²

³⁶¹ Green, "How Two Mississippi College Students Fell in Love and Decided to Join a Terrorist Group."

³⁶² Bronstein and Griffin, "Young ISIS Recruit: I Was Blinded by Love."

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