

**Navigating lived experience: reflections from the field.**

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**Abstract:**

In this article I use an autoethnographic approach to reflect on my experiences in Egypt—in which I came to live alongside converts to Islam and interact with adherents to militant salafist belief systems, as well as those who had disengaged from them. I outline how I came to have these lived experiences before explaining how they caused me to reexamine my understanding of radicalization and deradicalization in the militant salafist context, and to consider radicalization as a form of conversion.

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### **On impromptu decisions and lasting impacts: how I came to live in Egypt**

In early spring 2011 my beloved Grandfather died. I wish I could say he had a ‘good death’, quick, painless and peaceful. But he didn’t. Riddled by successive strokes, he was unable to see or talk properly, and could not tell his doctors what was wrong. In horrific pain, he called out in disjointed words for someone to save him. It was heartbreaking being so utterly powerless to help.

When it was clear nothing more could be done, he was put on palliative medication. In a haze I sat at the foot of his bed trying to stay awake and watching over him and my grandmother and mother as they fell into exhausted sporadic sleep at his bedside, never letting go of his hands. The three of us surrounding him so he would not be alone on his final journey. I watched and waited to wake them if his breathing slowed while they were sleeping. The medical staff had said this would tell us ‘the time was coming.’

I can’t remember how long it took, but I do remember as my grandmother held his face in her hands and whispered her final goodbyes he seemed to struggle out a noise in her direction, and then, he was gone. He looked so alive lying there, except, of course, that he wasn’t. I remember looking at him, knowing what had happened but yet still my eyes continued to search for signs of breathing. No breath came and to my surprise, in the time ahead neither did the grief I’d expected would follow.

Those stages of grief we hear so much about—denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance—it seemed to me they were mostly missing in action. I don’t think I can discern ever really moving through them all. Of course I did experience grief, but it was not a progression through the stages that are often drummed into us in self-help literature—as if we are not grieving correctly if we can’t mark some abstract point of stopping with one and

beginning another. I've thought a lot about the grief 'process' in the time since and wondered just how representative stages on a chart really are of people's experiences. Research suggests the reality is far more complex and varied.<sup>1</sup> My grief process involved getting on a plane to Egypt shortly after my grandfather's funeral, with very little in the way of a plan of what I would do once I arrived. As it turned out, I would stay for years.

Several days after arriving in Egypt, I moved into an apartment shared by two Latin American women, Maria\* and Julieta\* who had converted to Islam.<sup>2</sup> It was then I came to think about another significant life experience that has also been relentlessly categorized: conversion. Living with my flatmates as they attempted to navigate their way through life with a new religious identity in a foreign country, I found myself wondering how representative the commonly outlined stages of conversion are to people's lived experience. I thought perhaps because conversion can be a chosen process rather than a wholly forced one like grief, maybe there was reason to categorize; that there might be more commonalities in how it is experienced. I soon learned there are some similarities, but it is also a complex and varied phenomenon, as scholars of the field recognize in a growing body of literature.<sup>3</sup>

Broadly defined, conversion is, according to McGuire "a transformation of one's self concurrent with a transformation of one's basic meaning system and it changes the sense of who one is and how one belongs in the social situation."<sup>4</sup> Rambo's process model of conversion, one of the most widely accepted in the field, outlines the stages as "context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment, and consequences."<sup>5</sup> These stages occur, he argues, "in a dynamic force field of people, events, ideologies, institutions, expectations and orientations."<sup>6</sup>

The term conversion tends to conjure up images of people changing religion, but it has long been defined with a broader meaning that also includes changes within a faith. Take, for instance, Nock's 1933 work—still considered to be influential within the field—which defines conversion as:

the reorientation of the soul of an individual, his [sic] deliberate turning from indifference or from an earlier form of piety to another, a turning which implies a consciousness that a great change is involved, that the old was wrong and the new is right.<sup>7</sup>

My academic focus is on militant salafism.<sup>8</sup> Reading these lines, I think of those who come to hold militant salafist belief systems; more so, when considering Baer's definition in his study *Conversion and Conquest in Ottoman Europe*, which he prefaces by stating:

I take an integrated approach to conversion, linking conversion of self, others, and space, and include the dimension of power and the context of war and conquest.<sup>9</sup>

He goes on to contend that

...conversion is a decision or experience followed by a gradually unfolding, dynamic process through which an individual embarks on religious transformation. This can entail an intensification of belief and practice of one's own religion, moving from one level of observation to another, or exchanging the beliefs and practices in which one was raised for those of another religious tradition. In both cases, a person becomes someone else because his or her internal mind-set and/or external actions are transformed. In the case of intensification where one did not give other than cursory thought or attention to the theology of one's faith or engage in keeping wholeheartedly to its

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requirements, one devotes one's mind and body fully to understanding and embracing the religion.<sup>10</sup>

I did not always make such an identification. It came as a result of my time in Egypt and elsewhere, some of which was spent interacting with adherents of militant salafist belief systems, as well as those who had disaffiliated from them. Readers might take issue with conceiving adopting a militant salafist belief system as a form of religious conversion, given, for example, recent debates about whether the group 'The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant' is Islamic amidst its claims to be authentically following the Prophetic Methodology while carrying out horrific acts of violence.<sup>11</sup> I would contend the benefit of conceptualizing a person's coming to hold of a militant salafist belief system as a conversion is that conversion studies has a rich history of navigating such issues within the realm of what are termed conversions to 'deviant' groups.<sup>12</sup> These are groups that claim a pure or enlightened religious practice but proffer and act upon an interpretation of religious edicts that others outside their group contend deviates from the religion, and in the practice of the majority of its adherents. Militant salafist groups could therefore be considered as deviant in this context.

Conversions to militant salafism, or radicalization as it is more commonly called, often seem particularly drastic. This is in part because militant salafist belief systems call for a disavowal of and disassociation from one's culture, society and, in many instances, one's own family. In their most extreme form, they involve a physical relocation and participating in and supporting armed conflict, conquest and acts of violence against non-believers in the name of the belief system. Most militant salafis have not been raised with these belief systems. In this respect, major changes (a conversion, I would argue) are required for all who adopt them, regardless of their religion of birth.

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Maria and Julieta were not adherents of militant salafist belief systems. Maria held more conservative views than Julieta. In the categorisations of some, Maria would probably be considered salafi. Recently converted, Maria and Julieta were in Egypt to study Arabic, and it was by happenstance that I came to live with them. This experience, alongside my other interactions in Egypt and elsewhere, profoundly changed me, impacting not only on how I interacted with people, but also how I understood my chosen field of academic interest. It was how I came to understand conversion when in Egypt, coupled with my study of militant salafist belief systems and interactions with those adhering to and disaffiliated from them, which led me to consider one's coming to adhere to militant salafist beliefs would be better conceived as conversion rather than radicalization.

In Egypt, I saw for myself that conversion was a complex experiential phenomenon, which does not take place as a sudden rapid radical break but occurs over a period of time. It occurs, as Rambo and Farhadian note, within a context of “starts, stops, diversions, and even reversals.”<sup>13</sup> I would contend that it is also iterative. These starts and stops and diversions can form their own distinct cycles, because conversion is also not without significant consequences, and involves a complex navigation of identity spaces and culture(s) that both pre and post date a rite of conversion or conversion-as-commitment practice. It also often involves mobility, as the case of my flatmates demonstrates, and so there are sometimes multiple navigations of these stages in different locations and contexts, all of which further complicates the process and its trajectory.

Having an inside view of conversion led me to increasingly question the outside view I had previously held of radicalization, which only grew stronger as I interacted with people who held militant salafist beliefs and those who had disaffiliated from these belief systems. I could not help but think about how radicalization is often portrayed as a sudden or fast

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acting linear process that is only forward moving. But as I have seen, heard and experienced, radicalization, like conversation, often involves a constellation of factors that can both pre and post-date a commitment event or living-out of practices, which mark a person's following of that belief system. How it, too, can be iterative and varied in its trajectory, stopping, starting, and reversing in an ever-constant negotiation of the force field(s) in which it takes place.

It is not my intent to theorize in this piece, but rather to reflect on my lived experience. As Rambo notes of conversion theories (and the same would follow, I posit, for radicalization):

Theories of conversion often tell us more about the one making the attribution than the person or group that has converted. Generally, the theory is an attempt by a scholar to make sense out of something otherwise inexplicable to his/her worldview.<sup>14</sup>

My theorising would only serve to reveal that I am still trying to make sense of the processes I study and of my experiences away; in which some things became more explicable, and others, more confusing—challenging what I thought I knew.

What I present here is my effort at making sense of an extraordinary experience. It is a reflection on learning through lived experience in Egypt and elsewhere and how this influenced my views on conversion, radicalization and deradicalization in the militant salafist context. Informed by an autoethnographic approach that incorporates my feelings and subjectivities into these reflections, I consider how my lived experience challenged the conceptions and knowledge I held, and how I realized the importance of not only looking more critically at processes, but seeing beyond them into the differences, complexities and contradictions of lived experience in significant life events such as

radicalization/conversion.

### **Why an autoethnographic approach?**

In autoethnography, the proximity and immediacy of lived experience is the “epistemological point of departure and return.”<sup>15</sup> As such, the reflections in this piece mostly relate to my lived experience, rather than a research project focused solely on observations of other people. As Adams, Jones and Ellis note:

Autoethnographies begin with the thoughts, feelings, identities, and experiences that make us uncertain—knocking us for sense-making loops—and that make us question, reconsider, and reorder our understandings of ourselves, others, and our worlds.<sup>16</sup>

For me it began with death, identity and the sense of one’s place in the world when we lost the head of our family and I reacted by getting on a plane to Egypt.

Autoethnography involves “understanding, and writing from, through, and with personal experiences in relation to and in the context of the experiences of others.”<sup>17</sup> In Egypt, my experiences became intertwined with those with whom I lived or closely interacted. Using an autoethnographic approach allows me to embrace this entanglement of my lived experiences alongside others’, and to reflect on them in a way that also takes into account their cultural and societal contexts.

By recognizing and using these “personal-cultural entanglements,” I can better explain the challenges of navigating changing “experiences, identities and cultures,” in the context of my lived experiences of conversion, and highlight the impact of these in a way I never could if I was not sharing part of the experience.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, one of the key benefits of an

autoethnographic approach is argued to be that “insider knowledge can be used to call attention to the complexities of commonly held, taken-for-granted assumptions.”<sup>19</sup> This is done through the connection of “personal (insider) experience, insights, and knowledge to larger (relational, cultural, political) conversations, contexts, and conventions.”<sup>20</sup>

As Bleiker notes in his piece outlining the benefits of autoethnography for the study of International Relations, such approaches

can become a way of understanding otherwise inaccessible social and political relations which are important to forming and sustaining political community. Learning from such experiences can be crucial even through the so-produced insight may never be confirmed by empirical validation or falsification methods.<sup>21</sup>

In this respect, my lived experiences have also brought me new ways of considering a range of issues in my area of study, not only relating to conversion/radicalization, but also how groups espousing militant salafist belief systems form and sustain their communities, and the social interactions and other mechanisms they use to cultivate converts and maintain cohesion. It is to these experiences I now turn.

### **On Identity and Creating Meaning in Life**

One of the things I noticed most as I first shared apartment life with Maria and Julieta was their dedication to creating meaning in life through their new religion. I found it in stark contrast to the deep ambivalence I had at that time towards life, death and my own place in the world. On reflection, I find it striking I became so interested in how they created meaning and identity in their lives rather than looking at my own identity, which over the course of my time in Egypt was defined in part for me, in opposition to the things I was not;

married, mother, Muslim, as questions as to why I was none of these things were repeatedly posed to me by some of those with whom I interacted.

I later came to realize that it was a process not dissimilar to one Maria and Julieta were facing. They were Muslim, but they were foreign; they were seen through the lens of their culture and nationality, but wanted, it initially seemed to me, to be identified through their practice of religion. Both had arrived to Egypt single and quickly married. Maria had only recently escaped a violent marriage that appeared to have been an early part of her conversion. They were also ‘banned’ from marrying by the organization that had helped to fund their trip. I wondered why they risked getting married. Both had wed men who were foreign, but not of their nationality, further complicating their future life paths. Their husbands were living elsewhere as they completed their studies.

Marriage in Islam is often referred to as one half of *deen* (the religion). I wondered whether being unmarried when feeling foreign in a land you thought would practice Islam correctly, and in which you thought you would be unquestionably accepted, made them feel as if their *ibadaah* (worship) was not correct if they remained single. At times I certainly felt as if I was not seen as living correctly; it was in the looks given to me, particularly by other women, some disapproving, others almost pitiful, when I explained that I was not married and did not have children, as if somehow that meant my existence had no value. I can only imagine this type of questioning must have been much harder for Maria and Julieta—particularly if it was presented as a failing in their religious duty, or made them feel that way. I doubt they anticipated this when they envisioned living in Egypt.

The reality of living in a Muslim majority country, as Maria and Julieta found, was not at all as they had expected, and was quite confronting. Their idealized expectations did not meet

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the realities of religious practice in Egypt. They were not alone in this experience. I too had an idealized vision of Egypt that was nothing like the reality I experienced, and we often spoke about how different and challenging we found it, particularly as women and without the presence of a chaperone to ward off some, but not all of the harassment, and help with the general navigation of life. As a female who liked to wander the world solo and cherished independence, I found it extremely confronting to want to remain independent but also want a chaperone as a form of respite from the exhaustion, and at times outright threats to my safety, being independent entailed. Later, I would come to live alone, and spent many nights with a knife under my pillow, either by virtue of an unwanted visitor banging on my door knowing I was alone inside, or armed men in my hallway. I lost count of how many times I was followed or harassed on the street when walking alone. This took place despite my wonderful friends and neighbors in my community who looked out for me.

My idealized version of Egypt was very different to Maria and Julieta's. But it was equally shattered upon living in the society. None of us had anticipated the lack of law and order, the all-pervading corruption. Nor had we anticipated how difficult it could be to even cross a street safely, the dangerous (if not 'crazy' in the words of my flatmates) driving, the near constant sexual harassment at times both physical and verbal, and the sense of disempowerment brought about by an inability to do anything about it. For a time the police all but vanished from public view. A man could grab at you in broad daylight, on the street, in front of people—and do so, I discovered, with impunity. Of course, this was not always the case, but it did happen and all too often. Your first instinct to defend yourself was not always the wisest; if no one intervened to stop the groping, it was unlikely they would intervene to stop the person striking you back if you did lash out to defend yourself—as another friend experienced. Collectively, this all made me feel tremendously disempowered and dislocated. In this experience, too, I was not alone.

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Many male and female friends and acquaintances with whom I regularly associated felt some form of disconnection and disempowerment. We were from all walks of life and political and religious orientations. Some were foreigners newly arrived to the country, some were refugees. Others had come ‘home’ only to find a country they did not recognize, or having lived elsewhere their entire lives, were coming ‘home’ to a country they knew only from the stories of family, which did not match the reality they were experiencing. Still others, who had never left their country, felt as if they no longer belonged. They all railed at the corruption, feared for their safety and that of their family, felt unsafe on the roads and wanted some form of law and order to take hold and make things better. That sense of being in but at the same time feeling outside of where we lived seemed to connect us all regardless of our nationality, religion or politics. What fascinates me is how similar many of our thoughts were in terms of disconnectedness and the ills of society, but how differently we all dealt with the situation. While we recognized our disconnectedness and many of the same ills, how we processed these thoughts, what we attributed to our thinking that way, or even the causes of and remedies for societal ills, were all different.

The answer my flatmates offered up for the ills of society was “that they do not practice the correct form of Islam here.” I remember the first time Maria and Julieta said that to me, when they had asked how I was going. We were talking about some of our experiences of harassment on the street, and Maria told me she was harassed regularly despite wearing the *niqab* (veil covering all of the head and shoulders except for the eyes). Both Maria and Julieta then went on to explain how religion was not practiced correctly in Egypt. I thought to myself ‘what an incredibly arrogant thing to say, these girls, so new to the religion, presuming to know better.’ I was, in retrospect, no better in my scornful comments about society in those early days, and in my judgment of them.

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As we had more discussions and as time went on, I came to slowly understand what they meant and why they thought that way. I had wondered if when they converted they had an idealized version of their religion that was conceptualized outside of any particular cultural and societal contexts. In her study of conversion in Sweden, Sultan had findings suggesting this might be the case, with a quote from one participant who had converted mirroring the sentiment of Maria and Julieta when they spoke of how they thought Islam was not being practiced properly in Egypt.

I haven't discovered anything in Islam that I find bad but I have however, discovered how Muslims really act and that is not always in accordance with Islam; that has made me disappointed.'<sup>22</sup>

In *Being German, Becoming Muslim*, Ozyurek narrates a conversation between two German converts that also highlights a similar sentiment:

Murad Hofmann...a German convert to Islam, writes that toward the end of his long life, the renowned German Jewish convert Muhammad Asad told him that he doubted that he would again find his way to Islam, as he had done in 1926, if he were a young man in today's Muslim world. "With some bitterness he shared the frequently heard opinion that one could find lots of Muslims in the Orient, but precious little Islam these days, whereas the Occident had very few Muslims, but now much Islam."<sup>23</sup>

Faced in Egypt with what one of my acquaintances explained was an 'Islam of the street' or 'the people' Maria and Julieta chose to blame the incorrect practice of Islam for the ills of Egypt. If Islam was embraced and practiced correctly, their logic went, these things shouldn't happen. But humans are creatures of contradiction, and rules are not always followed. Navigating them was problematic, even for Maria, who was very committed to the

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*deen*, and her *ibadaah*—protecting her *hayaah* (modesty) with the *niqab*, and practicing hygiene and grooming according to the *sunnah* (way of the Prophet Muhammad), which she described on several occasions, encouraging me to do the same.<sup>24</sup> Yet, she struggled with *fajr* (dawn) prayers. She would sometimes ask me to make sure she woke up, and so it came that I would wander up the hallway in the early morning after the call to prayer and check that she was awake.

I had assumed that because Maria and Julieta saw the correct practice of Islam as the solution to societal ills they might also view their home culture in a negative light. But yet I never heard them speak negatively of their homeland or culture when talking about their pre-conversion experiences. Perhaps it was because they, like me, were busy confronting a new context that was far from the ideals we had constructed, and required a negotiation of our own place in this reality, and perhaps for them, even their conversion. What did become apparent was that although the reality was not to their expectations, it never made them question their faith. How they dealt with that challenge to their ideal and the disconnectedness living in another reality brought was to bolster their *ibadaah*, and to dedicate themselves to seeking *ilm* (knowledge).

Maria said Islam brought her peace. It helped her turn her life around, and an abusive and violent first marriage in her early conversion process did not weaken her faith, but instead strengthened it. As I watched her navigate life in Egypt, a similar strengthening seemed to be occurring in response to reconciling the differences between her vision of an Islamic society and the realities of living in Egypt. For Maria, the dissonance she saw seemed to intensify her desire to better understand and practice Islam correctly. Julieta confronted the same challenges and shared the same views, although as she remarked to me, her more positive life experiences and upbringing may have seen her better equipped to deal with

such challenges. She seemed more confident in her own *ibadaah* and in navigating her space in the world, even as her friend encouraged her to don the *niqab* and adopt a more conservative practice.

In literature on conversion and how converts deal with navigating between the ideal and the reality, focus is placed on the role of socialization in shaping how converts conceive of their experiences. A convert's conceiving of experiences takes place in a social context; that is, it can be influenced by social interactions and reinforcements. In this respect, converting is not just about changing one's belief system, but can also be about the group or community that one is joining, and how beliefs are sustained, shaped and even reformulated through social interactions. As Sultan notes,

If in the receiving group there is a culture of strong control over individual followers, opportunities for reflection are limited, meaning in turn that the tendency to idealization increases sharply among followers who are still interested in staying in the group. Here one also finds a greater need to reinterpret one's own life story. On the other hand, groups characterized by openness to their followers and that exercise less social control, provide considerably greater opportunities for independent thinking among future members. Consequently there is less need to idealize as well as reinterpret.<sup>25</sup>

Maria and Julieta were outside of any group in Egypt. Any idealization process that may have taken place when they converted in their home country was not only undermined by their lived reality in Egypt, but also by the absence of the social context of a re-enforcing group. This left them free to walk their own path, to interpret and navigate independent of the influence of such social interactions.

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I often wondered why they came to Egypt. Did they face what they felt was familial obstruction of their pursuit of their new faith back home? If they did, it did not stop them from converting. Neither, it seemed, intended on going back home. Perhaps this too was a reason for marrying. I wondered if the appeal of living in what they thought would be an Islamic society was because it offered the space to live without the intrusion of their home culture or without feeling strange practicing their religion in a country where they were in the minority. My thinking on this quickly came undone because rather than reject their culture or cast it in a negative light, they brought it with them. I heard a lot of Latin American pop music when I lived with Maria and Julieta. Hearing that coming from Julieta's room did not surprise me, but Maria's listening to music I did find surprising, given her outward appearance as salafi in religious orientation.

When I first encountered Maria, it was outside our apartment, and so she was dressed in an *abaya* (loose over-garment covering all but head, hands and feet) and *niqab*, and also had both her feet and hands covered. She fully met the stereotype I had of niqabis in those early days. When I arrived at the apartment the next day she was in her room. The first thing I noticed when she came out was that she was dressed in a singlet top and tight pants with a full length side cut out, and as she passed me she kind of danced her way down the corridor, singing to the Latin American pop music coming from our other flatmate's room. In truth, I was far more confronted by this than what I was when meeting her swathed in black with only her eyes visible. I had assumed that because Maria wore the niqab she would disavow things like listening to pop music and that she would dress conservatively—even in the house. Somehow I had also gotten it into my mind that she would not only be quietly spoken but also shy and aloof, because I had come to interpret salafi doctrine as encouraging women to have these characteristics in their pursuit of being the 'ideal *Muslimah*' (Muslim woman).

When I think back to the stereotype I had at the time, I realize I was shocked not by Maria's outward appearance, which I had interpreted to mean that she was salafi, but rather because she was, to me, so recognizably not salafi at home, or not what I thought a salafi would be. I cringe when writing these recollections now but I want to share what I thought and why, so I can explain what I later came to understand.

At our first meetings, I saw Maria as defined by her clothing. I looked at her outside attire and characterized her by it. I assumed that she would be a-cultural, as it were. That she would not listen to music or watch movies—that she lived a somewhat absolute existence defined solely by her religiosity, and in which there was no room for these other expressions of identity and culture. As a result, I was shocked when inside the reality was altogether different.

Prior to sharing a living space with Maria, I can see now that I saw women like her as one dimensional, which was even clear in the terminology I used to describe her, as a niqabi, as a salafi. An outside 'book perspective' influenced my doing so; I formed this conception on the basis of what I had read in both academic and salafi literature. I was influenced by the salafi literature's focus on identifying solely as Muslim and in the strict salafi definition of how the 'ideal' Muslim should behave, which I interpreted to mean disavowing elements of culture (like music and film). While this may be an ideal that it is depicted in the literature, it did not represent Maria and it was not her lived reality. But yet, this is how I saw her, until an insider perspective taught me otherwise. For Maria and Julieta, being Muslim did not involve such absolutes. They were of their culture and Muslim, rather than being only Muslim in their self-identification. While Maria and Julieta wanted to be accepted as Muslims in Egypt, it did not define them. But neither, it seemed, did they want to be solely defined by their nationality or culture. They saw no problem in being both. In truth, I had

the problem and deeply regret some of the ignorant attitudes I brought with me into the house.

### **On lessons learned**

Looking back at my conduct, I can see my treatment of Maria in such an ignorant manner must have been confronting. It has made me look much harder at my own biases. It also made me think more carefully about the costs of conversion: how interactions change, how you are perceived differently, and how alienating and hurtful that must be, especially if your change is something you believe is rightly guided and for the good. Being recognized for your piety is one thing, but for it to be the only thing that is seen to define you, and in a way that is often seen as negative by others, must be difficult.

My time in Egypt and interaction with Maria and Julieta has allowed me to better understand and see the consequences of conversion. Negotiating relationships in your new space can be challenging. Long-standing relationships and social ties become strained. Families become estranged. Maria's familial background was not as stable or positive as Julieta's but I got the sense from both of them that their conversions had come with significant cost. I also realized that costs are not just in the lead up to a conversion and in the immediate aftermath, but can be ongoing. There is cost involved not only in leaving the old but also in embracing and coming to terms with the new.

Converting involves changes to a person's identity and their way of relating in and to the world, and so can fundamentally and irrevocably change the nature of familial and social relations as well as broader interactions within a society, not always in a positive way. These changes are not easily navigated or resolved because conversion is a lengthy process rather than a solitary event. As I saw for myself, renegotiations of self and identity continue in

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force fields that are not static. Acceptance in the new world, often idealized, is not always guaranteed. If a person moves during or after the conversion processes, these negotiations can start all over again as the person must navigate a new society. How these costs are framed, as positive or negative, seems to depend not only on the belief system but also on context, location and the nature of social interactions surrounding the conversion process. If conversion processes take place across several locations and/or with several different groupings of social interactions, it becomes more complex, as I saw in Egypt.

Perhaps the most important lesson I learned was that when a person is confronted with dissonance and a conflict between their ideal and reality, even when the reality is negative and might be seen by outsiders as a catalyst to reconsider a position or faith, quite often the opposite occurs. Faith is strengthened and engagement with it intensifies. I also learned that conceptions of self and perceptions about how one is seen by others are critically important, and that these conceptions and perceptions are not static, can influence each other and also change with experiences, encounters, and location. I grew to appreciate how conversion often takes place in spite of strong resistance from family and social networks. While we often understand conversion as happening to those who are vulnerable and easily brainwashed, I learned that it also requires great strength and resilience precisely because it is such a costly and challenging endeavor. Finally, I learned that while conversion can seem to be a fast acting process, the antecedent stages or precipitating factors that take place before a conversion as commitment event or outward lived practice, are often not externally visible and occur over a longer period of time. In other words, it may not become apparent that a person is converting or has converted until they are well along in the process, and even when they are in that process many elements of it are not visible to outsiders.

Conversion research provides an important wellspring of knowledge and insight that has

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clear applicability to radicalization. It also has much to teach those of us who are interested in radicalization and deradicalization in the militant salafist context. It does not treat its subject matter in a hostile fashion, as a threat to be dealt with, but rather approaches studying the phenomenon of conversion from a position of empathy.<sup>26</sup> To be clear, an empathetic approach does not mean condoning the activities of the groups one studies, but to paraphrase an observation made by Schmid and Jongman on terrorism studies' tendency towards a counter terrorism focus, conversion studies does not see itself as a firefighter, but rather as a student of combustion.<sup>27</sup> Research is undertaken with the goal of understanding for understanding's sake, not for counteracting a threat because the researcher sees themselves as a 'firefighter' there to help fight the fire, or a part of a counter terrorism effort as it were. In the past, a good deal of radicalization concentrated research has focused on generating policy prescriptions, or building indicator sets for use in countering the threat and often seemed to be pursuing an illusive, universal model of radicalization. Conversion studies, too, is in part driven by a quest for categorization, but is marked by equal attention paid to lived experience and individual differences in conversion processes. It is in the empathetic attention to the latter, the lived and the unique, where conversion studies can most inform efforts to understand 'radicalization.' This is because a key starting point of research is the recognition of difference in experiences and that a process of conversion can come with very significant consequences and ongoing costs. These consequences and costs not only impact upon how a conversion progresses but also any disaffiliation that may take place.

Earlier, I wrote about how I had a one-dimensional view of my flatmate, as being solely defined by her religiosity. I have learned over years of interacting with those in the militant salafist milieu that it is likewise problematic to have a one dimensional view of those who hold militant salafist beliefs, to assume that people who may be sympathetic to these views

don't have normal day to day interactions in the world, won't engage in conversation or are entirely cloistered off from the societies in which they live. I learned that here too there are significant differences between what we understand as the proscribed ideal and the lived reality and practices of those who hold these beliefs. Militant salafis can also struggle to uphold what they perceive as the *deen* and face identity issues as they navigate their place in the belief system and society more generally. Their conversion comes at great cost to their familial relationships; ties can become strained or irrevocably damaged.

If we understand radicalization as conversion, we can draw from a rich body of research that explores these costs and consequences in their varied individual, familial and societal contexts. We could then come to a better understanding of how people struggle to disassociate from their families, society and culture and why, despite leaving behind their old way of life to embrace a new belief system being a costly and isolating activity, this often does not stop but rather intensifies some processes associated with conversion. It is also useful for building a more comprehensive understanding of how and why conversions take place, often in the face of strong familial opposition. A better understanding of how costs and consequences are navigated and rationalized by those converting would help families facing the devastating loss of a loved one to these belief systems.

Further exploring the body of research within conversion studies on deviant groups might help us understand why it is that radicalization to the absolute and deviant belief systems of militant salafist groups is proving so popular and so hard to address in terms of both reducing the number of persons entering the militant salafist orbit and encouraging those already within it to disaffiliate. This in turn might prompt more careful thinking in the policy realm before pushing forward with reactive counter narrative programs.

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When faced with challenges to their idealized vision or beliefs, many converts or those in the process of converting will instead double down on this vision, and so such programs, if not well thought out, have the potential to be counterproductive. Ill thought out counter narratives could also compound the issue of identity, both in terms of conception of self and how one perceives how others see them. They might bolster identification with these beliefs because they provide a visible opposition—something against which to define oneself.

This was clear in my own lived experience and that of others with whom I shared experiences in Egypt; you come to an awareness that you are being defined by what others tell you or assume that you are not. If one's identity is in flux then a counter narrative runs the risk of providing those in the early stages of uncertainly flirting with militant salafist beliefs something concrete against which to identify. In later stages of conversion, as people struggle to navigate the process and the costs it entails, a consequence could be the consolidation of one's identity around this belief system in opposition to the challenge posed by a counter narrative. This type of process taking place might further drive a decision to commit to these beliefs, either through a commitment act or lived practice.

As I have learned through my experiences, because identification takes place largely in the personal sphere, unless a person is a prolific user of social media as a form of diary or openly communicates with others in relation to such sentiments, these processes would be hard to identify. Consequently, conversion processes that have been gestating for some time can appear as sudden when they publicly manifest in lived practice as commitment. Moreover, if one is unfamiliar with what constitutes lived practice acts or commitments in the militant salafist realm, these too could pass unnoticed.

It is clear that we still have much to learn about why young men and increasingly young women are drawn to deviant groups and belief systems. It is my hope that as the field of radicalization and deradicalization studies continues to mature it is marked by a more outward looking perspective that reaches into other disciplines and fields such as conversion studies. They can help us to better understand complex life events such as the taking up of militant salafist belief systems.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See for example George Bonanno's work *The Other Side of Sadness: What the New Science of Bereavement Tells Us About Life After Loss*, which provides a good overview of new research into grief and loss. Bonanno, George A. *The Other Side of Sadness: What the New Science of Bereavement Tells Us About Life After Loss*. New York: Basic Books, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Not their real names.

<sup>3</sup> See Chapter One of *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion* for an excellent outline of the growing scope and output of the field. Rambo, Lewis R., and Charles E. Farhadian. *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014, 1-17.

<sup>4</sup> McGuire, Meredith B. *Religion, The Social Context*. Belmont: Wadsworth Pub. Co., 1997, 73

<sup>5</sup> Rambo, Lewis R. *Understanding Religious Conversion*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993, 5, 17.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>7</sup> Nock, Arthur Darby. *Conversion: The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933, 7.

<sup>8</sup> Salafis are those who follow the example and *tarbiyyah* (upbringing/education) of the first three generations of Muslims and seek to emulate their practice of Islam as they understand it to be prescribed. Salafism usually refers to an approach to Islam that aims for reform of society in order to return it to the pure state as existed during the time of the first generations. Militant salafis are those individuals and groups who advocate and/or adopt armed jihad to enforce their *salafi* derived worldview. While we could refer to militant salafism as an all-encompassing belief system, there exists multiple interpretations of what is prescribed as the Prophetic practice of Islam during the time of the first generations, and accordingly while there are significant similarities in interpretations, militant salafis can also fight one another believing their particular interpretation is rightly guided and all others are not. Thus, there are multiple militant salafist belief systems to which one can convert, with those proffered by al-Qaeda, and the Islamic State of Iraq and ash Sham being two of the more prominent and influential in the milieu, and which are in direct competition and conflict with one another.

<sup>9</sup> Baer, Marc David. *Honored by the Glory of Islam: Conversion and Conquest in Ottoman Europe*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008, 13.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> See for example the article by Ayyan Hirsi Ali "A Problem from Heaven" and the rebuttal "Islamic Scripture is not the Problem" by William McCants in the July/August 2015 issue of *Foreign Affairs*. Ali, Ayaan Hirsi. "A Problem From Heaven." *Foreign Affairs* 94, no. 4 (July 2015): 36-45, and McCants, William. "Islamic Scripture Is Not the Problem." *Foreign Affairs* 94, no. 4 (July 2015): 46-52.

<sup>12</sup> See for example the pioneering work done on this topic by Lofland and Stark in Lofland, John, and Rodney Stark. "Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective." *American Sociological Review* 30, no. 6 (December 1965): 862-875.

<sup>13</sup> Lewis and Farhadian, *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, 6.

<sup>14</sup> Rambo, Lewis R. "Theories of Conversion: Understanding and Interpreting Religious Change." *Social Compass* 46, no. 3 (September 1999): 261.

<sup>15</sup> Adams, Tony E., Stacy Linn Holman Jones, and Carolyn Ellis. *Autoethnography*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015, 23.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 47

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 23

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 14, 22

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 31

<sup>20</sup> Adams, Holman, and Ellis, *Understanding Qualitative Research: Autoethnography*, 25.

<sup>21</sup> Brigg, Morgan, and Roland Bleiker. "Autoethnographic International Relations: Exploring the Self as a Source of Knowledge." *Review Of International Studies* 36, no. 3 (July 2010): 795.

<sup>22</sup> Sultan, Madeleine. "Choosing Islam: a Study of Swedish Converts." *Social Compass* 46, no. 3 (September 1999): 334.

<sup>23</sup> Ozyurek, Esra. *Being German, Becoming Muslim: Race, Religion, and Conversion in the New Europe*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2015, .

<sup>24</sup> Sunnah has various meanings but the way in which Maria used it was in the context of her following the Prophet Muhammad's way and prescribed conduct.

<sup>25</sup> Sultan, "Choosing Islam: a Study of Swedish Converts," 333.

<sup>26</sup> See for the example the outline of the field provided in chapter one of Rambo, and Farhadian, *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, 1-17.

<sup>27</sup> Schmid, Alex P. and Albert J. Jongman. *Political Terrorism: A New Guide to Actors, Authors, Concepts, Data Bases, Theories and Literature*. Amsterdam: North Holland, 1988: 179.