
From Conversion to Violent Extremism: Empirical Analysis of Three Canadian Muslim Converts to Islam

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Abstract

The scholarship on radicalization to violence often treats born Muslims and converts interchangeably; far too little research is focused on understanding the factors and processes driving converts in particular. This is a problem given that there is overwhelming evidence demonstrating that Muslim converts are overrepresented among Western foreign fighters. Data from Canada corroborates this larger point: converts are highly representative in attempted and successful domestic terrorist attacks. Our article explores conversion to Islam and political violence as it relates to recent trends in Canadian Jihadist militancy. We distill the theoretical literature on conversion and radicalization to seven explanatory factors, including ideology; social networks; charismatic authority; political grievances; psychology; socio-economic and criminal circumstance; and enabling environments. We then build original empirical case studies – based on expert interviews and open-sourced documents – of three Canadian converts who engaged in terrorism, including John Maguire, Michael Zehaf-Bibeau, and Damian Clairmont. Using these case studies, we contextualize, analyze, and expand our collective understanding of conversion to violence, providing lessons for theory and methodology.

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Introduction

Radicalization to violence is a persistent and evolving challenge. The scholarship on the subject, however, often treats born Muslims and converts interchangeably. Although Salafi-jihadist inspired radicalization has received substantial attention, scholars rarely focus their

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efforts on understanding the factors driving converts in particular.² This is a problem given that there is overwhelming evidence demonstrating that Muslim converts are overrepresented among Western foreign fighters.³ Data from Canada corroborates this point: converts are highly representative in attempted and successful domestic terrorist attacks.⁴ The Canadian Networks for Research on Terrorism, Security and Society's Canadian Incident Database list 1,800 incidents of violent extremism in Canada between 1960 and 2014.⁵ The only two deaths attributed to ISIS-inspired violence since 2014 were conducted by Canadian converts: Martin Couture-Rouleau conducted a vehicular attack against members of the Canadian Forces, killing Warrant officer Patrice Vincent; Michael Zehaf-Bibeau (Z-B) fatally shot Corporal Nathan Cirilo – a Canadian soldier on ceremonial sentry duty at the Canadian National War Memorial in Ottawa – and subsequently stormed Parliament Hill. Canadian converts have likewise played a prominent role as foreign fighters: Damian Clairmont, a convert from Calgary, joined Syria's *Jabhat Al-Nusra*, an al-Qaeda-affiliated group, in 2012, and was killed fighting in 2014; John Maguire joined ISIS in 2012 and was featured prominently in ISIS propaganda, threatening “indiscriminate” attacks against Canadians.

Several research questions arise. What factors help explain why converts to Islam are susceptible to the lure of violent extremism? What are the causal pathways leading from conversion to extremism and violence? And from the Canadian context, do existing theories of Jihadist radicalization accurately explain the observed variation among Canadian converts and Canadian-born Muslims; what antecedent conditions account for the radicalization of

² Salafi-Jihadism focuses on the religious basis of jihadism. According to Maher, Salafi jihadism is based on five doctrines of faith: jihad in the sense of holy war, tawhid, (the oneness of God), hakimiyya (meaning true Islamic government), al-wala wal-bara (loyalty to divine truth and rejection of untruth and polytheism), and takfir (the naming of disbelievers). Shiraz Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea* (Oxford, 2016).

³ Jessica Stern and J.M. Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror* (New York: HarperCollins, 2015):81; B. Van Ginkel, and E. Entenmann (Eds.), “The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon in the European Union. Profiles, Threats & Policies,” *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 7: 2 (2016); Angel Rabasa and Cheryl Benard, *Eurojihad: Patterns of Islamist Radicalization and Terrorism in Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015): 6; Olivier Roy, *Jihad and Death: The Global Appeal of Islamic State* (New York: Oxford, 2017): 20.

⁴ Alex Wilner and Irfan Yar, “Canadian Terrorists by the Numbers: An Assessment of Canadians Joining and Supporting Terrorist Groups,” *Macdonald-Laurier Institute*, 2019: 22.

⁵ Canadian Network for Research on Terrorism, Security and Society (TSAS), “TSAS Workshop Series,” June 8, 2018.

Canadian converts, and do these factors transcend beyond religious and political context?

This article explores conversion to Islam and political violence as it relates to recent trends in Canadian Jihadist militancy. Our argument unfolds in three sections. Section one distills the theoretical literature on conversion and radicalization in an attempt to identify the core factors that help explain the phenomenon. It does so by providing a concise literature review of the emerging subfield disaggregated into seven core explanatory factors that are generally accepted by the wider scholarship as the most important elements linking conversion to violent radicalization. These factors include: ideology, social networks, charismatic authority, political grievances, psychology, socio-economic and criminal circumstance, and enabling environments. Section two of the article provides original empirical case studies – based on expert interviews and open-sourced documents – of three Canadian converts who engaged in terrorism, including the aforementioned Maguire, Zehaf-Bibeau, and Clairmont. These three individuals share important characteristics: each was single during the radicalization process; none had previously travelled abroad before conversion or had known contacts with foreign extremists; each appears to have been affiliated with ISIS and were eventually killed while participating in terrorism; and each expressed abhorrence of Canadian (and Western) foreign policies. The case studies themselves are informed by original interview data collected with individuals closely and personally related to Maguire, Zehaf-Bibeau, and Clairmont, including Ms. Christianne Boudreau, Clairmont's mother, Imams Navaid Aziz and Zijad Delić, both involved in deradicalization initiatives across Canada, and Adam Hirwa and *Anonymous*, friends of Maguire and Z-B, respectively.⁶ Finally, section three of the article, functioning as our conclusion, analyzes the case studies against the factors identified in the literature, providing lessons for theory and methodology therein, and guidelines for further research.

⁶ Ethics approval to conduct the interviews was granted by Carleton University's Office of Research Ethics. Interviews took place in 2019. They were held in person in Vancouver, Calgary, and Ottawa, Canada. All interviews were semi-structured in nature and most lasted one hour; none were recorded. All content within the article attributable to specific interviewees was included with participant permission.

Conversion to Extremism: Seven Explanatory Mechanisms

Relative to the number of foreign fighters who were born Muslim, several recent studies demonstrate an overrepresentation of converts fighting for jihadist factions in Syria and Iraq.⁷ Muslim converts are often described as having a particular “zeal” upon embracing their new faith – an idea often linked to perceived higher levels of activism (and radicalization) – as opposed to Muslims who were born into the religion. Ari Fodeman and colleagues, for instance, argue that because of their innate desire to find and dedicate themselves to a source of “congruent meaning,” converts are more likely to defend their newly found ingroup and “source of meaning” from opposing – and at times, even existential – sociopolitical threats.⁸ It follows, then, that converts, as opposed to non-converts, can show a higher level of activism – which according to the authors “fully mediated the relationship between conversion and radicalization” – and could be more likely to engage in extremist and violent behavior as a result.⁹ Sam Mullins, in his extensive study of American and British converts and radicalization to violence, points to a slightly different explanation: He finds that converts are often socially and economically marginalized in comparison to non-converts, and show greater rates of unemployment and criminality.¹⁰ Interestingly, Mullins further argues that American converts are much less likely to have gained training overseas or to have engaged in fighting abroad, and are more likely to act alone within domestic plots. Their socio-economic marginalization and an inability to achieve the American dream, Mullins argues, may drive some converts to find “belonging and acceptance” in violent jihad that may also provide “opportunities for excitement and fame” and a “chance to strike back against those who

⁷ Stern and Berger, *ISIS*, 81; Rabasa and Benard, *Eurojihad*, 6; Amarnath, Amarasingam, and Lorne L. Dawson, ““I left to be Closer to Allah”: Learning about Foreign Fighters from Family and Friends,” ISD, 2018; Bart Schuurman, P. Grol & S. Flower, “Converts and Islamist terrorism: An introduction,” ICCT Policy Brief, 7(3): 2016.

⁸ Ari Fodeman, Daniel Snook, and John Horgan. “Picking Up and Defending the Faith: Activism and Radicalism Among Muslim Converts in the United States,” *Political Psychology* 41:4 (2020): 681.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 694.

¹⁰ Sam Mullins. “Re-examining the involvement of converts in Islamist terrorism: A comparison of the US and UK,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9:6 (2015): 76.

rejected them.”¹¹ In another – uniquely diverse and in-depth – exploration of fifteen cases, Eitan Azani and Liramn Koblentz-Stenzler find a connection between the Da’wah system¹² and the radicalization of converts.¹³ The propagation of radical Islamic ideologies through Da’wah aims to “create an infrastructure of activists who are devoted to the Islamic message, the idea of renewing the Caliphate, and promoting the vision of an Islamic Nation.”¹⁴ The authors find that the central difference between converts and non-converts is the relatively short period in which a convert radicalizes and becomes connected to jihadist groups, a process that occurs as a result of their social exclusion, desire to prove themselves, and adoption of radical ideas.¹⁵ Azani and Koblentz-Stenzler’s study highlights several other components potentially informing this process: family or economic problems and personal trauma; particular personality traits, including violent tendencies and emotional responses; and a history of criminal activity.¹⁶ Concerning the last point, prisons and their effect on radicalization processes have been of particular interest to scholars; some have dubbed the “new type of jihadist” as “part terrorist, part gangster,” making use of “skills honed in lawbreaking” for engagement in violence.¹⁷ What follows is an assessment and evaluation of these and other findings stemming from the larger literature on the subject, distilled into the seven factors most often linking conversion and radicalization. These factors later animate the subsequent empirical exploration of our three Canadian case studies.

Ideology

While there may not be a standard relationship between conversion to Islam and the subsequent embrace of the Salafi-Wahhabi sect, some scholars argue that this strictly

¹¹ Ibid., 77.

¹² Da’wah (Arabic: دعوة, [ˈdæʕwæh] “invitation”, also spelt daawa, dawah, daawah or dakwah;) is the act of inviting or calling people to embrace Islam.

¹³ Eitan Azani and Liram Koblentz-Stenzler, “Muslim Converts Who Turn to Global Jihad: Radicalization Characteristics and Countermeasures,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2019): 4.

¹⁴ Ibid., 4.

¹⁵ Ibid., 6-7.

¹⁶ Ibid., 8.

¹⁷ Simon Cottee. “Reborn into Terrorism: Why are so many ISIS recruits ex-cons and converts?” *The Atlantic*, January 25, 2016

conservative theological orientation is the default position among jihadists and foreign fighters the world over. Indeed, there is no shortage of literature depicting ideology as being responsible for the radicalization of converts.¹⁸ Other experts point to a causal relationship between increases in religious practice and violent extremism.¹⁹ Though Lorne Dawson subscribes to this view, the author elsewhere concedes that converts generally have scarcer and weaker ideological underpinnings and are, after conversion, “structurally available” and more likely to fall prey to jihadist narratives.²⁰ On the other end of the spectrum, Olivier Roy entirely disputes the putative relationship between fundamentalist ideologies and radicalization, asserting that “terrorism does not arise from the radicalization of Islam, but from Islamization of radicalism.”²¹ In brief, there is an ongoing academic debate on the importance of ideology in the radicalization process of converts.

Social Networks

For converts, social networks and friendships with other Muslims are often the central sources of knowledge they need to practice the new faith. Forming networks with religious community members is generally a positive development, but some friendships can create associations that compel converts to entertain and accept potentially violent interpretations of their new faith. Emmanuel Karagiannis suggests loneliness and isolation make converts dependent on group interrelationships and, in some cases, progression to radicalization.²² Branching off from this discussion, Bruce Hoffman in his analysis of the radicalization of

¹⁸ Maha Azzam, “The Radicalization of Muslim Communities in Europe: Local and Global Dimensions,” *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* 13:2 (2007): 131-132; Anne Aly and Jason-Leigh Striegher, “Examining the Role of Religion in Radicalization to Violent Islamist Extremism,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 35:12 (2012): 859; Scott Matthew Kleinmann, “Radicalization of Homegrown Sunni Militants in the United States: Comparing Converts and Non-Converts,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 35:4 (2012): 284; Scott Flower, “Muslim Converts and Terrorism,” *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analysis* 5:11 (2013): 9.

¹⁹ Amarasingam and Dawson. “I left,”; Clara Egger and Raül Magni-Berton, “The Role of Islamist Ideology in Shaping Muslims Believers’ Attitudes toward Terrorism: Evidence from Europe,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2019): 1-24.

²⁰ Lorne Dawson, “The Study of New Religious Movements and the Radicalization of Home-Grown Terrorists: Opening a Dialogue,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 22:1 (2009): 6.

²¹ Roy, *Jihad and Death*, 8.

²² Emmanuel Karagiannis, “European Converts to Islam: Mechanisms of Radicalization,” *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 13:1 (2012): 108.

diaspora communities finds that group involvement leads individual converts to become increasingly tied to multinational terror networks.²³ Rabasa and Benard corroborate this argument by referring to converts from Spain.²⁴ Since converts lack the cultural context to weed out extremist rhetoric, they may come to rely heavily on people they meet in person or online.²⁵ Conversely, in their analysis of radicalized Danish converts, Manni Crone and Martin Harrow find that radical converts conduct terrorist operations with a degree of autonomy from external networks, and without links to organizations operated by radicals abroad, suggesting that radicalization does not solely occur directly through an interpersonal relationship with global jihadists networks.²⁶ Arguably, a subject of debate in this context is not whether social networks play a role in convert radicalization but whether radicalization of converts within social groups occurs autonomously or as a result of external and foreign actors.

Charismatic Authority

Radicalization scholars are largely in a consensus that charismatic leaders often play a crucial role in radicalizing converts by contextualizing and utilizing political or societal grievances.²⁷ Indeed, the idea of charismatic mentorship extends beyond jihadist movements and includes many examples of non-Muslim mentors, such as Vellupillai Prabhakaran of the LTTE, Abdullah Öcalan of the PKK, Joseph Kony of the Lord's Resistance Army, Shoko Asahara of Aum Shinrikyo, among others. The most popular and recent examples of charismatic jihadist mentors are Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, Osama Bin Laden, and Anwar-al-Awlaki. The accessibility of radical lectures online, and the challenge of locating extreme

²³ Bruce Hoffman, William Rosenau, Andrew J. Curiel, and Doron Zimmermann. *The Radicalization of Diasporas and Terrorism: A Joint Conference by the RAND Corporation and the Center for Security Studies*, 2007: 39.

²⁴ Rabasa and Benard, *Eurojihad*, 90-97.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 91.

²⁶ Manni Crone and Martin Harrow, "Homegrown Terrorism in the West," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 23:4 (2011): 534.

²⁷ Kleinmann, "Radicalization," 285; Karagiannis, "European Converts," 109-110. Farhad Khosrokhavar, *Inside Jihadism: Understanding Jihadi Movements Worldwide* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2009): 220; David Hoffman and Lorne Dawson. "The Neglected Role of Charismatic Authority in the Study of Terrorist Groups and Radicalization," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 37:4 (2014): 348-368.

mentors on the ground, is an evolving counterterrorism challenge. Charismatic leaders are also involved in the formation and strategic operation of militant groups.²⁸ Converts can meet such mentors in various environments and become part of their wider network. In short, terrorism experts argue that charismatic leaders are often involved in a variety of different activities, including the recruitment of would-be jihadists by channeling political grievances towards what Roy calls “fragile individuals” or what Amarnath Amarasingam and Dawson refer to as “seekers.”

Political Grievances

Several authorities argue that Western foreign policy plays a role in the radicalization of converts, shaping political grievances against which political Islam appears to have the ideological foundation to challenge Western imperialism.²⁹ For instance, Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko suggest that individuals are sometimes driven to radical action and violent extremism “in response to political trends or events.”³⁰ The authors refer to several examples to make the argument including the case of John Allen Muhammad – a convert – and his protégé Lee Boyd Malvo, who killed ten people in the Washington, DC, area in 2002.³¹ Similarly, Alison Pargeter suggests that jihadist groups have expressed opposition to Western policies and the Western way of life in general.³² In her view, converts have seen

²⁸Martha Crenshaw, *Explaining Terrorism: Causes, Processes and Consequences* (London: Routledge, 2011): 93; Ronald Crelinsten, *Counterterrorism* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2009): 36-37; F.M Moghaddam, “The staircase to terrorism: A psychological exploration,” *American Psychologist* 60:2 (2005): 165-166; Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004): 64, 104, 116-7.

²⁹ Karagiannis, “European Converts,” 107; Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, “Mechanisms of Political Radicalization: Pathways Toward Terrorism,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 20:3 (2008): 419; Alison Pargeter, *The New Frontiers of Jihad: Radical Islam in Europe* (New York: I.B.Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2008.): 172; Juan Jose Escobar Stemman, “Middle East Salafism’s Influence and the Radicalization of Muslim Communities in Europe,” *The Middle East Review of International Affairs* 10:3 (2006): 10; Alex Wilner and Claire Jehanne Dubouloz, “Transformative Radicalization,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 34:5 (2011); Wilner and Dubouloz, “Radicalization as Transformative Learning,” in *Radicalization and Counter-Radicalization*, Silva and Deflem (eds), (Emerald: Sociology of Crime, Law, and Deviance, Vol. 25, 2020).

³⁰ McCauley and Moskalenko, “Mechanisms,” 419.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 419.

³² Alison, *New Frontiers*, 172.

Islam as a religion that can stand up to Western imperialism and capitalism.³³ Building on this, Karagiannis similarly argues that jihadist literature has often made references to conflicts in places such as Chechnya, Palestine, Kashmir, and the Balkans where Muslims have suffered at the hands of “infidel” aggression.³⁴ Karagiannis points to cases such as the French terrorists Lionel Dumont and David Vallat who testified that footage from the Bosnian War or the Chechen conflicts was a trigger of their radicalization.³⁵ In disagreement with the mainstream scholarship, however, Scott Matthew Kleinmann finds that political grievances as a mass-level mechanism do not affect the radicalization of converts specifically.³⁶ While political grievances are often cited as a major source of radicalization, this paper will assess the degree to which they played a role in the radicalization of Canadian converts.

Psychological Factors

In a meta-study exploring empirical evaluations of radicalization, Oluf Gøtzsche-Astrup, notes that there is “strong evidence” that the “psychology of radicalization is essentially about normal mechanisms rather than abnormal or pathological processes,” but that core “motivational processes” nonetheless outweigh other, rational instruments of “risk and reward.”³⁷ Relatedly, there are several psychological factors identified in the literature that may predispose and motivate an individual towards violent jihadism, including emotional susceptibilities, psychology, personality, and cognitive function.³⁸ Kleinmann’s extensive study of 83 cases of radicalized individuals illustrates that psychological factors were present in 59 percent of radicalized converts but only 10 percent of born Muslims.³⁹ His inquiry finds that some converts were clinically diagnosed with mental health issues involving problems of

³³ Ibid., 172.

³⁴ Karagiannis, “European Converts,” 107.

³⁵ Ibid., 107.

³⁶ Kleinmann, “Radicalization,” 289.

³⁷ Oluf Gøtzsche-Astrup, “The time for causal designs: Review and evaluation of empirical support for mechanisms of political radicalization,” *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 39 (2018): 96.

³⁸ Aly and Striegler, “Examining the Role,” 859; Khosrokhavar, *Inside Jihadism*, 220; Kleinmann, “Radicalization,” 290.

³⁹ Ibid., 290.

low self-esteem, attention-seeking, identity issues, and high-risk tendencies.⁴⁰ He also found evidence of abuse and neglect. McCauley and Moskalenko corroborate this view suggesting that converts with a history of trauma – such as surviving auto accidents, rape, and other forms of violence – appear more likely to join extremist movements.⁴¹ Referring to a case study of a European convert, Amarasingam and Dawson list three psychological factors associated with radicalization, including a “desire to make a mark in the world,” anxiety about “moral problems and doing the right thing,” and a predilection towards “action ... adventure and risk.”⁴² Surprisingly, while the literature uncovers the role that personality, anxiety, and trauma-related disorders may have on radicalization, very little research links radicalization of converts to other mental health illnesses such as substance abuse and depression.

Socio-Economic and Criminal Circumstance

Carolyn Goerzig and Khaled Al-Hashimi analyze the radicalization of converts through the lens of social identity theory. In their view, developing a radical identity is a result of public discourse that produces public polarization, forcing some new Muslims towards a particularly violent end state. Public anti-Islamic discourse leads converts to stand in radical defense of Muslims.⁴³ Interestingly, Farhad Khosrokhavar asserts that European converts in comparison to “white” American Muslims, are more likely to radicalize due to their socio-economic class. He finds that American Muslims are generally middle class, and often share the American dream, whereas European Muslims mostly stem from the lower class, have less education, and are often economically excluded and socially marginalized. Khosrokhavar further highlights the role certain urban districts, like areas of Leeds, Britain, or the French *banlieues*, have in relation to radicalization.⁴⁴ Likewise, Rabasa and Benard provide a reference to the extensive *Renseignements Généraux* report that analyzed 1,610

⁴⁰ Ibid., 286-287.

⁴¹ McCauley and Moskalenko, “Mechanisms of Political Radicalization,” 429.

⁴² Amarasingam and Dawson, “I left,” 21.

⁴³ Carolyn Goerzig and Khalid Al-Hashimi, *Radicalization in Western Europe* (Routledge, 2015): 158.

⁴⁴ Khosrokhavar, *Inside Jihadism*, 220-1

converts with a history of crime, active proselytism, or connections to jihadist networks.⁴⁵ Ninety percent of radical converts who joined extremist groups had less than a college degree, whereas 71 percent were either unemployed or employed in unskilled jobs.⁴⁶ Socially, Scott Flower finds that radicalization of converts arises because they abhor globalization, modernity, and secular society.⁴⁷ He proposes that most radical converts suffer from a degree of social alienation. Feelings of personal victimization in social environments have also been associated with jihadism. According to Karagiannis, personal victimization in the form of discrimination results in anger that “could be transformed into rage, hatred, and a desire to take revenge.”⁴⁸ Conversely, Kleinmann finds that racism, discrimination, and police brutality do not appear to affect convert radicalization.⁴⁹ Roy, going further, argues that socio-economic factors are mostly irrelevant; there is little correlation between socioeconomic indicators and extremism.⁵⁰ And yet, criminal history is often associated with radical converts, in part because many converts (who later radicalize) appear to have embraced Islam while in prison, or as a result of social interactions while serving a prison sentence. As Rabasa and Benard demonstrate in their study, “nearly 17 percent of those who convert to Islam in prison join radical Islamist groups or their support networks.”⁵¹ Thus, converts that embrace the faith in prison appear more inclined towards radicalization. In agreement, Roy and Kleinmann find that the history of petty crimes among converts is often linked to their later radicalization.⁵² In sum, the literature is divided concerning the role socio-economic and criminal circumstances have on violent radicalization.

⁴⁵ Rabasa and Benard, *Eurojihad*, 91.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁴⁷ Scott, “Muslim Converts,” 8.

⁴⁸ Karagiannis, “European Converts,” 106.

⁴⁹ Kleinmann, “Radicalization,” 290.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁵¹ Rabasa and Benard, *Eurojihad*, 91-2.

⁵² Roy, *Jihad and Death*, 22; Kleinmann, “Radicalization,” 287.

Enabling Environments

A number of different studies demonstrate that mosques, prisons, and the internet are the most common enabling environments of radicalization.⁵³ Generally, the internet appears to have the most impact on contemporary recruitment. Jihadists active in Syria and Iraq, for instance, all made extensive use of social media platforms, including Ask.fm, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, PalTalk, kik, viper, JustPaste.it, and Tumblr, to attract attention and recruits.⁵⁴ Twitter has been identified as a popular communication platform for jihadists who use it for operational strategy.⁵⁵ The use of social media to radicalize, recruit, and plan violence may have likewise diminished the importance of religious institutions in radicalization.⁵⁶ Many converts will have likewise relied on the internet to learn about Islam before converting, and once they do, will return online to find the information useful for practicing their newfound faith. Online activity may influence a convert's interpretation of Islam, putting them in contact with potentially radical material and individuals. Religious courses in private homes (rather than religious institutions), and visits of extreme recruiters, are also increasingly important.⁵⁷ Indeed, these factors tie to the earlier discussion of radical mentors who are involved in the formation of extremist groups and can inspire individuals to participate in violence.

Canadian Converts to Violence: Maguire, Zehaf-Bibeau, and Clairmont

What follows next is an empirical exploration of the life histories of three Canadian extremist converts, built using a combination of open sources and interview data. The cases provide contextual information relating to the causal mechanisms linked to extremist conversion as identified in the literature.

⁵³ Rabasa and Benard, *Eurojihad*, 91-105; Khosrokhavar, *Inside Jihadism*, 211; Karagiannis, "European Converts," 110.

⁵⁴ Jytte Klausen, "Tweeting the Jihad: Social Media Networks of Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 38:1, (2015): 1.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁵⁶ Stemman, "Middle East," 11.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

John Maguire (Abu Anwar al-Canadi, a.k.a Yahya)

John Douglas Maguire grew up in the Village of Merrickville in Eastern Ontario, Canada. He went to North Grenville District High School in Kemptville, Ontario, where he was perceived as an intelligent, outgoing, and popular person.⁵⁸ He “kept to himself about a lot of things that were either important or ... that bugged him.”⁵⁹ As an excellent student who was elected to the student council, Maguire became a member of the “school’s most-envied social circles.”⁶⁰ His hobbies included playing hockey, riding motocross, and playing the bass guitar. In 2003, when he was 12 years old, his parents’ marriage broke down.⁶¹ His mother, Patricia Earl, claimed that she was a victim of spousal abuse.⁶² In Grade 12, Maguire lived with his grandparents before moving to Ottawa, Canada’s Capital, to attend Hillcrest High School.⁶³ His Kemptville classmates said this was unexpected and his response was strange: he “just got rid of everyone on Facebook and kind of disappeared.”⁶⁴ Scoring highly on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) in 2009, Maguire earned a scholarship and admission to Los Angeles City College’s business school in the United States.⁶⁵ While studying in LA, he purportedly found Islam. He returned to Ottawa in September 2010 to continue his studies at the Telfer School of Management at the University of Ottawa (U of O) and officially announced his conversion to Islam on Facebook. He told his friend, Stephane Pressault, another convert, that he found the faith by researching eschatology (e.g. end of the world theology).⁶⁶ Although raised in a secular family, Maguire quickly became a practicing and devout Muslim.

Maguire’s progression toward extremism was perhaps first witnessed by Pressault, who recalled stopping Maguire in the hallway of U of O and asking him what he was playing

⁵⁸ Sarah Boesveld and Sam Cooley, “Path of a Jihadi: How John Maguire went from a high school joke in Kemptville to an Islamic radical,” *Ottawa Citizen*, December 8, 2014.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Andrew Duffy and Meghan Hurley, “From JMag to Jihad John: the radicalization of John Maguire” *Ottawa Citizen*, February 7, 2015.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Boesveld and Cooley, “Path.”

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Duffy and Hurley, “JMag.”

⁶⁶ Ibid.

on his iPod. “I’m listening to a lecture by Awlaki,” replied Maguire.⁶⁷ According to Pressault, Maguire was someone who had “a particular zeal. ... When you convert, you have a desire to learn everything, to know everything. [Maguire] had that.”⁶⁸ Al-Awlaki’s political influence on Maguire became apparent in his social media posts. In October 2012, during his Fall term, Maguire tweeted: “How can I sleep with what is happening in Syria?”⁶⁹ Indeed, Maguire’s befriending of Awso Peshdary – an Ottawa man born to a Shia family of Kurdish descent – in 2012 at an Algonquin College lecture,⁷⁰ is believed to have helped trigger his radicalization. The men bonded over their political interests in the Middle East.⁷¹ Peshdary first appeared on the Canadian authorities’ radar in 2010 with the discovery of an al Qaeda-inspired terror cell with motivations of attacking the Parliament buildings in Ottawa.⁷²

Eventually, evidence of Peshdary’s influence on Maguire was presented to CSIS and the RCMP by Abdullah Milton, a Muslim convert who was working with authorities as an informant. Federal Crown prosecutors used Milton’s intelligence to file charges against Peshdary. Milton recalled that Peshdary had notified him that he had been speaking with Maguire who was already in Syria and was asking for help with a project. Maguire wanted ISIS to publish its propaganda in English for western converts who did not speak fluent Arabic. Peshdary suggested Milton was the man for the job: “Maguire was trying to convince an emir (leader) within ISIS [that] there’s a need ... to have an English media wing because everything was all in Arabic at that point, and Maguire intended to gather information to prove there’s a need,” Milton testified. Allegedly, Peshdary once asked Maguire what other types of skills ISIS needed. “Every skill is needed,” Maguire replied. Peshdary told Maguire he had advised the “brothers” back home to enroll in training, particularly running or walking long distances. Milton testified that since Canadian officials had prevented Peshdary from

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Stewart Bell, “Extremist named John Maguire: Ottawa student likely joined ISIS after converting to Islam and moving to Syria,” *National Post*, August 24, 2014.

⁷⁰ Aedan Helmer, “Ottawa terror trial’s key Crown witness describes how he became an RCMP agent,” *Ottawa Citizen*, December 11, 2018.

⁷¹ “Who is Awso Peshdary? The case against an alleged Ottawa extremist who police say recruited for ISIS,” *National Post*, February 27, 2016.

⁷² Ibid.

obtaining a passport, he “felt it was his obligation to recruit people to go to Syria.” The men would often meet at a Tim Horton’s coffee shop, where Milton recalled Peshdary praising Khadar Khalib, another Ottawa local who fought in Syria. “It’s easy, it’s not difficult,” Peshdary said.⁷³

In December 2012 Maguire travelled to Turkey. According to his mother, he bribed Turkish border guards to let him into Syria.⁷⁴ In spring 2014 he married a woman named Hedeal and invited his mother to the wedding, but the trip was impossible to arrange.⁷⁵ An aid-worker who hosted Maguire in Syria and who was a witness at Peshdary’s trial claimed that Maguire was radicalized in Syria.⁷⁶ He drove him from Turkey’s Hatay Airport into Syria by taxi. Maguire portrayed himself as a new Muslim uneducated about the different interpretations of Islam and wanted to learn Arabic and help Syrian children. The aid-worker allowed him to stay in his apartment for two months and provided him with a gun for protection. During Peshdary’s trial, he recalled laughing at Maguire’s comments about helping children. He told him: “This is not the right time for tourism. It’s a war zone.”⁷⁷ He added that Maguire “was new (to Syria) and didn’t know anything.” Allegedly, he met Maguire with an imam to whom Maguire asked a “tonne of questions.” One time, he recalled, Maguire looked confused and said: “Muslims were at war in Canada?” Maguire later claimed that he could not return to Canada since some of his family members had disowned him when he converted to Islam.⁷⁸

Maguire rose to international prominence when he appeared in an ISIS propaganda video giving a speech in front of a destroyed city, a Kalashnikov rifle beside him. Indeed, during this period Maguire was especially active on social media. He described Canada as “evil,” and his actions as pathways to “the reward of jihad” and “the opportunity for

⁷³ Aedan Helmer, “Ottawa terror trial hears undercover agent maintained contact with Maguire, Khalib in Syria,” *Ottawa Citizen*, December 14, 2018.

⁷⁴ Duffy and Hurley, “JMag.”

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Gary Dimmock, “Aid worker says Ottawa jihadist Maguire initially only wanted to help children,” *Ottawa Citizen*, June 12, 2018.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

martyrdom.”⁷⁹ In his ISIS video, Maguire describes the terrorist attacks in Ottawa and Quebec in 2014 by Z-B and Couture-Rouleau as a “direct response” to Canadian involvement in the anti-ISIS coalition. He also discussed the reasons behind his views, at length:

I was one of you: I was a typical Canadian. I grew up on the hockey rink and spent my teenage years on stage playing guitar. I had no criminal record. I was a bright student and maintained a strong GPA in university. So how could one of your people end up in my place? And why is it that your own people are the ones turning against you at home? The answer is we have accepted the true call of the prophets and the messengers of God. To the Muslims who are still residing in Canada, I say to you: How can you remain living among the disbelievers under their unjust man-made laws which are slowly but surely eliminating the rights of the Muslims especially now that the Caliphate is being established? How can you stand to live among them peacefully when their leaders, who represent the masses, are waging a crusade against your Muslim brothers and sisters at this very moment?⁸⁰

Maguire is believed to have been killed in January 2015 during ISIS’s failed attempt to occupy the city of Kobani.⁸¹

Michael Zehaf-Bibeau

Michael Zehaf-Bibeau was born Joseph Paul Michael Bibeau. His mother, Susan Bibeau, and his Libyan father, Bulgasem Zehaf, split up before he was born, though the couple reunited and married in 1989, only to divorce again in 1999.⁸² The family lived in

⁷⁹ Bell, “Extremist.”

⁸⁰ Duffy and Hurley, “JMag.”

⁸¹ Stewart Bell & Meghan Hurley, “Mother mourns Ottawa jihadi Maguire, believed killed in Syria,” *Ottawa Citizen*, January 14, 2015.

⁸² Michael Friscolanti, “Uncovering a killer: addict, drifter, walking contradiction,” *Macleans*, October 30, 2014.

Laval, a suburb of Montreal, Quebec, where his mother raised him as a Catholic, sending him to a Roman Catholic school. In eighth grade, Z-B started attending Collège Stanislas (a Roman Catholic primary and secondary school). The following year he switched to Collège Laval, a place where he first tried drugs, and where his former classmates perceived him as a kid who loved to have fun and host parties.⁸³

Starting in 2001 at the age of 19, Z-B was charged with several convictions, including assault and battery, gun possession, and drunk driving. In 2004, he served a 60-day sentence for possession of a potent hallucinogenic drug. He later explained to a psychiatrist that he was raised Catholic but had become a Muslim in 2004.⁸⁴ Eventually, he cut ties with his mother (and father), relocating to British Columbia, Canada, in 2009. In Vancouver, he regularly attended a mosque where he formed relationships with other community members. Dave William Bathurst, a Muslim convert, met Z-B at the *Masjid Al-Salaam* and *Education Centre* in Burnaby, B.C., during Ramadan. He recalled that Z-B once told him that he wanted to study in Libya because “he was basically sick of trying to fit into Canadian society.”⁸⁵ Another time, Z-B told Bathurst that he felt that “the devil [was] after him.”⁸⁶ Bathurst recalled how Z-B’s “erratic” behavior caused problems with other members of the mosque, who eventually asked him to stop praying with them. In a bizarre episode, Z-B was arrested at the mosque after he contacted the police to notify them of a crime he had committed years ago. “He was charged with robbing somebody and he pled guilty to uttering a threat,” lawyer Brian Anderson said; “It was something fairly minor and fairly bizarre.” Later, Z-B attempted to rob a Vancouver McDonald’s using a wooden stick.⁸⁷ After the cashier phoned the police, Z-B walked outside, threw the stick to the ground, and waited for the authorities to arrive.⁸⁸ At the December 2011 hearing, he told the judge that he wanted to stay in prison: “The

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Glen McGregor, Andrew Seymour, Shaamini Yogaretnam and Dylan Robertson, “Michael Zehaf-Bibeau: Journey to death on Parliament Hill,” *Ottawa Citizen*, November 10, 2014.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Colin Freeze and Les Perreux, “Suspected killer in Ottawa shootings had religious awakening,” *The Globe and Mail*, October 22, 2014.

⁸⁷ Jon Woodward, “Ottawa shooter tried to rob Vancouver McDonald’s with stick,” *CTV News Vancouver*, October 23, 2014.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

RCMP couldn't do the work fast enough. I warned them that if you can't keep me in, I will do something right now to put me in [prison]."⁸⁹

He was detained awaiting trial and was given a psychological assessment, which concluded that he did not have a mental illness.⁹⁰ Z-B explained that he was a devote Muslim for seven years but had difficulty practicing because of his drug addiction. He wanted to overcome this addiction by going to prison. At his trial in February 2012, he underwent a second psychiatric assessment, at which point he was diagnosed with bipolar disorder.⁹¹ Eventually released, he became homeless and began using drugs again. He eventually returned to Al-Salaam. David Ali, the vice-president of the mosque, noted that "his behavior was not normal"; he recalled that Z-B would activate the building's fire alarm by entering through the wrong door.⁹² He was eventually kicked out of the mosque because he had "gotten a hold of keys and stuff from the mosque, and when he got out of jail, he just started sleeping there."⁹³ Mosque administrators met with Z-B after he began complaining about their interfaith programs. Rashid recalled Z-B commenting: "Why are you allowing non-Muslims into the mosque?"⁹⁴ Interestingly, Hasibullah Yusufzai – a radical Vancouver-area Muslim who was charged in 2014 by the RCMP with visiting Syria to join a terrorist group – was also visiting the mosque around this time.⁹⁵ Bathurst noted that Z-B interacted with Yusufzai, but claimed that their engagement occurred before Yusufzai's radicalization.⁹⁶ In another series of episodes, Z-B, while living at a Vancouver shelter, would regularly begin arguments with those around him about contemporary and international affairs, especially with Paul Jarjapka, a councilor. Jarjapka suggests that by then Z-B had already become a supporter of ISIS: he

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Friscolanti, "Uncovering."

⁹² Douglas Todd and Rob Shaw "Parliament Hill shooter kicked out of Burnaby mosque two years ago," *The Vancouver Sun*, October 23, 2014.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Friscolanti, "Uncovering."

would argue that Americans were the true terrorists and that ISIS's murdering of non-Muslims was justified.⁹⁷

Although Z-B was often homeless, the RCMP revealed that before he attacked Parliament Hill he had been living and earning a wage in the oil fields of Alberta. They assumed that Z-B was saving money to fund “pre-attack activities.”⁹⁸ The RCMP subsequently barred him from acquiring valid travel documents, preventing him from leaving the country.⁹⁹ On September 20, 2014, just four weeks before his attack, he travelled to Ottawa, where he visited the Libyan embassy in hopes of renewing his expired passport. Embassy officials informed him that it would take several weeks to assess his request.¹⁰⁰ In the meantime, his application for a Canadian passport was being reviewed by the RCMP, delaying the process further. By October 16, 2014, less than a week before he killed Cpl. Cirillo, Z-B turned 32 and was again sleeping at a homeless shelter – the Ottawa Mission. The Mission was within walking distance to the War Memorial, where his attack began. Mission residents remember him as being argumentative, of taking pride in hating Canada, and of being on Canada's no-fly list, though there is no evidence that he was barred from flying.¹⁰¹ At the Westgate Shopping mall where Z-B bought the car he would later use during his assault, he was overheard arguing with another person: “If soldiers bombed your family, wouldn't you want to kill them?”¹⁰² On the morning of his attack, Z-B recorded a video on his cellphone, justifying his forthcoming assault: “To those who are involved ... this is in retaliation for Afghanistan and because [Canadian Prime Minister] Harper wants to send his troops to Iraq.”¹⁰³ “The mujahedeen of this world,” he went on, were retaliating. Canada had become an enemy because of its “bombing” of innocent Muslims. Cpl. Nathan Cirillo was

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Reid Southwick, “Michael Z-B sought refuge at Calgary homeless shelter,” *Calgary Herald*, November 3, 2014.

⁹⁹ Freeze and Perreux, “Suspected killer.”

¹⁰⁰ Friscolanti, “Uncovering.”

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Glen McGregor, “Shooter was overheard talking about bombings, civilian deaths,” *Ottawa Citizen*, October 28, 2014.

¹⁰³ Michael Z-B, “Michael Z-B video: complete, unedited.” YouTube, 1:13 minute, May 29, 2015.

murdered, standing guard at the National War Memorial; Z-B was later killed across the street while storming Parliament.

Toxicology reports of Z-B's body showed negative results for drug and alcohol use before the attack.¹⁰⁴ In a letter sent to the *National Post*, his mother, Susan, who at the time was a senior official with the Immigration and Refugee Board, said he was "an unhappy person at odds with the world ... [he was] troubled ... mentally unbalanced."¹⁰⁵ She mentioned that he sought to understand the world by turning to Islam, a process that ultimately "did not bring him peace." She recalled her son's distance from the family; once he moved to Vancouver they had had very little contact with him. She received one short e-mail from him in which he stated his intention of meeting the Islamic obligation of respecting one's parents. The last time they met, Susan noted that her son argued how good religion was and how she was "wrong to pursue the materiality of this world." She believed Z-B wanted a passport to travel to Saudi Arabia to study Islam and the Quran and to live with others who shared his beliefs. In her view, mental illness was at the heart of Z-B's actions: "At some point in his life, my son had a serious addiction to drugs, I don't know if he overcame it, but ... it could have left permanent marks and led to his current mental state."

Damian Clairmont (Mustafa Al-Gharib; Abu Talha Al Kanadi,)

Damian Clairmont was born in Nova Scotia into an Acadian Catholic family. He moved to Calgary, Alberta, as a young boy with his parents who eventually divorced.¹⁰⁶ Although naturally intelligent, he dropped out of high school. An "inquisitive" boy interested in science and history, his mother, Christianne Boudreau, described him as someone who "cared about the underdog."¹⁰⁷ He sought to protect people and made friends with bullied classmates. He did the same at home, protecting his mother from her abusive partner. She

¹⁰⁴ Andrea Janus, "Ottawa shooter says in video: 'You're not even safe in your own land,'" *CTV News*, March 6, 2015.

¹⁰⁵ "Ottawa shooting by Michael Z-B was 'last desperate act' of a mentally ill person, his mother writes," *National Post*, January 24, 2015.

¹⁰⁶ Stewart Bell, "Canadian killed in Syria: Calgary man, 22, joined fight after converting to Islam," *National Post*, January 15, 2014.

¹⁰⁷ Alexandra Bradford, "Mother of an ISIS Recruit Tells of Loss and Hope," *News Deeply*, July 14, 2016.

remarked: “Damian took a lot of it [abuse] on my behalf and tried to protect me as much as he could.”¹⁰⁸ When she contacted the police asking to be sent to a shelter with her kids, the request was dismissed. The family eventually escaped but the authorities’ lack of action “stuck with Damian into his adulthood.” At 17, he attempted suicide. Following his release from the hospital, he joined a group home, saw a psychiatrist, and went on medication. He was later arrested while purchasing drugs.¹⁰⁹ According to Christianne, that same year he found Islam: “He was just trying to find where he fit and it was difficult.”¹¹⁰ [Upon converting, he changed his name to Mustafa al-Gharib.] Clairmont “struggled with the hypocrisy” of the practicing Christians surrounding his family and the Islamic relationship with God appealed to him; “it spoke to his heart.”¹¹¹ She was happy he had become a Muslim: “He stopped hiding, stopped blocking himself from the world.” Three years after converting, Christianne moved the family across town, whereupon Clairmont began attending a different mosque. “He was introduced to people who were stricter,” Christianne recalls, and “this opened him up to other ideas ... he wanted to be an even better Muslim.” Justin Thibeau, Damian’s childhood friend, noted that Clairmont seemed to be constantly changing his identity.¹¹² In 2011, Thibeau moved to Calgary and began living with the Clairmonts. He said Damian preached to him, disapproved of his lifestyle, and judged him: “You’re going down the wrong path ... I can open your eyes,” he would say.¹¹³ Thibeau’s desire to join the Canadian Armed Forces particularly irritated Clairmont who pushed him away from the idea. “He couldn’t fathom why I wanted to join the military,” said Thibeau. Clairmont believed the military was killing Muslims like him.¹¹⁴ “He would mention things going on in Syria,” explained Thibeau, saying “It’s not right what’s going on there.” Although Clairmont never

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Stewart Bell, “The path to extremism: The story of how one young man from Calgary ended up dead in Syria,” *National Post*, April 25, 2014.

¹¹⁰ Sameen Amin, “Radicalized at home: Canadian mother details her son’s path to extremism,” *Al Jazeera America*, 5 November 2014.

¹¹¹ Bradford, “Mother.”

¹¹² Bell, “The path.”

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

expressed a desire to join the war in Syria, he once told Thibeu: “I wish there was something I could do.”¹¹⁵

Christianne noticed a change in her son in 2011, too. He became more secretive and argumentative and would discuss 9/11, and other conspiracies. He began arguing that the media was untruthful in their depiction of Muslims; “He would get pretty worked up about it and conversations could get pretty heated,” Christianne recalled. Clairmont joined a gym and began going on hikes with his group of Muslim friends. According to his mother, he became “really zestful” about certain activities, but would soon “get bored and move on to the next thing.”¹¹⁶ She believed something like this occurred in his developing desire to learn Arabic abroad.¹¹⁷ Clairmont soon became more politically outspoken. Christianne noted that “He would say to me, ‘Mom, [Syrian President] Assad is allowing women to be raped. He is killing thousands of people and no one is helping.’”¹¹⁸ When Christianne heard her son say that he was planning on travelling to Egypt to study Arabic she did not fully believe him.¹¹⁹ The night before his eventual departure, the family dined at a restaurant, and Clairmont spent the rest of the evening playing video games with his little brother. Christianne said that he seemed calm and happy.

The following morning he called her from the plane. The next call came only one month later, though Christianne still had no reason to believe he was anywhere else but Cairo. In late January, however, CSIS officers appeared at her front door claiming that they were tracking her son alongside a group they referred to as “the brotherhood,” as part of a two-year investigation. Clairmont was fighting for *Jabhat Al-Nusra*, though later joined ISIS in 2013.¹²⁰ Now referred to as “Abu Talha Al Kanadi (the Canadian) by his comrades, Clairmont served for a “long time” as a guard in Aleppo. Ultimately, Clairmont was placed in a “position of responsibility” in Jarabulus, a Syrian city bordering with Turkey that was

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Bradford, “Mother.”

¹¹⁹ Bell, “The path.”

¹²⁰ Ibid.

controlled by ISIS at the time.¹²¹ Desperately wanting to save her son, Christianne planned to fly to Turkey to try to bring him back home, but he refused. Clairmont told her he was making efforts for the afterlife and promised that she would receive a call if anything happened to him.¹²² His personality was now totally different; she found him colder and firmer. Undeterred, Christianne reached out to local imams for help. When Clairmont found out, he told her not to listen to the “people with Muslim (or Arab) names” because in his view they were “in so many ways far from Islam.”¹²³ He also explained that he felt no guilt for what he was doing: “I am finally where I belong.”¹²⁴

In August 2013, Clairmont turned to Canada’s *National Post* to continue justifying his actions: “Sure, Canada ... is a place where you can allow yourself to believe you have figured things out.” Describing his new life, he elaborated:

The benefit for myself in terms of the worldly life is most certainly back in Canada where I could see my family, indulge in fornication and infidelity legally and limitlessly and stagger around poisoned on intoxicants and then lie to myself and the world about ‘freedom’ and how fantastic it is ... Challenging those learned assumptions ... is always much harder to do. My doing so caused a search for truth and ended in a conclusion that Islam was the answer. With that came Islam’s concept of working for an afterlife that never ends, and not trading success in that life for the things assumed — by my prior conditioning — to be successes in this life. An eternity in Paradise cannot be traded for 70 years (if that) of this place.¹²⁵

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

In December 2013 Clairmont sent a message saying that he was “still waiting” to be martyred.¹²⁶ He praised Al-Qaeda as Syria’s liberators.

During this period, a popular jihadist blogger, Abu Dujana, shared details about Clairmont. He confirmed being part of the same study group as Clairmont which met at the 8th and 8th prayer room in Calgary.¹²⁷ Dujana argued that ISIS fighters like he and Clairmont fought “a global system of oppression” in which “innocent men, women, and children are pleading for our help.” Imam Navaid Aziz, who led prayers at the 8th and 8th facility – which eventually closed due to its link to several Canadian jihadist fighters – noticed the group in the mosque: “I saw them a couple of times, but I never saw anything first-hand that would arouse my suspicion. In front of me, nothing ever happened.”¹²⁸ “I could never infiltrate that circle,” the imam recalled, and “eventually, I found out that they’re gone.”¹²⁹

On January 14, 2014, ISIS’s Twitter account announced Clairmont’s death, noting that he had been captured and killed by the Free Syrian Army in a battle near Aleppo.¹³⁰ Abu Turab confirmed the news, adding that Clairmont’s main motivation was to help the Syrian people and that “he was not a threat to Canada...Nor did he want to kill people everywhere.”¹³¹ In support of this view, Clairmont’s mother reiterated that “in his heart, he was there to help women and children. That would be Damian, he always believed in helping others.”¹³²

Concluding Thoughts: Conversion to Extremism from Theory to Practice

Presented as the article’s conclusion, what follows is a synthesis of our empirical data matched against the theoretical explanations for conversion to violent extremism. We add a

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ “Calgary mom targeted by jihadist blogger after her radicalized son killed in Syria,” *National Post*, January 24, 2015.

¹²⁸ Devin Heroux and Nazim Baksh, “Calgary mosque tainted by ‘dark element’ of radicalization to close doors this week,” *CBC News*, March 30, 2017.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ “Damian Clairmont killed fighting with al-Qaeda-linked rebels in Syria,” *CBC News*, June 19, 2014.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid.

contextual layer to the open-source record by integrating original interview data on each of the three Canadian cases to further assess the process. Our analysis provides scholars with suggestions for the next steps in further improving our understanding of the factors and circumstances that drive conversion to violence.

Ideology

There is some direct evidence that each of our cases shared an ideological affiliation with Salafi-jihadism. Salafism itself is a popular ideological orientation teaching meticulous adherence to the way of *al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ* or “the pious predecessors” (the first generations after the Prophet), while generally rejecting other sources of influence. Salafi-jihadism is a step further in this direction, in which followers raise awareness among other Muslims that their religion has been declining in political, economic, military, and cultural terms.¹³³ Perceived humiliation of Muslims as part of an “anti-Islamic alliance” consisting of Crusaders, Zionists, and “apostates,” calls for a dedicated program of action (including martyrdom) seeking to overturn the current course of history.¹³⁴ All three individuals likewise took efforts to increase their religious practice, in similar but at times different ways.

During an interview, Adam Hirwa, a friend with whom Maguire informally studied the Arabic language at the University of Ottawa, revealed that Maguire used to “hang out with people who followed Sufi Islam.”¹³⁵ Hirwa, who is also a convert to Islam, was surprised when Maguire “changed” and began sharing radical ideas online. “The theme of what he shared online was about the ‘dos and don’ts’ of sharia within the context of war,” said Hirwa. While Maguire never openly stated his ideological association, his views did not reflect the Sufi doctrine, but rather that of Salafi-jihadism. This was manifested when he suggested that Muslims in Canada should not live with “the disbelievers under their unjust man-made laws” and that Western leaders, “represent the masses” that are waging a “crusade” against Muslims. Maguire also openly stated that he wanted to be martyred. Further, while they

¹³³ Assaf Moghadam, “The Salafi-Jihad as a Religious Ideology,” *CTC Sentinel* 1:3 (2008): 1.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹³⁵ Adam Hirwa, interview with the authors, Ottawa ON, March 22, 2019.

attended Arabic lessons together, Hirwa said he “observed” Maguire increasingly “becoming more religious,” in different ways, supporting Pressault’s view (expressed above) that he had a particular “zeal.”

Z-B shared Maguire’s views. They first became apparent when he railed against his mosque’s interfaith programs and justified murder as a response to Western foreign policies. He was against allowing non-Muslims into the mosque, and like Maguire, sought to deepen his religious practice, illustrated by his establishing brief contact with his mother out of religious obligation. Moreover, in the video he made on the day of the shootings, Z-B suggested that Western leaders were preventing Muslims in the Arab world from implementing their religious law – demonstrating in a similar way that Maguire did, the Salafi-jihadist aversion to “man-made laws.” These themes resonate in Clairmont’s case, too, who openly extolled the Salafi-jihadist’s misinterpreted Islamic idea of martyrdom, what is normally (according to this religious tradition) supposed to be a noble death fighting for the right cause. Like Maguire and Z-B, he continued to increase in religiosity. In interviews with us, his mother, Christianne Boudreau confirmed this by recalling his introduction to “stricter” Muslims once the family relocated, compelling him to become “an even better Muslim” himself.¹³⁶

While all three men embraced certain Salafi-jihadist narratives, none necessarily engaged in terrorism because they considered themselves Salafi-jihadists. Rather, they associated their personal grievances with certain paradigms that the ideology predicates upon. These narratives reinforced the various (and evolving) political, religious, and social views that the men held. As Roy suggests more broadly, Clairmont, Maguire, and Z-B seem to have cherry-picked certain ideological paradigms and positions, largely based on Salafi-jihadism, that appealed to their shifting sensibilities.¹³⁷ Indeed, Salafi-jihadist narratives combined with the longing Clairmont, Maguire, and Z-B expressed for expanding their religious practice, played a central role in driving all three men towards violence and terrorism.

¹³⁶ Christianne Boudreau, (Founder of Extreme Dialogue), interview with the authors, Calgary AB. February 28, 2019.

¹³⁷ Roy, *Jihad and Death*, 8.

Social Networks and Charismatic Influencers

At some point in their radicalization, Maguire, Z-B, and Clairmont interacted with other known and suspected extremists, both physically and virtually. However, unlike Maguire and Clairmont, Z-B never joined a radical milieu and was not part of a wider network of friends who shared his extremist views. None appear to have been associated with an international terrorist network before physically joining such movements overseas.

Perhaps the first recruiter that Maguire met in Ottawa was Peshdary, suspected of having recruited several ISIS fighters from Canada. However, the aid-worker who hosted Maguire in Syria argued that he was radicalized only *after* arriving in Syria. This narrative is difficult to accept in full if only because Maguire listened to Al-Awlaki's lectures while already in Ottawa, and had become a close friend of Peshdary. Moreover, before leaving Ottawa, Maguire made Facebook posts demonstrating that he was already emotionally invested in the Syrian conflict; he was likely radicalized and kept it secret to avoid problems at the border upon his departure. Despite the evidence that Z-B was associated with Yusufzai – a known extremist – and that the men spent time together, Yusufzai's actual influence on Z-B is not fully known. Since Z-B was vocal about his political and religious views, Yusufzai possibly encouraged or accelerated his path towards violence. And yet, unlike Clairmont and Maguire, Z-B felt the need to have his views acknowledged and approved by others. He was vocal about his beliefs, argumentative with anybody who would listen.

During an interview with Clairmont's mother, she confessed that at times her son felt isolated and lonely, seeking out a community where he fit. As Navaid Aziz, a Calgary imam told us, social networks are especially crucial at “the phase where converts and other Muslims are looking for people that identify with similar mindsets.”¹³⁸ Clairmont's and Maguire's cases illustrate the importance of group networks in the recruitment of extremists. Imam Zijad Delić from the South Nepean Muslim Community in Ottawa, in an interview, suggested further that converts who are new to the Muslim community meet “people who are into

¹³⁸ Navaid Aziz, (Director of Religious and Social Services for the Islamic Information Society of Calgary), interview with the authors, Calgary AB. February 28, 2019.

religion [and] have more time for religion than regular guys.”¹³⁹ Such people “can always give these converts more time and space and that’s what converts look for.”¹⁴⁰ Considering that converts can often feel lost and isolated upon accepting their new religion, imam Delić argues that “they look for somebody to be their brother and sister, and if regular guys don’t offer time because we are busy with other stuff, then they go to somebody who has time, and these people who have time are basically people who can easily misguide them.”¹⁴¹ Individuals with time to shape the newfound belief structures of converts may also, at times, be the very same individuals who are keen to spread radical interpretations.

Unlike Z-B who appears not to have followed a specific preacher or mentor, Maguire and Clairmont watched and listened to Al-Awlaki’s lectures. The path that led them to Al-Awlaki remains unclear. Ms. Boudreau recalled, during an interview with us, how Damian would spend entire nights browsing and watching videos online, which we now know included some of Al-Awlaki’s speeches.¹⁴² His behaviour puzzled her, she noted, but she “never imagined” what was going to eventually happen. Imam Delić also credited the role charismatic leaders have on converts, including those in our study.¹⁴³ In his view, the charisma and ability to command respect and obedience that mentors possess, help them exploit vulnerable Muslims – including converts still grappling with new ideas, beliefs, and behaviours – who “think the same and feel the same pain.”

Political Grievances

All three individuals in our study used political grievances to justify their engagement in violence. They sought to retaliate for perceived oppressive and unjust Western (and Canadian) policies. They likewise each understood the world in dichotomous terms, between Muslims and non-Muslims, a theme Berger explores in suggesting that extremism is borne out

¹³⁹ Zijad Delić, (Imam at the South Nepean Muslim Community), interview with the authors, Ottawa ON, February 22, 2019.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Boudreau, interview with the authors.

¹⁴³ Delić, interview with the authors.

of an “us versus them” worldview, escalated by the perception that the success of “us” is indivisible from violent acts against “them.”¹⁴⁴

In his speeches, Maguire often pointed fingers at Muslims living in the West under Western leaders who were “waging a crusade against [their] Muslim brothers and sisters.” He used this logic to justify Z-B’s attack in Ottawa; blowback for Canada’s supposed foreign atrocities. Maguire’s friend, Hirwa, explained to us that Maguire “messed me from Syria, and began using radical terms like ‘Kuffar’ to address Western leaders ... I was confused because he never spoke like that before” in explaining his worldview and evolving belief structures.¹⁴⁵ Similarly, in his video, Z-B describes his act as retaliation for Canada’s foreign policies. Clairmont, too, blamed the government for oppressing Muslims “like him,” though he appeared more focused on Assad’s atrocities in Syria. Interestingly, unlike Maguire and ZB – who saw attacks in Canada as a way of communicating extremist intent – Clairmont demonstrated less abhorrence toward Muslims and non-Muslims living in Canada. While in Syria he abstained from calling for domestic attacks, focusing instead – as his many engagements with the *National Post* suggest – on rejecting the Western lifestyle.

Imam Delić explained that converts “are bombarded with injustices happening in Afghanistan, Iraq, Egypt, Palestine, and then people basically stop thinking anymore and ask themselves: ‘what can I do?’” He suggested that extremist leaders actively capitalize on these grievances to attract potential recruits and ultimately, in the later stages of radicalization, introduce the religious justification for violence.¹⁴⁶ Indeed, acknowledging that a majority of Muslims worldwide have similar, if not identical political grievances but never resort to violent extremism, partially illuminates the role of political grievances as a factor of radicalization. While many terrorists use political reasons to justify their violent extremism, this factor alone does not explain why some converts become radicalized or engage in political violence. Nonetheless, the overwhelming presence of hatred toward Western foreign

¹⁴⁴ J.M Berger, *Extremism* (MIT Press; 1 edition, 2018)

¹⁴⁵ Hirwa, interview with the authors.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

policies among extremist converts establishes this element as a core component in their radicalization process.

Psychological Factors

Biographical details reveal that Maguire did not have a record of mental health issues, while both Z-B and Clairmont were diagnosed with bipolar mood disorder and depression, anxiety, and identity issues, respectively. Z-B, however, had two contradictory psychiatrist assessments, in which he was also deemed mentally healthy at one point. And Vancouver shelter residents where Z-B lived also believed he was sane, if not always rational. On the other hand, in an interview with us, one of Z-B's friends, strongly reiterated: "I think Michael had mental health issues. I genuinely think that."¹⁴⁷ The RCMP's declaration that Z-B was mentally ill adds further credibility to the claim, evidence that compounds an assessment of certain periods of Z-B's life (e.g. stating that "the devil was after him"; wishing to be incarcerated). In contrast, Clairmont suffered from depression and anxiety as a teenager, which, according to his mother, was a product of domestic violence.¹⁴⁸ His suicide attempt further demonstrates the degree of his personal struggles. In interviews, his mother recalled: "My son was bipolar," notwithstanding psychiatric assessments suggesting otherwise. "I can tell you ... the psychiatrist was an idiot and an egomaniac and had no clue. It went much deeper than that."¹⁴⁹ Ms. Boudreau recalled further that her son took medication "for ADHD, not for bipolar disorder." And yet, "something wasn't adding up. Damian had a lot of emotional issues, depression, and everything else that he had gone through."¹⁵⁰ Indeed, Z-B's exploration of drugs and criminality, and Clairmont's attempted suicide, suggest that as opposed to Maguire they were both more inclined to take risks, a trait Kleinmann argues is shared with many other converts who radicalize.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁷ *Anonymous*, interview with the authors, Vancouver, BC., March 2, 2019.

¹⁴⁸ Boudreau, interview with the authors.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ Kleinmann, "Radicalization," 296-287.

Socio-Economic and Criminal Circumstances

The empirical data demonstrate a variation of economic, social, educational, and criminal circumstances across the three cases. For instance, all three men seem to have grown up in similar economic environments. Clairmont's mother confirmed that he was raised in a middle-class family, and while Z-B struggled with poverty and homelessness as an adult, both his and Maguire's families appear to have been financially comfortable. Z-B's mother was a senior government official and his father owned two Montreal nightclubs. Moreover, as young adults, all three men were employed at some point. However, as Rabasa and Benard illustrate is often the case with radical converts, they were employed in low-skill jobs: Maguire worked in a grocery store; Clairmont held a couple of jobs, including at a Dare Foods warehouse (where he was praised for his "amazing work ethic");¹⁵² and Z-B worked in Alberta's oil fields, a low-skilled but lucrative position.

And yet, all three were socially alienated from mainstream Canadian society. Z-B and Clairmont were vocal in their abhorrence of Canadian society, in which they struggled to fit in because of their Islamic beliefs. Z-B's history of crime and addiction likewise contributed to his struggle to relate to Burnaby's Muslim community and led to further social alienation therein. As a teenager, before his conversion, Clairmont's identity crisis fed into a larger struggle to accommodate his Christian community; as a Muslim, he later developed a disdain for contemporary liberal society. And some of Maguire's university friends likewise described him as socially alienated.

Concerning higher education, only Maguire proved academically inclined, having been admitted to prestigious business schools in both the US and Canada. During an interview, Hirwa confirmed that "everyone was aware of Maguire's academic success."¹⁵³ Conversely, Z-B and Clairmont showed much less interest in higher education: whereas Z-B graduated from high school, Clairmont dropped out. Interestingly, however, all three converts strived to learn more about Islam and demonstrated a strong desire to enroll in Arabic or Islamic studies abroad. In an interview, Hirwa recalled how Maguire in the early stages of his

¹⁵² Boudreau, interview with the authors.

¹⁵³ Hirwa, interview with the authors.

conversion and while they were taking Arabic lessons together, was keen on travelling abroad to study Arabic. Z-B also told a friend of his he wanted to study in Libya, and always carried a “small Qur’an” around that he would “study and use to argue with.”¹⁵⁴ Similarly, Clairmont told his mother in 2012 that he wanted to go to school to become an imam: “He began learning Arabic in preparation ... and said he wanted to go to university in Saudi [Arabia] or Egypt.”¹⁵⁵ Informally, he studied Islamic theology in Calgary. However, after leaving Canada, instead of enrolling in an Egyptian university as he had promised his mother, he joined *Jabhat al-Nusra*.

In sum, while all three converts were raised in middle-class families, showed an interest in certain aspects of education, and held a range of low-skill jobs as young adults, they each struggled with social alienation, which helped feed perceptions of personal and political victimization.

Enabling Environments

All three men found an enabling environment online: Maguire regularly engaged with Al-Awlaki’s lectures; Z-B watched and shared Taliban videos; and Clairmont spent hours researching extremist material online, to the point that his mother recalls him “falling asleep while watching videos.”¹⁵⁶ And to a certain degree, they likewise found a physical enabling environment. Z-B is thought to have met publicly and privately with Yusufzai. And both Maguire and Clairmont were members of radical clusters in Canada where they regularly and physically interacted with other suspected and known militants and extremists: the former met with Peshdary, the latter with Salman Ashrafi, Collin and Gregory Gordon, and others.

Final Thoughts

In sum, the empirical evidence from Canada leads us to several questions about the phenomenon of the progression of converts to radicalization and violent extremism. For

¹⁵⁴ Anonymous, interview with the authors.

¹⁵⁵ Boudreau, interview with the authors.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

instance, there are elements of Salafi-Jihadi ideology in the ideas expressed by all three men. And yet, what specifically led our cases toward accepting these ideas, especially given the differences in their radicalization processes? The role of social networks is also puzzling. The three men were socially alienated from the mainstream Canadian society but two of them were part of a radical group. Within this context, are radical social networks formed in the post-radicalization phase or before? Conversely, mentors appear to be effective in either phase; they tend to focus on political grievances and instill feelings of victimization among vulnerable Muslims. Indeed, all three men shared similar political grievances. But given that political grievances are likely experienced by many other Muslim converts who nonetheless speak up against violence, how does this factor relate to other triggers in leading to radicalization?

In terms of mental health, Z-B and Clairmont suffered from certain illnesses; what is unresolved, however, is the effect these issues may have had on their progression to violent extremism. Are certain mental health issues more important in feeding the radicalization process than others? Furthermore, all three men were raised in middle-class families and held low-skilled jobs during their life; Z-B was the only one with a criminal history. Are uneducated, less professionally successful converts more likely to become radical? And are certain crimes more likely to be identified as antecedent conditions of a radical convert? Our cases likewise suggest the internet was the primary enabling environment of radicalization. An important aspect of this finding in relation to converts is whether they are more likely to become radicalized as opposed to born Muslims who generally have more knowledge about their faith and are more likely to weed out the radical rhetoric encountered online. How should we gauge, then, the value and role in-person religious education has compared to online religious education in the radicalization of converts?

And finally, in terms of responding to convert radicalization, what strategies might helpfully defuse the process? From a preventing (or countering) violent extremism (PVE) perspective, our findings suggest a role for the convert's larger community, friends, and family. As Daniel Koehler, Tobias Ehrt, Anaïs El-Amraoui, and Benjamin Ducol argue in a

series of studies, families are not only considered the main targets for prevention and intervention, but an important resource for scholarship.¹⁵⁷ Studies also suggest that once parents are confronted and begin grappling with the radicalization of their children, they often move toward a “less controlling, ignoring reaction” driven by a sense of powerlessness; they essentially lacked the tools for coping with emerging developments.¹⁵⁸ Still, other research demonstrates that while friends are most ideally positioned to intervene, they may likewise be reluctant to reach out to PVE services.¹⁵⁹ More research is needed, here, on the value of building and distributing unbiased public knowledge on conversion and radicalization, on the most effective ways to engage parents, families, and the broader community within PVE design and implementation, and on building lessons and best practices from a wider slice of the empirical record.

¹⁵⁷ Daniel Koehler and Tobias Ehrt. “Parents’ associations, support group interventions and countering violent extremism,” *International Annals of Criminology* 56:1-2 (2018): 178-197; Daniel Koehler, “Using family counseling to prevent and intervene against foreign fighters,” *Journal EXIT-Deutschland. Zeitschrift für Deradikalisierung und demokratische Kultur* 2 (2014): 10; Anaïs F. El-Amraoui, and Benjamin Ducol, “Family-oriented P/CVE programs,” *Journal for Deradicalization* 20 (2019): 221.

¹⁵⁸ Elga Sikkens, Stijn Sieckelinck, Marion van San, and Micha de Winter, “Parental reaction towards radicalization in young people,” *Child & Family Social Work* 22:2 (2017): 1049.

¹⁵⁹ Michael Williams, John Horgan, and William Evans. “The critical role of friends in networks for countering violent extremism,” *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* 8:1 (2016): 62.

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