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Western Muslim Converts and Violent Extremism: Issues and Strategies

By Damien D. Cheong

Synopsis

The number of Muslim converts in the West involved in violent extremism is an emerging issue. Increased community intervention and supportive counselling for converts may be helpful in countering radicalism.

Commentary

IN RECENT times, Muslim converts in the West professing extremist beliefs have come under the spotlight for terrorist-related activities in and outside their home countries. For instance, a British and French national were identified in the latest ISIS video showing the mass beheadings of Syrian soldiers. The beheading of two Americans – a journalist and an aid worker – in Iraq two months ago was carried out by a Muslim convert with a British accent.

Last month, the attack on the Canadian parliament was perpetrated by Michael Zehaf-Bibeau, a recent Muslim convert while in New York, Zale Thompson, another convert, attacked NYPD officers with an axe. Earlier, in May 2013, two British Muslim converts, Michael Adebolajo and Michael Adebowale, were convicted of the brutal slaying of Lee Rigby, an off-duty soldier in southeast London.

Motivations, conversion process and related issues

The motivations behind these acts were personal, and differed from individual to individual. However, what is common is the embrace of a world view that legitimises acts of extreme violence to achieve objectives that are premised on religious grounds. Was this the result of the convert's misinterpretation/misunderstanding of religious texts? Or was the convert influenced by radical individuals close to him/her (radical influencers)? Or did violent extremist groups simply appeal to the psyche of the convert?

According to psychologists, religious conversions usually happen when an individual is forced to develop a "new meaning system" to replace the existing one as the latter has failed to adequately explain or validate the "discrepancies" of life (e.g. the sudden death of a loved one). As conversion involves significant changes to a person's meaning system, it will naturally result in observable

changes to his/her “self-perception, identity, life purpose, attitudes, values, goals, sensitivities, ultimate concerns and behaviour”.

The behavioural and attitudinal changes are stressful enough, and personal circumstances (e.g. conversion to facilitate marriage), environmental and situational factors (e.g. reaction of family and friends), as well as societal dynamics (e.g. discrimination against Muslims) may potentially add to the complexity of the conversion process.

Pathways to radicalisation

Islam, like many other religions, is not monolithic; “its form and expression vary from one Muslim to another and from group to group”. For example, Indonesian Islam, while sharing similar tenets with say Pakistani Islam, is still different in many fundamental ways. This plurality can cause confusion in the convert, and in some cases, alienation, if the convert, while Muslim, is still excluded because he/she belongs to a different ethnic group. In fact a 2013 Oxford Analytica report identified feelings of personal emptiness and social isolation as a major causal factor of radicalisation among Muslim converts.

The study also argued that the resentment of “modernity, globalisation and secular society”; the absence of formal education and training in Islamic doctrine and theology; and the interpretation of “Islamic ideology as a form of protest” were key push factors toward radicalisation.

The study found that “radicalisation is usually the result of social interaction; it is less common for converts to self-radicalise in isolation. The process, which involves the convert developing a more extreme interpretation of his/her faith to legitimise or justify violence, generally takes months or years”.

It is for these reasons that increased psychological and community support for converts is necessary as it can enable them to become more knowledgeable about their new faith, more confident about their place in the world, and most importantly, more discerning about alternative interpretations of religious doctrine.

Community guidance and support

These findings suggest that positive community intervention in terms of increased guidance and support is essential to help converts deal with the challenges they encounter on the religious, social, personal and sometimes financial fronts. As such, the creation of support groups for converts may be useful.

For instance, in view of how “as a community, new Muslims face unique challenges and have a distinct set of needs compared to Muslims who are born into the faith”, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) organised a New Muslim Summit in January this year. The summit aimed to “develop effective strategies and systems to cater to the needs of New Muslims” by raising awareness, educating and providing direction to new converts.

Similarly in New Zealand, the New Muslim Project was founded in 2012 by a group of volunteers. It was initiated as “people in a non-Muslim country like New Zealand can be exposed to a wide range of information about Islam, [but] not all is right or authentic”. The Project attempts to “find ways and means to provide help and support for all those who are new to, or are interested in learning more about Islam”. It also organises social events, conducts religious courses and provides useful information and literature about Islam.

In the local context, the Muslim Converts’ Association of Singapore (aka Darul Arqam), established in 1979, aims to “provide religious guidance and render assistance [including financial assistance] to members; organise religious, literary, and/or recreational activities; publish Islamic articles and/or literature; participate and provide welfare services for the community; and represent the interests of all Muslim converts residing in Singapore”.

Role of supportive counselling

In addition to community support and guidance, supportive counselling for converts is another avenue that communities can introduce to help converts during their conversion process. Supportive counselling entails a one-on-one session whereby the counsellor uses techniques to reduce the anxiety (e.g. stress arising from the conversion process) faced by the client.

Such an approach may enable the counsellors to better reach out to the converts' needs and establish rapport. More importantly, it may divert the converts from turning to radical ideology to address their needs. Counselling can therefore help alleviate some of the personal, situational challenges and stress associated with conversion.

However, supportive counselling would only be useful if converts are motivated to participate in the counselling process. Collaboration with religious authorities and/or specialists can certainly help in this regard. For instance, a possible approach, if it has not been done already, would be to explore the use of techniques that incorporate Islamic concepts into the counselling process. The common appreciation for Islam may create a facilitative platform for converts to address their needs and concerns.

Community support and supportive counselling are more likely to work with converts who embrace Islam for spiritual reasons as opposed to those who convert for political ones. Nevertheless, combining the two approaches represents a multi-pronged approach to the issue of converts and radicalisation that should be explored further.

Damien D. Cheong is Coordinator of the Homeland Defence Programme and Research Fellow at the Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS) of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University.

Nanyang Technological University
Block S4, Level B4, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg