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Federal Bureau of Investigation
Intelligence
ASSESSMENT

(U//FOUO) The Radicalization Process: From Conversion to Jihad

10 May 2006

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Prepared by

**FBI Counterterrorism
Division**

(U//FOUO) The Radicalization Process: From Conversion to Jihad

(U//FOUO) Scope Note

(U//FOUO) This assessment provides a working model of the radicalization process for a legal US person who is a convert to Islam, utilizing FBI case examples that illustrate the process. “The Radicalization Process: From Conversion to Jihad” is the first in a series of analytical products dealing with various aspects of the radicalization process. Information contained in this assessment is derived from open and closed FBI investigations, academic literature, and is current as of 10 April 2006.

(U//FOUO) Key Terms

- (U//FOUO) Conversion: a noticeable change in one’s religious identity,ⁱ a conscious self-transformation that may take the form of a change from:
 - One formal faith to another.
 - A secular belief to a formal faith.
 - A recommitment to an existing faith.
- (U//FOUO) Deprivation: any and all the ways that an individual or group may be or feel disadvantaged in comparison either to other individuals or groups, or to an internalized set of standards.ⁱⁱ

(U//FOUO) Key Judgments

- (U//FOUO) We assess that the radicalization cycle is generally composed of four steps: pre-radicalization, identification, indoctrination, and action. Each one is distinct, and a radicalized Muslim may never reach the final step.
- (U//FOUO) Pre-radicalization, the first stage in the radicalization process, is largely influenced by internal and external factors unique to every individual. We have identified four distinct motivations/conversion types—jilted believers, protest converts, acceptance seekers, and faith reinterpreters—all who have the potential to become violent jihadists.
- (U//FOUO) Nodes and venues where radicalization can occur include, but are not limited to, mosques, prisons, universities, and places of employment.
- (U//FOUO) During the identification stage, the individual is alienated from his former life and affiliates with like-minded individuals, strengthening his dedication to Islam in an attempt to prove his worth.
- (U//FOUO) Indoctrination, the third stage in the radicalization process, occurs when an individual is convinced that action is required to support and further the cause but is unsure or unfamiliar with how to participate. It usually includes extensive vetting and operational tests to gauge the recruit's willingness to participate in an attack; it also allows the recruit to test his own resolve.
- (U//FOUO) The final stage, action, can be accomplished through several means including participation in a terrorist attack or jihad, facilitation, recruitment, or financing. The latter three offer roles for individuals who are unwilling or unable to perpetrate an attack.
- (U//FOUO) Homegrown Islamic extremists are a growing threat, and are identified as legal US persons whose primary social influence has been the cultural values and beliefs of the United States, who also have the intent to provide support for or directly commit a terrorist attack inside the United States.

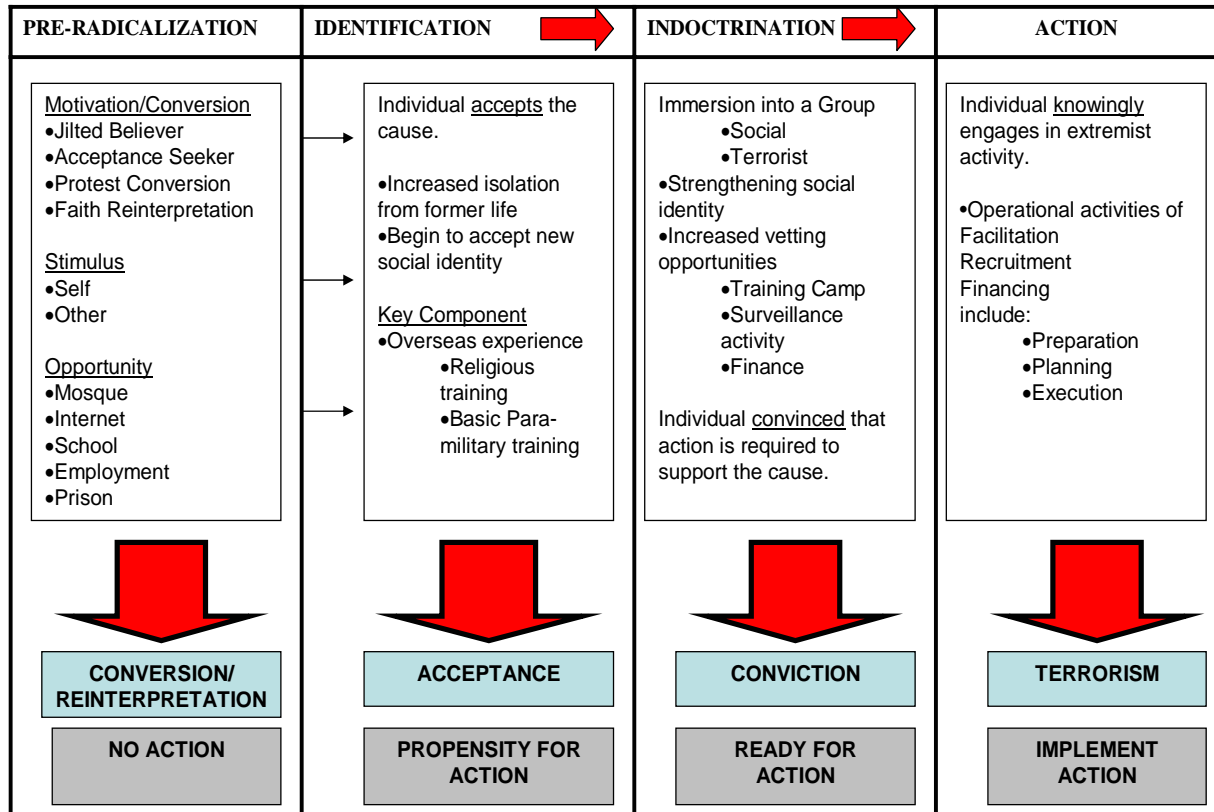
(U//FOUO) The Radicalization Process: From Conversion to Jihad

(U//FOUO) Radicalized US converts to Islam and their potential to attack the Homeland are growing concerns of the US Intelligence Community (USIC). Conversion to the Islamic faith does not always lead the convert down the path of radicalization. The situations that place converts in a position to be influenced by Islamic extremists appear to be more important than the convert’s initial motivations for converting.

(U//FOUO) The evidence suggests that the radicalization of an individual is a fluid process that does not have a time table and does not always lead to action. US converts, under the right circumstances, may enter, exit, or even re-enter the radicalization process at any stage.

(U//FOUO) Information collected during investigations does not always reveal the full scope of an individual’s experience with radical Islam. For example, some modes of conversions (protest converts and faith reinterpretation) appear more frequently than others (jilted believer and acceptance seekers), thus leaving an unequal sample from which to compare and contrast. This assessment, although not definitive, does suggest important trends in the radicalization process.

The Radicalization Process



(U//FOUO) First Stage: Pre-Radicalization

(U//FOUO) Conversion is a process of dynamic religious change that generally involves interactions between people, institutions, events, ideas, and experiences. An individual's motivation is critical to the process and is not always static. For example, an individual who initially converts to gain acceptance may reinterpret his faith if the group he joins is comprised of Islamic extremists.

(U//FOUO) Motivation/Conversion

(U//FOUO) Conversion types are the result of different motivational orientations. Some conversions are driven intrinsically while others are driven extrinsically.

(U//FOUO) Intrinsic motivations: in the case of a jilted believer conversion, internal frustration and dissatisfaction with the current religious faith leads the individual to change belief systems. The new belief system can be initially religious in tone or secular. Conversion attempts to resolve inconsistencies between what one has come to believe and what one has been taught to believe.

- (U//FOUO) Adam Gadahn, aka Azzam the American, wrote in his conversion story that Jesus was at best the son of God and not someone individuals should revere and pray to. He expressed complete contempt for the belief in the holy trinity.ⁱⁱⁱ

(U//FOUO) Motivations: Intrinsic and Extrinsic

(U//FOUO) Motivation energizes, directs, and sustains behavior. Intrinsic motivation focuses on an activity as an end in itself. Extrinsic motivation focuses on an activity as a means to an end. Intrinsic motivation is a stronger motivational orientation than extrinsic motivation. Although an individual will engage in a behavior because of external rewards or punishments, the extent to which the behavior lasts is usually as long as the reward remains or the punishment stops. Alternatively, when internal motivation is driving the behavior, one is more likely to carry through in the face of obstacles. Ultimately, behaviors initially driven by extrinsic rewards or punishments can be eventually performed out of intrinsic motivation if the ideology that underpins the behavior is internalized.¹

¹ Thane Pittman, "Motivation," in *The Handbook of Social Psychology*, edited by Daniel Gilbert, Susan T. Fiske, and Garner Lindzey (New York City, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998), 549-590.

(U//FOUO) Faith reinterpretation is another form of an intrinsically driven conversion where the individual alters his religious tradition through introspection and evaluation. This motivation refers specifically to those who are Muslim by birth but then choose to follow a more extremist form of Islam.

- (U//FOUO) Faysal Galab, Yasein Taher, and Shafal Mosed (members of the Lackawanna Six) drank alcohol, used drugs, and had relationships with non-Muslim women—all of which are forbidden by the Qur'an—prior to meeting Kamal Derwish. Derwish was apparently the primary influence on their newfound Islamic path. After this

transition, it was easier for Derwish to convince them to participate in jihad as a way of absolving their sins.

(U//FOUO) Extrinsic motivations: a protest conversion could stem from economic, ethnic, racial, legal, political, religious, familial, or social deprivation that may negatively affect an individual's attitude and beliefs toward those implicated, leading to a change of faith as an answer to the deprivation.

(U//FOUO) Acceptance seeking, another form of extrinsic conversion, is a fundamental human motivation.^{iv} Individuals have a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting and significant interpersonal relationships.¹ Although the product of these relationships can have positive or negative consequences for the individuals involved, the inherent need to acquire and maintain interpersonal relationships is essential. Individuals with weak social ties may benefit from the solidarity that extremist groups provide.

(U//FOUO) The Encounter: Stimulus and Opportunity

(U//FOUO) Not all Muslim converts are extremists but they can be targeted for radicalization. Converts who proceed through the radicalization process are often driven by an extremist with whom they have come into contact. Many factors including compatibility of ideology, age, sex, education, and similar attributes influence the outcome of the encounter.^v

(U//FOUO) Evidence suggests most recruiting is accomplished by personal friends who have established bonds with the extremist group itself or one of its members.^{vi} The attachment to the extremist group is not necessarily due to a charismatic leader but instead can be the result of having a close friend in the group. The probability that a person will become a member of a particular extremist group will likely vary with the intensity and frequency of interaction with members of the sect.

(U//FOUO) Venues where interactions between converts and Islamic extremists can occur include:

- (U//FOUO) Mosques: the mosque is a place of worship where extremists can observe other Muslims' commitment to the faith and their reactions to the Islamic message given by the particular imam.
- (U//FOUO) Prisons: prisons provide a setting with a population of individuals with criminal backgrounds who can provide operational skills (document forgery, human trafficking, and so forth) to recruits.
- (U//FOUO) Universities: Islamic and secular universities provide a market of curious individuals who question society as well as their own beliefs. This is also a time

¹ (U) Psychological research on terrorism suggests that psychopathology has proven to be, at best, only a modest risk factor for general violence, and all but irrelevant to understanding terrorism. Thus, it is prudent to conclude that the current population that we are making inferences about comes from a non-clinical sample, which would allow us to apply all non-clinical psychological research findings to understand and predict their behavior.

period where religious conversions are common.^{vii} Through Islamic groups on campus, Islamic extremists have the opportunity to gauge anti-American or pro-extremist attitudes.

- (U//FOUO) Places of Employment: extremists who own their own businesses (bookstores, halal meat markets, and so forth) are able to provide a more private setting to conduct meetings and further indoctrinate new converts.
- (U//FOUO) Internet Chat Rooms: this virtual arena allows vulnerable individuals from around the world to discuss Islamic doctrine. Radicalization is encouraged both directly and indirectly on the Internet: indirectly through extremist propaganda (inflammatory speeches, videos, etc.) and directly through chat rooms and bulletin boards. These online forums allow individuals to “self-recruit” (seek out facilitators online, for example) and enable Islamic extremists to spot and cultivate potential recruits.

(U//FOUO) Under certain situational circumstances where motivation and opportunity exist, converts are able to bind to extremist individuals or groups and begin to forge an Islamic extremist identity.

(U//FOUO) Second Stage: Identification

(U//FOUO) Identification, the second stage in this process, is where an individual identifies himself with a particular extremist cause and accepts a radicalized ideology that justifies, condones, encourages, or supports violence or other criminal activity against the US Government, its citizens, its allies, or those whose opinions are contrary to his own extremist agenda. Although the individual has accepted the cause, he may not be convinced that his action is required to further it. Training activities in this stage serve more as group bonding experiences to solidify the individual’s extremist identity rather than training in preparation for an attack.

(U//FOUO) Accepting the cause leads an individual to become increasingly isolated from his former life. The dramatic change in lifestyle and ensuing isolation creates a vacuum requiring even more guidance on how to build a new life that supports his newfound ideology. New converts often seek guidance from imams or more senior followers on how to live every detail of the religion. Following this guidance can cause recent converts to become more committed to the newfound faith. The strength of this commitment can be supported by the convert’s social connections with other like-minded individuals. The group bonding resulting from such isolation and established connections reinforces the convert’s initial beliefs and legitimizes them.

(U//FOUO) The process of embracing a radical Islamic ideology is difficult to predict due to the unique circumstances and experiences of the converts involved. Certain types of experiences, including exposure to jihadist videos, tutelage under an extremist imam, and exchanges on the Internet with more extremist individuals, are more likely to drive the convert from conversion to jihad.

(U//FOUO) Key Component: Overseas Experience

(U//FOUO) Overseas travel can be a significant experience that appears to accelerate the radicalization process. Although radicalization can occur without overseas travel, it appears to provide the networking and experience necessary to participate in operational activity. The experience may vary from religious or language instruction to basic paramilitary training.

(U//FOUO) Some US converts to Islam, while traveling overseas, may experience their first exposure to Islamic extremism by perceived legitimate scholars, or by interacting with fellow Muslims outside of structured environments. The networking that occurs may have a profound impact on a student's experience. Oftentimes, these encounters can lead students to supplement their religious and language education with physical and paramilitary training at various camps.

(U//FOUO) Third Stage: Indoctrination

(U//FOUO) Indoctrination, the third stage in the radicalization process, occurs once a convert has accepted the radical ideology but may be unsure or unfamiliar with how to participate. Part of this stage involves becoming an active participant in a group, but could also be initiated within the recruit's self-created jihadist environment. Through various activities with the group and increasingly demanding and significant roles within it, the convert ultimately becomes convinced that further action is required to support the cause.

(U//FOUO) The indoctrination activities involve small group and individual participation that allow the recruit to know and recognize his own potential as a jihadist. The convert's confidence increases or decreases in relation to his experience and training. Moreover, the activities are essential to know at which level the convert can ultimately participate and how much he can prove himself worthy to the cause.

(U//FOUO) Final Stage: Action

(U//FOUO) The final stage is engaging in terrorist activities in support of the cause. This action can be violent or non-violent, but is always done with the intention of inflicting damage to the enemy. Some individuals who reach this stage will attempt to participate in a terrorist attack.

(U//FOUO) Every action has three stages: preparation, planning, and execution. During any of these stages a recruit can attempt to stop participation; however as a result of the indoctrination process an individual may be caught up in the group's activities, which may unduly influence the individual to engage in behaviors he would not necessarily initiate on his own. Up until the recent JIS case in California, there had been little evidence that radicalized US converts have engaged in preparation for an attack inside the US. Attack preparations can include target selection, casing, financing, and forming distinct operational cells.

(U//FOUO) Facilitation is a key component of any terrorist attack, and can be accomplished by operatives dedicated to the support role, operatives waiting for a separate attack, supporters unwilling or unable to perpetrate a terrorist attack, or unwitting participants. Facilitation can include providing financial assistance, safe houses, false documents, materials, attack plans, surveillance, or travel assistance. Females may play a role in this step as well.

(U//FOUO) Individuals who are unable or unwilling to carry out a violent terrorist attack can still further the goals to which they subscribe. Recruitment plays an important role in any terrorist organization, and a radicalized individual can use his experience to spot, assess, and encourage potential recruits to follow the same path. This process could also include vouching for a new recruit or helping them establish their extremist credentials. A charismatic recruiter with limited training or participation in jihad can transform that experience into an extremely enticing recruitment tool for individuals susceptible to an extremist message. Extremist Islamic clerics can play a major role due to their knowledge of Islam, ability to provide religious justification for terrorist attacks, and the emotional hold they can have over impressionable recruits.

- (U//FOUO) JIS founder Kevin James propagated JIS ideology and recruited adherents inside and outside prison, mainly through disseminating the JIS manifesto and direct meetings with inmates. James also provided guidance for members to recruit outside prison. He sought new recruits without prison records, who could benefit the group through their occupations, abilities, or access to sensitive locations.

(U//FOUO) Providing funding for a terrorist operation could be a part of the vetting process for a terrorist group to determine a recruit's commitment; it could also be a way to show support for a cause without being directly involved in an attack. Financing also refers to individuals who use criminal activities to fund terrorist operations, which again could be used to gauge a recruit's commitment. These criminal activities could be violent or could be committed through fraud, scams, embezzlement, or theft. However, having a role in financing an attack does not preclude a person from being involved in the attack itself, as the below example indicates.

- (U//FOUO) The JIS case involved three homegrown Islamic extremists in Los Angeles who robbed gas stations presumably to fund their planned operations in support of the JIS cause.

(U//FOUO) It is important to differentiate between providing funding for a terrorist attack, either through individuals or nongovernmental organizations, fully knowing that the contribution will go to facilitate an attack, and donating to an NGO without knowing the final destination of the contribution.

(U//FOUO) Homegrown Islamic Extremists

(U//FOUO) The use of the term “homegrown” in an attempt to classify and define FBI terrorism investigation subjects has become prevalent since the 7 July bombings in London and other recent events.

(U//FOUO) The FBI identifies a “homegrown Islamic extremist” as a legal US person whose primary social influence has been the cultural values and beliefs of the United States, who has the intent to provide support for or directly commit a terrorist attack inside the United States.

(U//FOUO) Indicators

(U//FOUO) During the pre-radicalization stage, an individual may not display overt signs of radicalization because conversion does not always lead to radicalization. The following is a preliminary list of indicators the FBI has developed in order to identify an individual going through the radicalization process:

(U//FOUO) Identification

- (U//FOUO) Increased isolation from former life
- (U//FOUO) Association with new social identity
 - (U//FOUO) Wearing traditional Muslim attire
 - (U//FOUO) Growing facial hair
 - (U//FOUO) Frequent attendance at a mosque or a prayer group
- (U//FOUO) Travel to a Muslim country

(U//FOUO) Indoctrination

- (U//FOUO) Increased activity in a pro-Muslim social group or political cause
- (U//FOUO) Attendance at a training camp or participation in paramilitary training
- (U//FOUO) Conducting surveillance activities
- (U//FOUO) Proselytizing

(U//FOUO) Action

- (U//FOUO) Travel without obvious source of funds
- (U//FOUO) Suspicious purchases of bomb making paraphernalia or weapons
- (U//FOUO) Large transfer of funds, from or to overseas
- (U//FOUO) Formation of operational cells

(U//FOUO) Intelligence Gaps

- (U//FOUO) What are other factors that take someone away from a normal process of conversion into the path of radicalization? Are some of these identified factors more significant than others?
- (U//FOUO) What factors may inhibit or prevent an individual with similar circumstances to someone who becomes radicalized from pursuing that course himself?
- (U//FOUO) What demographics or characteristics make a convert more susceptible to extremism?
- (U//FOUO) What factors within a particular stage are more likely to dissuade one from continuing in the radicalization process?
- (U//FOUO) Is there a type of conversion (sudden versus prolonged) that is more likely to lead a convert to radicalize?
- (U//FOUO) Are there other places of opportunity for radicalization to occur?
- (U//FOUO) What other locations overseas are desirable destinations for extremist converts? Are these overseas locations necessary for the radicalization process to manifest itself?
- (U//FOUO) Is the radicalization process capable of solely occurring within the United States (i.e., without overseas travel)?
- (U//FOUO) How important is a charismatic leader to the entire process?
- (U//FOUO) To what extent are coercion and manipulation versus normal persuasion tactics utilized?
- (U//FOUO) Are recruits active seekers or passive responders? Or both?
- (U//FOUO) What effect does deprivation have on who will join an extremist group? Is any one particular deprivation—social, economic, political, ethical, and so forth—more predictive than?

ⁱ (U) Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi and Michael Argyle, *The Psychology of Religious Behaviour, Belief and Experience* (London: Routledge, 1997).

ⁱⁱ (U) Charles Glock and Rodney Stark, *Religion and Society in Tension* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1965).

ⁱⁱⁱ (U) The Free Republic, Becoming Muslim by Adam Yahye Gahdan on the MSA Website of USC, available at <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/1482394/posts>.

^{iv} (U) Roy Baumeister and Mark Leary, "The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation," *Psychological Bulletin*, 117: 497-525.

^v (U) Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi and Michael Argyle, *The Psychology of Religious Behaviour, Belief and Experience* (London: Routledge, 1997).

^{vi} (U) Ibid.

^{vii} (U) Ibid.

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DISSEMINATION