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Introduction

Overview

The rationale behind this book is to provide a practitioner's insider perspective on a convert community's approach to tackling violent extremism during the early 1990s and up until 2009. The significance of conducting this research can best be illustrated by reference to practitioner authors in another field of study, namely, education, and their attempts to gain credibility by articulating theoretical frameworks that inform successful and established practices. Whitehead and McNiff observe:

> while practitioner research is generally held in high regard for its contributions to quality practice, it is not held in equal regard for its potential contributions to quality theory. Part of the reason is that its methods for assessing quality have not yet been fully worked out, and in some cases not even addressed.
>
> (Whitehead and McNiff 2009: 1)

They further observe:

> The new openness to practitioner research is therefore offset by caution that perhaps practitioners are still not capable of doing quality research or generating theory because they are not fully conversant with the appropriate methods for judging the quality of their work, and, given that the topic is seldom raised in the practitioner research literature, it would seem of low priority. So, if practitioners themselves do not take care in addressing these core issues, the wider

educational research community could be forgiven also for not taking them seriously.

(Whitehead and McNiff, 2009)

The challenges faced by practitioners in the educational circles described here could easily be transferred to those facing practitioners in the counter terrorist field today. In fact, despite acknowledgement by governmental and other statutory bodies regarding the success of grassroots community-led initiatives in addressing violent extremism, a preference for academic research, mainly from outsider perspectives, still proliferates in the counter-terrorist arena, it being the preferred and safer option for government. Added to this somewhat inhibitory approach is the more recent statutory alignment to self-confessed alleged former extremists who have apparently renounced violent extremism and embraced a more liberal and secular variation of Islam.[1] Such affiliations ignore practitioner entities that have never espoused violent extremism and have been at the forefront of countering violent extremist propaganda and its protagonists since the early 1990s. The consistency of their counter extremist efforts has often been overlooked by the authorities who prefer alternative voices considered to provide a more palatable brand of Islam. In any event, Whitehead and McNiff's observations remain relevant to the ambit of this book. Academic research in this field, particularly from a *western Muslim convert*'s perspective, is minimal and there is a need to introduce this dimension to existing discourses on the subject. The authors further acknowledge that:

> Practitioners themselves need to define and articulate the standards of judgement they use to evaluate their own work, and make these standards of judgement available to the wider ... research community.

(Whitehead and McNiff, 2009: 1)

This book examines British convert Muslims who faced violent extremist propaganda at a grassroots level during the early 1990s. It also discusses the effects of these Muslims being labelled as extremists because of their adherence to the orthodox Salafi (Salafist) branch of Islam. The book focuses on the following research question:

> Are British Muslim converts more susceptible to violent extremism or, are they the most effective members of the Muslim community in countering it?

Or, to rephrase the question slightly:

> Are British Muslim converts best placed by virtue of their identity/ies, to act as effective conduits between the majority (host) society and immigrant, second/third generation Muslim communities in understanding and effectively leading the fight against violent extremism in the UK today?

In order to place the research question within an appropriate context, it is necessary to discuss the socio-political and socio-religious climates that have developed in the UK. These climates have arguably contributed to the marginalisation and criminalisation of certain sections of the Muslim population within the UK today. Such sections include adherents to the Salafi doctrine of Islam. The author wishes to demonstrate what a participant observer's insider perspective can contribute to academic literature in this field. A unique academic insight can be gained on a convert-led Muslim community in view of the author's position as community leader and chairman of the Brixton Mosque and Islamic Cultural Centre between 1994 and 2009. This position provides an alternative perspective to existing research in this field, given the duality of roles as both author and practitioner. The inability of many authors to obtain sufficient primary empirical data from this particular, very insular section of the Muslim community leaves a significant knowledge gap which has failed to record the experience of British Salafi Muslims in addressing violent extremism. Academic research therefore needs to be conducted among the Salafi community itself and compared to existing research in similar, related fields. Presently, there exist few insider perspectives whereas an increasing plethora of outsider perspectives on Salafism and its adherents abound.[2] Relatively few of these perspectives provide accurate, primary research findings. In any event, these sources will be cited as a means of correlation or contrast, whatever the case may be in each instance (Wiktorowicz, 2006a: 207–39 and Olivetti, 2001). In the absence of a genuine insider perspective, external analyses, based largely on secondary data, are inevitably flawed. Despite the input of western Muslim academics on the subject, the author will suggest that they continue to provide an outsider perspective. The ideological differences and unswerving adherence to different schools of jurisprudence arguably influence non-Salafi academic findings. An example of this can be witnessed in the increasing contributions of Muslim academics from the Sufi tradition who have entered the arena to expound upon Salafism, often providing inconclusive data based on secondary sources of research without substantiation

from primary evidence.[3] This book endeavours to bridge the above mentioned knowledge gap by providing and examining primary data, and correlating it with existing secondary sources.

The book is likely to be of general interest in view of the current climate of concern surrounding Muslim communities in general and British Muslim youth specifically. Counter Intelligence agencies and other statutory bodies' assessment that extremist cells and sympathy for violent extremism have increased since the 7 July 2005 bombings, only serve to perpetuate public concern.[4] Societal concerns and sensitivities regarding the possibility of further 'home grown' terrorist attacks from British Muslims have been further exacerbated by continuing anti-Muslim sentiment and negative media portrayals of Islam and Muslims. This has, in turn, raised the issue of identity and what 'Britishness' entails within multi-cultural Britain today. The book aims to provide, on one hand, insight into a community of British Muslim converts who possessed intrinsic values of Britishness prior to conversion to Islam. On the other hand, it intends to explain the orthodoxy of Muslim converts' practice within the context of more mainstream practices in Islam. The objective in this instance is to provide an alternative insightful narrative from which a more comprehensive debate can develop regarding the extent of the societal contribution of British Muslim converts in countering the violent extremist phenomenon in Britain.

From a practitioner's perspective the research aims to provide a similar insight to that already mentioned above; however, additional empirical evidence will hopefully provide a wider platform upon which existing theoretical frameworks can be further examined and tested. Counter terrorist agencies and related bodies, such as the Metropolitan Police are expected to be interested in the approach adopted in this research primarily due to the fact that no research of this nature, i.e. a participatory observer perspective among an altogether insular Salafi community, has been conducted to date in the UK. The apparent inability in the past of such agencies to examine or even penetrate communities of this nature means that possibly, for the first time, they will have an academic insight, from a community practitioner (this being the author having a duality of roles) to inform their practitioner perspective. It has proved necessary to address some of the more predominant and prevalent discourses on radicalisation and Salafism in order to place the latter movement within a specific, discernable context. Therefore, it is not unusual for ensuing discussions to proceed along tangential avenues around radicalisation, usage of terminology, etc. before refocusing on the key research question. The distinctive themes of discourse

are interwoven and, in some instances, interchangeable throughout this book in an attempt to illustrate the complexities that surround research into violent extremism and Muslim communities in Britain today. They are by no means conclusive, however, and serve only to complement existing as well as emerging research on contemporary Salafism in the UK.

The initial part of this study (Chapter 2) will provide a historical prologue to the research question, illustrating the establishment and progress of, arguably, the first Salafi convert-led mosque in the UK and how issues of identity, both British and Muslim, contributed to the continuing evolution of a distinct convert identity. It provides a contextual backdrop against which the analyses/research chapters can be examined. The chapter also provides a distinctive narrative which highlights the issues that affected the community's struggle to thwart the increasing attempts of violent extremist propaganda that was threatening to effectively take control of the mosque.

Chapters 3 and 4 will encapsulate the literature review, highlighting academic, scientific and religious discourses surrounding identity and religious conversion. Chapter 3 focuses particularly on the issue of identity formation in the UK and how it is defined from multi-cultural or pluralistic perspectives. Chapter 4 examines theoretical aspects of religious conversion in order to identify potential circumstances and environments against which Muslim conversions have occurred in the UK during the past two decades (Kose, 1996 and Zebiri, 2008).

Chapter 5 introduces the methodological approaches applied in this study, discussing the research methods employed.

Chapter 6 focuses on three case studies of extremists who resided in the UK; Richard Reid, Zacarias Moussaoui and Abdullah el Faisal, all of whom were convicted of terrorist related offences and imprisoned. The fourth case study will examine Sean O'Reilly (a pseudonym); a convert initially invited to and attracted towards violent extremism but, upon encounter and engagement with Salafis, moved away from his former position and embraced Salafism. This particular case study will examine the reasons behind his gravitation from violent extremist narratives.

Chapter 7 introduces interviews conducted on the target group of British Salafi converts. Dissemination of the data extrapolated from these interviews will then take place so as to provide distinctive time lines/periods over which conversions took place. This will enable the opportunity to determine whether socio-political/religious events during specific periods (between the 1990s and 2008) affected the target group and their choice of Islamic practice. It will also provide an

illustrative narrative against which the previous case study chapter can be compared to establish whether similar drivers existed between the two research groups (i.e. interviewees and case studies) and whether their respective responses in dealing with these led to similar religious conclusions.

Chapter 8 (the conclusion) will address the research findings and place them within the context of the primary research question, querying whether the findings are conclusive and the extent to which additional research is required. These will also be compared and contrasted with the Brixton Mosque's account of community approaches towards tackling violent extremism during the 1990s, with particular focus on more recently established counter extremist intervention strategies and programmes. The chapter will, thereafter, discuss: i) implications for the government's Preventing Violent Extremism agenda, ii) the implications for the counter terrorist policing policy and iii) the implications for Muslim communities throughout the UK.

Statement of the problem

Since the early 1990s, significant international events affecting the Muslim world have continued to politicise Muslim youth in Britain.[5] Various Islamic movements and groups, such as Hizbut Tahrir, Supporters of Sharia (SOS) and The Committee for Defense of Legitimate Rights (CDLR) emerged during this period to highlight and, in some cases, exploit the tensions prevalent in the Arab and Muslim world (Wiktorowicz, 2005: 9).[6] Such tensions were to be played out on British soil and proliferate throughout university Islamic societies across the country.[7] The most notable of groups was Hizbut Tahrir in view of their well organised media campaigns, intellectual appeal to undergraduate Muslims, and their spiritual guide and leader, Omar Bakri (Wiktorowicz, 2005: 3) however, it did not take the masses long to realise that this group was, by and large, centred largely around rhetoric. More serious and extreme ideologies were being expounded by individuals who appealed to a wider audience that included non-academic, street-wise youth, converts (some of whom came from a background of crime), and disillusioned second/third generation British Muslims. Abu Hamza al Misri, Abdullah el Faisal and Abu Qatadah were able to engage a captive audience with their extreme understanding of Islam, experience and studies abroad in the Muslim world.[8] The latter was to bear the brunt of their extremist rhetoric in the early to mid-1990s.[9] Islamic scholars were subsequently belittled and discredited by extremists' highlighting

of, and reference to, contentious legal rulings (Fatawa) that contributed to the dissension that ensued.[10]

The Salafi position

Salafi communities in the UK arguably became the sole voice to effectively counter the developing extremist rhetoric and propaganda, recognising the popularity and indeed, threat of an emerging '*takfeeri*' (excommunicating) ideology in Britain. Their effectiveness stemmed from recognition and familiarity of violent extremist roots, and the sources of Islamic legislature and texts that are often distorted in extremists' attempts to justify terrorism. The increased popularity and attention to the extremist narrative was fuelled primarily by the aforementioned conflicts involving Muslim countries and communities. The perceived double standards of the West in addressing these conflicts further exacerbated the progression of Muslim youth towards extreme radicalisation which would consequently make them vulnerable to violent extremism. Salafism came under immediate attack from the proponents of extremism and British Salafis were derided alongside religious clerics in the Muslim world.[11] The effectiveness of Salafis countering the arguments of takfeeri propaganda led to the extremists' uniting in their attacks against Salafism.[12] Hizbut Tahrir's opposition to Salafism, for example, was continually emphasised in universities throughout the UK (Husain, 2007).

Surprisingly, despite the availability of extremist material that points, unequivocally to its opposition and rejection of Salafism, academic, government and media perceptions hold the movement's ideology to be a contributory proponent or precursor to violent extremism. Difficulty has arisen, however, in the application of relatively new terminology to define what comprises various strands of Salafism. In using such terminologies it has increasingly been suggested that ideologies/movements that have historically been considered disparate in the Muslim world, are now being defined as one and the same in the contemporary era. For example, Takfeeri (violent extremist), Ikhwani (Muslim Brotherhood/Islamist) and Salafi ideologies and groups are now being considered as one and the same movement, but with differing political aspirations (Wiktorowicz, 2006b: 207–39). Little, if no, consideration appears to have been given to the possibility of marginalising and indeed criminalising the Salafi community. Failure to make informed and properly researched distinctions between the above mentioned ideologies has already contributed towards the movement's marginalisation.

Although similar in many respects, the three movements still differ in rudimentary aspects of their respective beliefs and practice. Another example of newly introduced terminologies which emanate largely from western academia and journalistic discourse can be seen in Stemmann's distinction between '*academic Salafism*' (*Salafiyyah al-ilmiyyah)* and '*jihadi*' or, '*Fighting*' Salafism or *Salafiyyah al-Jihadiyyah*, (Stemmann, 2006: 3). Pargeter observes:

> rather than being an organization, Salafiyah Jihadia is more akin to a current of thought . . . It is also a term used primarily by Moroccan and other security agencies to label their Islamists.
>
> (Pargeter, 2008: 118–19)

She cites, as evidence to illustrate the coining of this new and somewhat alien terminology a prominent 'Salafist preacher', Ahmed Al-Rafiki, who explains Salafia Jihadia to be:

> a media and security term because I don't know anybody who claims to represent that current. There is no organization or group that carries that name.
>
> (Pargeter, 2008: 119)

Others have, unsurprisingly, rejected this new terminology, and few rebuttals of what is seen as disingenuous neo-classification of Muslims are as emphatic:

> As for what is called salafiyah jihadia, this is part of the imagination of the atheist media . . . we, Ahl Sunna wal Jama'a, are not salafiyah jihadia. We pray, so why don't they call us salafiyah praying, we go to pilgrimage and they don't call us salafiyah pilgrimage?
>
> (Pargeter, 2008: 119)

The introduction and subsequent use of new terminology to describe groups or phenomena as methods of denigration, etc. gathered momentum among the Muslim world during the mid- to late twentieth century. In acknowledgement of this existing method, McCants et al., recommended the following strategy as a means of reducing the popularity of Jihadis among Salafis:

> Label the entire Jihadi Movement 'Qutbism' in recognition that the Jihadis cite Sayyid Qutb more than any modern author. Muslim opponents of the Jihadis (including mainstream Wahhabis) use this

term to describe them, a designation Jihadis hate since it implies that they follow a human and are members of a deviant sect. Adherents of the movement consider 'Qutbi' to be a negative label and would much rather be called Jihadi or Salafi.

(McCants et al., 2006: 10)

Figure 1.1 below presents an interesting depiction of where Salafis may be located among the wider Muslim community. It is more accurate, however, in its illustration of precisely where Jihadis (or more accurately, takfeeris/violent extremists) are likely to be positioned. The author suggests that the continuing usage of inaccurate terminologies and typologies to define and categorise Salafis and takfeeris as one and the same entity, serve only to isolate and stigmatise the former movement who have, thus far, proved among the more effective in countering the violent extremist ideology. Continuing negative portrayal of Salafis may in fact result in a return to their previous insularity/isolation from wider society which, in turn, may further marginalise them and lead to proliferating the threat of 'Jihadis' embedding themselves even further among the former's communities. It is important to note that the illustrations in Figure 1.1 are, to a greater extent, mutually exclusive in that each constituency does not necessarily encapsulate the positions and ideologies, etc. of the other. In other words, it should not be incorrectly understood from the diagram that all 'Jihadis', for example, are Salafis but not all Salafis are 'Jihadis', etc.
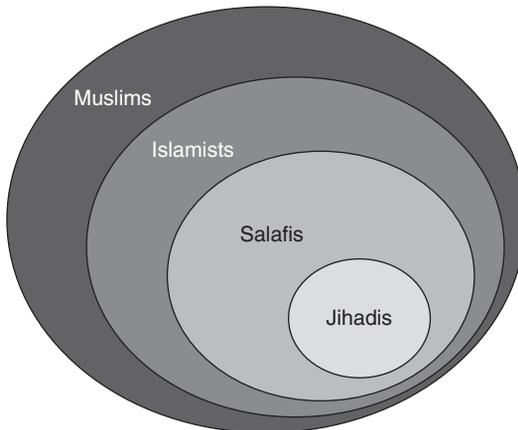
Figure 1.1 Jihadi constituencies
Source: McCants et al., 2006: 10)

Stemmann's research further emphasises the author's above-mentioned concern when discussing the impetus and process of extremist recruitment. Unfortunately, his classification of extremism, as it relates to Salafism, is that the ideology and movement are in fact precursors to violent extremism and, most notably, terrorism. Irrespective of this assumption, some of the transitional drivers towards extremism described by him correlate with takfeeri, violent extremist descriptors. He suggests the:

> radicalization process begins with the emergence of anti-integration tendencies and the desire to disengage from the host society.
>
> (Stemmann, 2006: 11–12)

This, he claims:

> continues with hostility towards the host society, rejection of the principles and institutions of liberal democracy, and the growing acquisition of violent attitudes.
>
> (Stemmann, 2006: 12)

Figure 1.1's depiction of the 'Islamist' *locality* among the wider Muslim community is, to a greater extent, accurate. However, the author suggests that it requires amendment if it is used to illustrate '*gravitation*' towards violent extremist ideology and thought. In other words, so far as politicisation and extremist philosophy are concerned, 'Islamists' would be positioned in the adjoining circle to the 'Jihadis' position with 'Salafis' occupying the penultimate 'outer circle' beside the 'Muslims' constituency. In effect, therefore, the Islamist and Salafi constituencies would be swapped. Further discussion on ideological positioning and the binary usage of Figure 1.1 takes place later in the book. However, in order to more accurately portray the UK context of both the ideological and gravitational positioning of some Muslim communities in Britain the author proposes additional theoretical frameworks (Figures 1.7 and 1.8 below). Behavioural traits which contribute to the extremist mosaic will be referred to briefly. In the meantime, perhaps the most telling aspect of Stemmann's conclusion is that the above mentioned descriptors he refers to make susceptible individuals potential targets for extremist recruitment. He discusses the transitional stages from Salafism to terrorist militancy as being an easy process 'given the radicalization that accompanies integration in the Salafi community' (2006: 11).

When considering Figure 1.1, and the positioning of 'Jihadi' constituencies, it is important to note that a more conclusive assessment would be that Stemmann's process becomes particularly poignant if Salafi communities resort, once again, to the insularity witnessed prior to 9/11 as a knee-jerk reaction to continuing inaccurate and often negative portrayals of their practice. To reiterate the earlier warning, 'Jihadis' could then embed themselves among Salafi communities to the extent that they recruit unsuspecting young Muslims who are unable to discern the finer aspects of ideology, methodology and practice, as was witnessed in the case of Richard Reid, aka the 'Shoe Bomber' during the late 1990s.

The author is well placed as a member of a Salafi community and is aware of the effects of extremist propaganda upon susceptible youth coming from backgrounds similar to that of Richard Reid. While in the process of learning the foundational aspects of Islam, Reid was violently radicalised towards extremism owing to his relative naivety and misplaced enthusiasm for his new found religion. After all, 'Recruits tend to have little knowledge of the Koran, and thus it is easy for the recruiter to mask the religious content of their core message; namely, that Islam is under threat from enemy action (2006: 12). This research will endeavour to establish the validity of such claims that Salafism contributes towards extremism and, therefore ultimately, terrorism.

Part of the remit of this ethnographic study is to examine the effect(s) of religious terminology used to define aspects of Islam, i.e. Jihad, and religious groups deemed to be part of the violent extremist phenomena. In this regard, the author's participative observant role will enable comparisons between an insider and outsider perspective of a British Salafi community and, in doing so, bring to the fore the research question concerning their susceptibility to, or effectiveness against, violent extremism. Acknowledgement is, however, given to the possibility of the subjective bias that can occur in studies of this nature and to mitigate such bias Chapter 5 addresses the methodological approaches applied in this instance. Subsidiary questions invariably emanate from the research question around the susceptibility of convert Muslims to violent extremism. Although raised in media circles, there appears to be little, if any, academic discourse on this topic (Pipes, 2005). Further questions are also raised addressing British and Muslim identities of converts and how both tackle areas of perceived conflict of the two constructs. The author suggests that the majority of converts in this study do not necessarily undergo or face the conflict experienced by second/third generation British Muslims so far as dual or multiple identity issues are

concerned. However, some converts from the older, African-Caribbean target group may have experienced racism from the host society during child/adulthood.[13] This resulted in them developing resilience to racism or subsequent stereotypical profiling. The younger target group are arguably more integrated and part of the fabric of multi-cultural Britain. It is, therefore, unlikely that they experienced the same degree of racism, if any, as their more senior peers.

Framework of study

Figure 1.2 provides the framework around which this study will examine stages of the sample group's pre- and post-conversion progression/regression in order to determine any pre-existing or post-related drivers that may have contributed to any identified susceptibility to violent extremism. In contrast, observations will also highlight the drivers that have prevented such susceptibility, possibly enabling individuals to be effective conduits against violent extremism.

This model has been adapted from Hudson's work in a completely separate field from that which this study is addressing; namely, management. However, it is proposed by the author that it can be adapted as an effective process of charting stages of religious conversion (Hudson, 1995: 45).

Founding (conversion) phase

This stage of conversion shall examine the influences/drivers that caused individuals to convert to Islam and compare these to other existing theoretical frameworks and models that cover the same phenomena (Roald, 2004). Discussion will then ensue around whether pre-conversion influences and perceptions continue to affect individual's lives thereby impeding their assimilation to Islam or, on the other
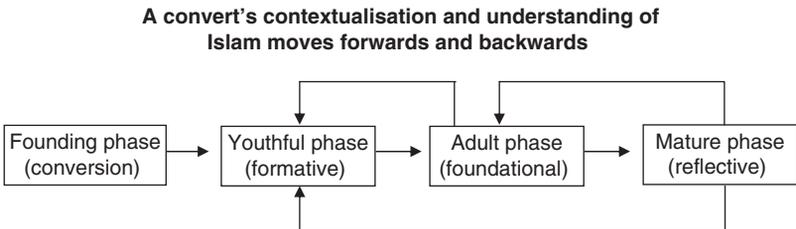
Figure 1.2 Proposed model for the life cycle of a convert's post-conversion process

hand, they have been able to fully embrace new ideological, cultural and religious practices once considered alien to them.

Youthful (formative/overzealous and idealistic) phase

Particular focus will be put on this stage of conversion which is, arguably, the phase in which converts are most susceptible to extremist propaganda and teachings. Overzealousness is a common feature of many conversions as, in many instances, a new convert possesses a heightened sense of self-righteousness with a desire to directly address/tackle perceived ills of society (Roald, 2004: 160). Social affiliations, if not effected at the founding phase of conversion, can possibly still occur at this particular stage. This phase will highlight observations surrounding the possible correlation between pre-conversion practices that may continue or even proliferate during the youthful phase (i.e. gun, knife and gang criminality) and violent extremism. Reference will be made to existing de-radicalisation programmes that address such issues at grassroots level to determine the validity of, and possible reasons for, such correlation.

Adult (foundational) phase

This phase looks at longer-term Muslim converts who have practised the religion long enough to have perhaps progressed from earlier understandings and practices of the first two phases. Reasons behind such progressions will be examined and discussed to determine whether an '*actualisation*' of the religion is in fact the significant factor that enabled such progress. *Actualisation* of the religion, as opposed to practising it in *abstract*, means that the adult phase convert has better understood and experienced the religion as a way of life, i.e. lived or travelled abroad to Muslim countries and engaged/participated in those societies, thereby enhancing his/her understanding and practice of Islam. This is contrary to their previous understanding and practice which, as mentioned above, was previously applied in an abstract form, i.e. learned from books, cassettes and videos in a predominantly non-Muslim environment. Research results are intended to show whether converts have come to terms with their new found, and often dual, identities or whether conflicts still arise during this phase.

Mature (reflective) phase

Converts' perceptions may further develop or, indeed, change if they have not already at earlier stages of post-conversion, owing to a

multiplicity of socio-economic and/or religious factors. For example, marriage, birth of a new child or even the death of relatives or friends (irrespective of their religion) may be contributory factors towards an individual reflecting on his/her religious understanding, practice and development. These potential drivers shall be examined and discussed shortly; however, at this juncture, it is necessary to briefly examine Roald's three-stage conversion process which, to some extent, lends support to the four-stage model proposed above. When suggesting that new Muslims undergo a process of '*culturalisation*' into their spouses' or friends' cultural contexts, she identifies a preliminary stage of ' "falling in love with Islam", where one wants to practise every Islamic precept' (2004: 288).

The second stage is described as a period of discovery where the convert realises the difficulty or, indeed, impracticality of implementing Islamic practices in their entirety. S/he therefore realises the 'discrepancy' between Islamic ideals and Muslims' actual practice. In other words, the new convert recognises the difference between: 'the Ideal Islam', as it is illustrated in Islamic books and that of Muslim understanding/practice in various parts of the world. Roald's observations at this stage accord to the author's earlier explanations regarding 'abstract' and 'actualised' understandings of the religion. Finally, she mentions the third stage of conversion being the convert's ultimate realisation that Muslims are not too dissimilar to their non-Muslim counterparts and that 'it is possible to understand Islam in a Scandinavian framework' (Roald, 2004: 288).

The proposed model introduced below (Figure 1.3) illustrates the process of cognition and development so far as ritualistic aspects of conversion are concerned. Rambo suggests:

> Ritual actions consolidate the community through singing, recitation, and gestures in unison, which instill a deeper sense of belonging. Ritual is also a way to tell the story of the new faith to outsiders . . . ritual provides experiential validation of the religious belief system being advocated. (1993: 115)

As already intimated above, Rambo's model is applicable insofar as it relates to the initial phase, i.e. 'founding phase' of Hudson's amended framework (Figure 1.2) because it illustrates process of change prior to conversion ('Separation'), during cognitive openings and changes ('Transition'), leading to actual conversion ('Consolidation').

Separation	→	Transition	→	Consolidation
Disconnect		Reprioritize		Add
Delete		Assimilate		Accept
Reject		Modify		Affirm
Repudiate		Transform		Embrace
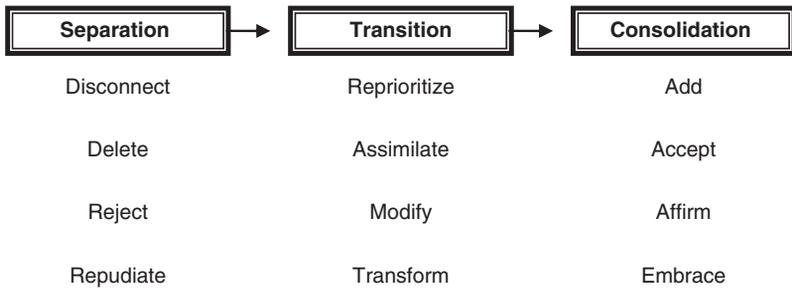
Figure 1.3   Ritual processes
Source: Rambo, 1993: 115

A bipolar perspective of extremism

It is necessary to introduce another perspective to the debate on extremism as focus has been specifically on violent extremism and its drivers. 'Liberal extremism' is arguably considered by significant sections of the Muslim community to be another form of extremism and a contributory factor towards young Muslims, including converts, *swinging* from a more moderate or, indeed, liberal perspective towards violent extremism. However, unfortunately, statutory authorities are perceived to show a clear preference in inviting and accommodating Muslim support from this end of the spectrum. After all, 'participating in . . . demonstrations is relatively non-confrontational . . . and . . . is rendered friendly and safe' (Greaves, 2005: 76).

This spectrum could possibly act as a general indicator of where groups, movements and, indeed, ideologies are situated among the Muslim communities in Britain today. Subsequent to the models shown in Table 1.1, the introduction of two additional gauges that determine possible drivers of violent extremism among British Muslims is also necessary. In response to a booklet entitled 'Making Terrorism History', the author proposed a measure by which catalytic drivers of violent extremism could be made (Elsworthy and Rifkind, 2006).

The simple continuum shown in Figure 1.4 served to reflect the extent of Muslim sentiment in light of perceived injustices implemented by the government and statutory agencies against the religion of Islam, Muslim countries or the Muslims themselves. The author submits that this continuum can be used when considering the case studies to determine each subject's perception of external, socio-political or socio-religious factors

Table 1.1 Bipolar spectrum of religious extremism among the Muslim community in Britain

Liberal Extreme	Moderate Perspective	Fanatical/Violent Extreme
Secular	Addressing Muslim concerns within context of Islamic law (Sharia) and common law	Imbuing emotional responses from its followers
Failure to adequately address Muslim concerns		Propelling them to react/respond physically
Lack of religiously knowledge based decisions	Action relative to what is required	Urgency of reaction/ response
Reliance more upon intellect than Islamic edicts and rulings	Contact with bona fide, experienced & knowledgeable scholars	Instilling uncontrollable hatred/resentment towards own society & those who do not subscribe to their view
More concerned with public perception and position with higher authorities etc.	Engaging with wider society acting as effective conduits between Muslim community and wider host society	
Self appointed and often not representative of Muslim masses/involvement in politics		Misinterpretation/ distortion of religious texts to justify extreme beliefs
Failure/refusal to acknowledge shared Muslim sentiment regarding government policies and subsequent actions that adversely affect Muslim communities/societies	Involvement in politics	Justifications for criminality in societies considered Darul Harb (a place of war)
Belief only in Jihad un-Nafs (personal, inward struggle) and condemnation of all physical Muslim action/reaction	**Belief in and advocacy of Jihad in its correct context, whether it be offensive or defensive**	**Violent extremism/ Terrorism & empathy/support for it under the banner of Jihad**
Passivism/Inaction	**Measured/balanced response**	**Misplaced Activism/ Reaction**

Source: Baker, 2006: 8

Sense of Injustice------Actual but Conceivable Injustice------Ultimate Injustice
(Perceived injustice)   (Atrocity)

Figure 1.4   Perceptions of injustice continuum

that propelled them towards violent extremism. A more comprehensive framework that can further illustrate these particular elements can also be used. The definition of 'atrocities' in this instance is restricted to general Muslim perceptions of injustice by some western governments against Muslim countries and/or communities. Examination of at least two of the case studies in this research will reveal the extent of politicisation among adherents to violent extremism. Violent terrorist acts or attempted acts are, according to some experts in the field of counter terrorism 'a considered political act triggered by a set of [these] circumstances' (Briggs et al., 2006: 41).

The author suggests that by placing 'atrocities' at the starting point of 'the cycle of violence' a tacit acknowledgement is given which indicates that such atrocities cannot be prevented and must, therefore, be considered a normal or acceptable initiator of events as illustrated in Figure 1.5. This can be perceived as a precarious initiator to the above mentioned cycle. Precursors to atrocities – which invariably exist – must be equally considered and highlighted, due to the fact that violent reactions can also stem from these areas. Muhammad Sadiq Khan and his colleagues arguably witnessed what they perceived to be the failure of the country's democratic process of the masses rallying to dissuade its government from going to war with Iraq. They (Muhammad Sadiq Khan and his colleagues) shared the anger, frustration and humiliation of many Muslims around the world at the lack of diplomacy afforded over

Figure 1.5 Cycle of violence (modified)[14]

the March 2003 invasion of Iraq. Arguably, these individuals had already developed extremist ideologies and beliefs before the commencement of the war. This possibly explains their resultant capitulation across the 'cycle of violence' spiral to the anger/retaliatory and eventual terrorism stage. The model refers to 'international atrocity' and highlights alternative routes to the 'cycle of violence' model; one emanating from an almost knee-jerk reaction of those already imbued with extremist ideologies and beliefs, and the other – those who realise what they conclude to be the ineffectiveness of democratic processes, i.e. rallies, etc., recognising violence as the only effective tool against imminent (and often additional) ultimate injustices. Perceived international atrocities can be, on occasions, easier to envisage than national or local ones. A clear example of this was witnessed during the build-up to the war on Iraq in 2003; the world witnessed mass protests by societies unconvinced of the arguments expounded by the US and its allies, perceiving that a great (ultimate) injustice was about to be committed against the Iraqi people. National/local 'atrocities', on the other hand, can sometimes be more difficult to detect until the act has actually been effected (successfully or unsuccessfully, depending on from which perspective it has been considered.) The June 2006 Forest Gate incident can be cited in support of this assertion. An incident/atrocity committed within a national framework can effectively propel recipients of that particular injustice, or those sympathetic to them, into the international arena of violence and terrorism. This book aims to examine the validity of such assertions when considering the case studies in Chapter 6.

Finally, the author proposes that the following 'Funnel' theoretical frameworks (Figures 1.6 and 1.7) incorporate the existing models discussed below, and illustrate the significance of the primary research question within the context of this entire research. The concept of the funnel was developed and first proposed by the author and a fellow trustee of Brixton Mosque in 2006 to the extent that it was referred to as a theoretical model during the Wilton Park Conference Summary Report on counter terrorism in March 2006.[15]

The three dimensional illustration (Figure 1.6) shows the positioning of the Salafi community at the neck of the funnel where the 'gravitational pull, translated in this context, as extremist propaganda, intensifies. This positioning highlights the Salafis' ability to address extremist propaganda at the 'hard end' of the bipolar spectrum illustrated in Table 1.1, particularly at a stage when Muslim youth are considered most susceptible to violent extremism. It also portrays the stark context of the primary research question so far as Salafis' susceptibility to extremism,
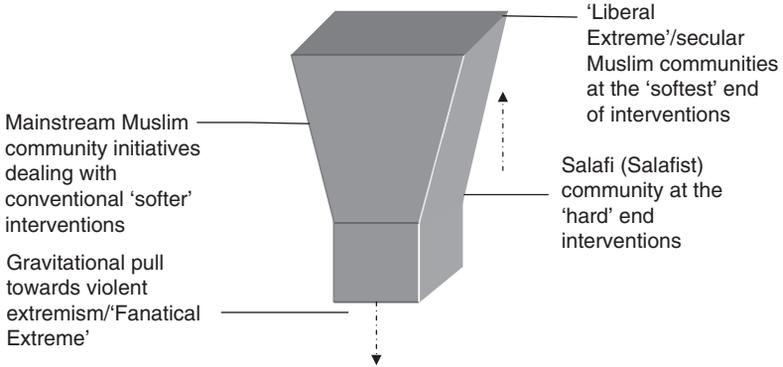
Figure 1.6 The funnel model

or effectiveness in countering it, is concerned. Other more conventional Muslim communities are located higher up the funnel, with the most liberal at the very summit, thus depicting the 'softer' degrees of work with their respective communities. Young Muslims who are actively *engaged* with these communities are not considered at risk to violent extremist propaganda, although it must be acknowledged that they will inevitably empathise with the anger and frustration of Muslim communities towards perceived injustices against the Muslim world. Depending on the degree of liberalism that underpins these types of communities, such feelings, when running high, could result in a 'pendulum swing effect' from the liberal extreme to the violent, fanatical extreme (see Table 1.1).

The cross section overview of the funnel (Figure 1.7) illustrates the societal parameters surrounding disenfranchised young Muslims and
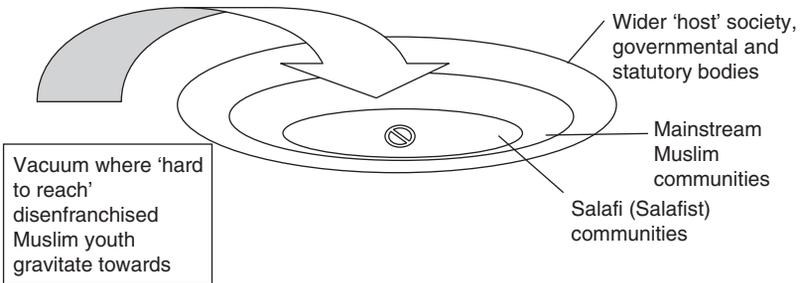
Figure 1.7 Cross section of funnel model

also provides a context to the second part of the research question regarding converts' positions as potential conduits between Muslim communities and wider 'host' society. The wider circle depicts the non-Muslim 'host' society and governmental/statutory bodies, with the Muslim community being located more centrally among the inner circles. The author suggests that, in the event of both wider society and Muslim communities failing to address various socio-economic, political and religious factors facing such youth, there is a risk of them gravitating towards a central, more covert, societal 'vacuum' which exists within an even smaller inner circle.[16] This is where extremist rhetoric is most potent. The risk of being effectively 'sucked' into extremism is then substantially increased; however, such risk remains undetected. This observation accords with the earlier positioning of 'Jihadis' illustrated in Figure 1.1. Unfortunately, some journalistic investigations discovered that, instead of addressing this area of concern, the previous Labour government's apparent intention appeared to be one of attempting to 'police' extremist *thought* among Muslim communities. This particular approach was apparently in response to accusations that too much focus had been on countering violent extremist *action* but not *thought*:

> Ed Husain, of the Quilliam Foundation think-tank, said the root causes of terrorism were extremist views, even if those advocating the views did not call for violence.[17]

A repositioning of significant sections of the Muslim community would prove inevitable when considering the funnel concepts (Figures 1.6 and 1.7) in this instance. Particular concern would surround Figure 1.7's illustration of Muslim communities and the risk of them being marginalised to a greater degree than at present. This in turn poses the potential of these communities being targeted as the 'alien other' by the surrounding, non-Muslim 'host'/majority society. Such a regression at this stage of academic and public debate regarding the threat of home-grown terrorism would be reminiscent of the stigmatisation received by the Jewish community in parts of pre-war Europe during the early to mid-twentieth century. That said, acknowledgement is given to the fact that not all government agencies subscribe to the approach advocated by Ed Husain and are aware that a government strategy that targets individual or collective views and beliefs could prove 'incendiary' to existing relations with Muslim communities in Britain.[18]

Chapter conclusions

Earlier presumptions regarding the roles of Muslim converts within the multi-layered spheres of wider, non-Muslim/host societies and the more insular Muslim communities, need to be re-examined in light of recent events which witnessed home-grown terrorist attacks in the UK. Increasingly, it has become necessary to complement existing research on Muslim converts in Europe and the UK in particular as a result of these events. The second aspect of the research question will be addressed in light of this observation. The theoretical frameworks proposed in this chapter will be referred to throughout the research with the objective of highlighting their complementary and, possibly, interconnecting components. At the same time, however, the ensuing chapters will also serve to challenge the validity of these frameworks in order to test their rigour and applicability to this subject.

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Page numbers in *italics* denotes a table/diagram

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