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# What Do Overrepresented and Underrepresented Groups Tell Us About Risks for Involvement in Islamist Extremism?

Fiore Geelhoed  and Richard Staring 

Department of Law, Society and Crime, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Rotterdam, Netherlands

## ABSTRACT

On the basis of empirical research on an underrepresented group—Turkish-Dutch youngsters—and an overrepresented group—converts—in Islamist extremist movements, we want to contribute to the debate on what fosters radicalization and resilience. While in both the underrepresented and the overrepresented group there are ample factors recognizable that are commonly identified as contributing to radicalization, Turkish-Dutch youngsters hardly become involved in Islamist extremism, while converts are involved to a larger extent than one might expect on the basis of the number of converts. To shed light on these findings, we will demonstrate how this differential involvement can be understood through the concept of “relational embeddedness”.<sup>1</sup> We will demonstrate how the relational embeddedness of this underrepresented and overrepresented group contributes in various ways to either the lack of susceptibility or the susceptibility to involvement in Islamist extremist groups. We will do this with reference to their sources of identification, their religious socialization, and the availability of legitimate political pathways. In the concluding discussion, we will argue that these insights can contribute to a more nuanced policy approach.

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## Introduction

Why do some social groups become more involved in violent extremism and other social groups less? This is a question that has received relatively little attention in previous studies on violent extremism. While many studies have been conducted on the factors that help to understand the involvement of individuals and groups in extremism or terrorism and while increasing attention is paid to what fosters resilience against such involvement, there are few studies in which underrepresented groups and overrepresented groups in extremism are compared.<sup>2</sup> In this contribution, we aim to shed further light on the characteristics and processes on the meso and macro level that influence the involvement in extremism for groups that are labeled as high-risk by western governments. We will do so by comparing Turkish-Dutch youngsters, who are underrepresented in Islamist extremism, and Dutch converts to Islam, who are

**CONTACT** Fiore Geelhoed  [geelhoed@law.eur.nl](mailto:geelhoed@law.eur.nl)  Department of Law, Society and Crime, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Rotterdam, Netherlands.

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overrepresented in Islamist extremism. This overrepresentation of converts is a phenomenon that can be witnessed internationally as converts from Western European countries and the United States are estimated to have been overrepresented in Islamic extremist movements such as Islamic State (IS) in Syria and Iraq.<sup>3</sup> To illustrate the under- and overrepresentations with numbers from the Dutch case, in 2018 the General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD) stated the total number of foreign fighters who traveled to Syria and Iraq to join Islamist extremist groups such as IS from the Netherlands to be 310.<sup>4</sup> In view of the fact that Turkish-Dutch communities<sup>5</sup> form one of the largest shares of the Muslim population in the Netherlands, one might expect a substantial share of the foreign fighters stemming from their ranks. Yet, they form a relatively modest group amongst these foreign fighters with an estimated 9.7 percent. With 47.6 percent, the largest group of foreign fighters has been argued to be of Moroccan-Dutch origin. To give an indication of how these numbers relate to the size of these respective ethnic groups in the Netherlands, in 2014, at IS' heyday with the seizure of Mosul, Statistics Netherlands (CBS) counted 396,414 Dutch citizens with a Turkish background versus 374,996 from Moroccan descent.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, the Moroccan-Dutch population represents a somewhat larger percentage of the Muslim population in the Netherlands, as 94 percent considers themselves a Muslim as opposed to 86 per cent of the Turkish-Dutch population in this period of time. Together, these groups are considered to form approximately two-thirds of the total Muslim population in the Netherlands. Converts, in contrast, are estimated to constitute somewhere between 1.4 to 1.9 percent of the Dutch, Muslim population. Nonetheless, they have been estimated to form 12.9 percent of all foreign fighters from the Netherlands.<sup>7</sup> Hence, based on the size of these respective Muslim communities, one might expect more Turkish-Dutch foreign fighters and less converts amongst the foreign fighters than the actual figures indicate. The objective of this contribution is to seek for an explanation for the differential representation in Islamist extremism of Turkish-Dutch and convert groups, whereby we will focus on the societal and group level.

Thereby, we by no means intend to deny the individual factors involved in the turn to extremism and that form part of the complex radicalization puzzle that has been widely acknowledged in the literature. In our studies, we also found support for such individual factors. One factor on the individual level that is commonly mentioned to explain the overrepresentation of converts in Islamist extremism and that hence merits discussion concerns the convert's zeal. Schuurman, Grol and Flowers define this zeal as "the desire to show dedication to a newfound faith by embracing it in a particularly fanatical and literal fashion."<sup>8</sup> Yet, in line with other recent studies that question the explanatory power of this alleged factor,<sup>9</sup> we will argue that the convert's zeal, like other individual factors, can not sufficiently account for the differential representation of these two groups in Islamist extremism, which is the topic of this contribution.

What exactly is the added value of this focus to previous studies on extremist involvement and what is the use for policymaking? Regarding the former aspect, we noticed that previous studies offer an ambiguous image as to what groups are likely to be overrepresented in Islamist extremism. More concretely, previous studies could arguably just as well or even better predict the opposite from what we observed, namely that Turkish-Dutch youngsters would be overrepresented and that converts would be underrepresented in Islamist extremism. This ambiguity becomes visible

when considering the group factors and the societal factors that have been identified so far in academic work. Previous studies have pointed toward many different factors that are involved in processes of radicalization, whether in terms of opinion or action.<sup>10</sup> Recurring factors on the societal and the intergroup levels are political instability, polarization, international politics, propaganda and military interventions, and various forms of absolute or relative deprivation, such as poverty or perceived inequality and injustice. In the closer environment of people, group factors that can contribute to extremist involvement concern family, friends and networks when these family members, friends or others in the social networks are involved in extremist movements. Once individuals enter extremist groups, the group dynamics, individuals (such as charismatic leaders) and cultures within these groups have been argued to further pull radicalizing individuals into extremism and to offer them status and a sense of belonging.<sup>11</sup>

In contrast to these “risk factors,” previous studies have also identified various factors that contribute to resilience and could thus be qualified as “protective factors” to extremist involvement. On the societal and group level, these factors involve having non-extremist friends, family, peers and bonds with school and attachment to society.<sup>12</sup> In terms of such attachments, there is a developing interest in the concept of “resilient communities” in the context of the prevention of violent extremism. Assumptions are that improving social bonds within families, within communities (social bonding) as well as bonds between different communities (social bridging) and between communities and societal institutions (social linking) can contribute to counter risks of radicalization into extremism.<sup>13</sup> Stephens et al. (2021) link these concepts of social bonding, bridging and linking to the role that “social capital” has been argued to play in creating resilient communities as argued by, for example, Dalgaard-Nielsen and Shack (2016).<sup>14</sup> However, Bhui, Everitt and Jones (2014: 2) point out that social capital—described rather broad and passively as “the assets, resources or ‘capital’ available to individuals and groups; [...] defined as community cohesion and resilience resulting from a rich associational life based on a strong array of co-operative social networks”—has paradoxically come out of research as both a protective factor and a risk factor for radicalization into extremism, depending on the context.<sup>15</sup>

These factors arguably raise the expectation that members of Turkish-Dutch communities in the Netherlands are more represented in Islamist extremism than converts. This overrepresentation could be expected on the ground of relative and absolute deprivation, considering that Turkish-Dutch youngsters are still lagging behind socio-economically, by overall lower-skilled jobs, and lower educational levels than other major ethnic groups in the Netherlands.<sup>16</sup> In addition, together with Moroccan Dutch citizens, Turkish Dutch citizens experience most discrimination in the Netherlands. Following this line of reasoning, youngsters with a Turkish background would be more deprived than the group of converts, especially if these converts are from native Dutch descent. Moreover, one could expect that youngsters from these Turkish-Dutch communities with their large share in the Muslim population and their relatively strong focus on their own ethnic and religious groups, would also be more likely to form connections with Islamist extremism than converts who start out with no Islamic background and connections. On the other hand, one could also argue that it is precisely due to the relative absence of Islamist extremists within the Turkish-Dutch

communities that these youngsters do not find obvious routes within their communities toward Islamist extremism. Addressing this ambiguity and shedding more light on differential group involvement in Islamist extremism can help to come to better informed policies.

In this article, we will thus address this ambiguity by demonstrating how the differential involvement in Islamist extremism can be understood for these two groups and what our findings tell us about the role of societal and group factors. Therefore, we will build on previous findings concerning the role of social capital in terms of “relational embeddedness.” The use of “embeddedness” is not new in extremism and terrorism research as several previous studies have used or at least mentioned the concept to shed light on the commitment of individuals to extremist groups. The focus in these previous studies is, on the one hand, on embeddedness within extremist milieus and its supporting communities. The principal argument in these studies is that embeddedness in extremist milieus and supporting communities such as through criminal social capital or through an embeddedness within jihadist and broader, non-extremist Salafi networks can contribute to the involvement in extremism.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, Ozer (2020) focuses on local embeddedness in times of cultural globalization. He contends that the lack of “individual life-embeddedness in the local social-cultural context” and consequential lacking feelings of connection to society increase the risk of extremist involvement.<sup>18</sup>

Our focus adds to these perspectives a deeper exploration of the relevance of the relational embeddedness in ethnic and religious minority groups (Portes, 1995) and how the different faces of relational embeddedness can actually contribute to or hinder the involvement in extremism. Relational embeddedness refers to, in words of Portes “the assistance and constraints offered by the co-ethnic community, mediated through social networks”.<sup>19</sup> We take a slightly broader interpretation of this concept as starting point by not limiting it to “co-ethnic communities,” but including “co-religious communities.” We will operationalize relational embeddedness through the respondents’ sense of belonging and their embeddedness in their migrant communities including the religious and political institutions and activities. Before moving onto this elaboration on the role of relational embeddedness, the following two sections offer an overview of the methods of each of the three studies on which this contribution is based and an elaboration on the wordings “involvement in Islamist extremism”.

## **Materials and Methods**

This paper is based on three separate qualitative studies: two on Turkish Dutch youngsters and one on converts to Islam from which we will quote extensively. All three studies aimed to further our understanding of the involvement of these groups, or the risk thereof, in Islamist extremist movements. The first study involved semi-structured, individual interviews with 73 Turkish-Dutch youngsters between 18 and 30 years old and 27 professionals who worked with Turkish-Dutch youngsters.<sup>20</sup> The data for this study was collected between 2012 and 2013, thus prior to the IS heydays, but in reaction to public fears in the Netherlands that Turkish Dutch youngsters were likely

recruits for Islamist extremist movements. Within this group of respondents there was variety in religiosity, identification as “Turkish” and the orientation on Turkey and Turkish communities in the Netherlands.<sup>21</sup>

The other two studies were a direct result of the emergence of IS and public and academic debate about alleged support of Turkish Dutch youngsters for IS and the overrepresentation of converted foreign fighters from the Netherlands. This second study on Turkish-Dutch youngsters took place in 2015 and involved focus groups with 79 Turkish-Dutch youngsters between 18 and 30 years, 18 mosque administrators or representants of religious or Turkish-Dutch ethnic groups and political organizations, and 8 professionals.<sup>22</sup> As these two studies were motivated by political concern about specific Turkish-Dutch religious-political organizations and risks of radicalization amongst Turkish-Dutch youngsters, it was an objective of these studies to include a diverse sample of respondents from various Turkish Dutch communities in the Netherlands. Nonetheless, none of these interviewed Turkish-Dutch youngsters turned out to be involved with Islamist extremist movements, as mentioned in the introduction, though some displayed some (limited) support for such movements, as will be described in the next section.<sup>23</sup>

For the third and last study on the overrepresentation amongst foreign fighters of converts to Islam, 26 converts to Islam were interviewed in 2017 and 2018.<sup>24</sup> With the exception of one respondent of 52 years, the age of the respondents varied between 21 and their early thirties. Of these 26 converts 9 were or had been involved with jihadist movements (as will be elaborated on in the next section). The other 17 converts had become involved in moderate or orthodox interpretations of Islam. In all three studies, we opted for theoretical purposive sampling, thereby including both men and women, Turkish-Dutch youngsters and converts to Islam from various cities and with different religious and political affiliations.<sup>25</sup>

Although these studies concern different groups of respondents in the sense of ethnic background and were conducted in different periods, our samples in the various studies are comparable. In all three studies the focus is on (1) young adults who all (2) share a (diverse) Islamic orientation, and (3) face discriminatory and exclusionary practices. In addition, (4) all respondents within each study share a comparable diversity with respect to moderate and orthodox movements that were questioned by the Dutch government for their potential links with extremism, such as Salafism, and for the Turkish studies Diyanet, Milli Görüş and Hizmet, among others. Even though only the convert study includes nine respondents that had been actively involved in Islamist extremist movements, one of these converts had a Turkish, non-religious background. In terms of time, the respondents are interviewed at different moments in time, but their (shared) experiences give meaning to similar incidents in similar time periods due to the fact that the moment of conversion and the experiences of the respondents in our different studies vary and cover a broader period of approximately 2000 till 2018. To make this more concrete, some of the respondents in our convert study converted decades ago and some of these converts that were involved in extremism were so over a decade before the interview. Moreover, some Turkish-Dutch youngsters’ experiences were rooted in the time of the Dutch Hofstadgroup while the experiences of others took place parallel to the emergence of IS.

Due to the three studies in this paper having been conducted separately, they had related, yet different research questions. As a result, the topics that were discussed during the interviews and the focus groups were not entirely the same. Nonetheless, topics that were central in all studies and that form the foundation of this paper concern their experiences of being a Muslim and practicing their religion in the Netherlands, their identification and belonging and their views on Islam and Islamist extremist groups.

All interviews have been recorded with consent of the respondents and under the guarantee of anonymity and unrecognizability. These recordings have been transcribed *ad verbatim* and analyzed with ATLAS.ti. The analysis in each study concerned a combination of thematic coding, based on the interview guides, open coding to create room for induction and a pattern analysis to come to abstraction and formulate answers to the research questions.

### **Involvement in Islamist Extremism**

In this contribution we speak of Islamist extremism to refer to a political ideology that promotes violence to realize a Caliphate under totalitarian rule of sharia law.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, we prefer using the term “*involvement* in Islamist extremism” over the term “radicalization” as “involvement”—in our view—more accurately reflects the distinction that academics have made between the “radicalization of attitudes” and the “radicalization of action”. Based on this distinction McCauley and Moskalenko (2017) developed the two-pyramid model.<sup>27</sup> This model follows from the recognition that not everybody who is involved in extremist actions embraces extremist beliefs and not everybody who embraces extremist beliefs engages in extremist behavior. In addition, this model acknowledges that there are different levels of both radicalization in terms of attitudes and in terms of behavior—hence the pyramid. Our findings illustrate the different shapes that involvement in Islamist extremism can take. Overall, both in terms of attitudes and behavior most of the respondents in these different studies explicitly distance themselves from Islamist extremism. They do so by condemning terrorism and the use of violence by IS and/or other Islamist extremist groups on religious or humanitarian grounds. This is the case for all respondents in the study on Turkish-Dutch youngsters, although some of the Sunni respondents amongst them did express some sympathy for IS in the sense that they feel that IS stood up for fellow Sunni Muslims in Iraq and Syria, opposed Assad whom they consider a Shii dictator, and because in their view IS fought the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), that they believe to pose a bigger threat to Turkey than IS. For these reasons, these Sunni respondents see IS as the lesser of two evils. In the study on converts, however, 9 of the 26 respondents were involved in Islamist extremism at the time of the interview or were so in the past, including one Turkish-Dutch respondent from a non-religious family. Their involvement ranged from actively supporting or facilitating Islamist extremist movements—such as jihadi groups in Syria, Iraq (such as IS) and Afghanistan (Al-Qaeda)—to actively participating in Islamist extremist or convicted terrorist groups, whether by spreading extremist messages, traveling to and living in Syria or—for one respondent—by using violence. Of the three respondents who traveled to Syria, two spent time

with Islamist extremist groups after which they returned to the Netherlands. The third respondent traveled to the Turkish-Syrian border and then returned due to a change of heart.

### **Different Forms of Relational Embeddedness**

When comparing the data of the various studies on which this contribution is based, we discerned three forms of relational embeddedness in which the Turkish-Dutch group and the converts differed from one another and that could explain the variation in Islamist extremist involvement between them: (1) perceived relational embeddedness (sense of belonging), (2) religious relational embeddedness, and (3) political relational embeddedness.

### ***Social Networks and Alternative Pathways to Belonging***

With the perceived relational embeddedness, we refer to the individual's perceived embeddedness in social groups, or in other words, their sense of belonging. In Western countries where Muslim communities form a minority, such as the Netherlands, commonly mentioned factors for involvement in Islamist movements concern experiences of social exclusion and a lacking sense of belonging.<sup>28</sup> Especially youngsters with a migration background from majority Muslim countries are considered to have such experiences due to discrimination, marginalization and their alleged position in between the two cultures of the country of their own, but increasingly their parents' origin and of their country of residence.<sup>29</sup> Both social exclusion and belonging could then be seen as signaling a lack of embeddedness in society at large. On the one hand, exclusion reflects the deprivation of such embeddedness by dominant social groups. On the other hand, a lacking sense of belonging reflects the self-perception of not being embedded in terms of identification and orientation.<sup>30</sup>

In our studies such a lack of embeddedness was indeed present in both groups, yet to different extents and in different senses. The 150 Turkish-Dutch youngsters in our studies frequently mentioned both issues concerning belonging and experiences of social exclusion. Nonetheless, their perception of these issues greatly varied. To begin with, they reported considerable diversity in terms of identification and orientation, ranging from primarily identifying with and being oriented toward the Netherlands to primarily identifying with their Turkish or Muslim identity and being oriented to Turkey and all variations—and multiple identifications and orientations—in between. Similarly, the composition of their social contacts varied with diverse positions on a spectrum of these contacts being entirely from Turkish origin or Muslim to being ethnically and religiously mixed. A similar diversity is visible in the group of converts, not in the least because of the ethnically diverse background of these converts. Some were native Dutch, while others had migrated to the Netherlands or had one or more parents with a migration background, western or non-western. Consequently, they reported various groups that they feel attached to. Nonetheless, they mentioned their newly found Muslim identity and Islam as their primary source of identification and orientation after their conversion, which coincides with an at least temporary



withdrawal from their former non-Islamic social circle in the aftermath of their conversion.

Another communal aspect between the interviewed Turkish-Dutch youngsters and converts concerns their experiences of social exclusion and marginalization. Both groups report to have experienced negative reactions to their “otherness”. For the Turkish-Dutch respondents exclusion occurred both with respect to their ethnicity and their religious identity in school, work, media and in the street. Respondents therefore spoke of “always being 2-0 behind”, holding “second-rate citizenship”, and “never being Dutch enough”.<sup>31</sup> The exclusion that the converted respondents speak of is primarily directed at their religious identity. While exclusion is not necessarily a new experience to the respondents with a non-native Dutch background, for those who are native Dutch this can form quite a shock, such as in the case of a blond-haired and blue-eyed native Dutch female convert, who started wearing a khimar and niqab but did not get involved in jihadist movements:

“I have experienced what it is like, let’s say, to not wear all this, to not be a Muslima (...) No, you can—for example—not know how bad you [are] discriminated when you are born like this, then if you only later see both sides. That is really an observation that you make and that makes you think: well, wow, that is quite an extreme difference. So, you come from being very Dutch. (...) Yes, it is a very big difference.” (Respondent 12, Study III)

Experiences that the respondents mention vary from scolding and discriminatory remarks to physical aggression. An extra dimension of exclusion that most converted respondents experienced, concerns negative reactions from their families and former friends. On some occasions, converts say to—at least temporarily—not have been in touch with one or more of their parents because these loved ones could not accept their conversion. As a result, the exclusion that these converts experience contributes to a loss of former sources of belonging and a sense of alienation from their previous dominant in-group. Another respondent, who came close to traveling to Syria in the early days of the war, stressed the reaction of the social environment in such struggles concerning belonging:

“Not so much because you have difficulties with your identity, but because other people have difficulties with your identity, because (...) you’re not a Moroccan nor a Turk, but sometimes some Muslims think so, as if you suddenly have to live in accordance with their culture. So, you have an identity crisis within the Islamic community. (...) But also in Dutch society your identity is taken away from you. (...) When you start with Islam, you suddenly are someone else, even though you aren’t.” (respondent 5, Study III)

This sense of alienation points to an interesting difference between the Turkish-Dutch youngsters and converts in our study. While respondents deal with experiences of social exclusion in various ways ranging from trying harder to become an accepted member of society to distancing, they have a strong alternative: their Turkish identity. As a young Turkish-Dutch woman explained:

“Yes, you speak the same language. You share the same values. Especially now, when there is much negativity about Islam, you can resort to them. Then you can talk with them and they will then understand you. (...) Those are the people that can understand you then.” (respondent 14, Study II)

According to an interviewed professional working at the neighborhood level with Turkish-Dutch youngsters, the Turkish Dutch community even forms an obstacle to radicalization:

“Well yes, radicalize....I do not really see that. I think it is not a big problem amongst Turkish youngsters (...) The community is very close, right, of Turkish people. I think that that makes a difference, how close the community itself is.” (Professional 10, Study I)

For many of the converts in our study, such a strong, alternative source of belonging was lacking. While they are confronted with feelings of alienation due to their conversion, especially those who experienced conflicts with their families and former social contacts do not have such a clear alternative identity to fall back on and group to belong to. In such cases, being a Muslim has become the converts' principal if not only source of belonging, at least temporarily. For the converts in our study this sense of belonging found two different expressions. First, there is the side of feeling to be accepted in a Muslim community and having found brother- and sisterhood. Several respondents mentioned that the convert's zeal helped them to gain status in moderate and orthodox Muslim communities which contributed to this feeling of belonging. As a converted woman who later became involved in a jihadist movement states during an interview about her first experiences in non-extremist circles:

“Everybody welcomed me really warmly, all those mothers and fathers, well (...) I was simply it. Everybody wanted to know my story and yes, simply, that I would come. Always inviting me. Come have dinner. Come do this, come do that. Yes. I missed that sense of family.” (Respondent 7, Study III)

Moreover, some respondents mentioned that their reputation as zealous converts made them popular wedding partners. Whether helped by this reputation or not, some converts came to belong to Muslim families, that is when they married a Muslim partner and gained a new family.

Second, this belonging can find expression in a perceived need to stand up against oppression of Muslim brothers and sisters in other parts of the world and the brotherhood amongst fellow fighters. A converted man who used to be involved in a jihadist movement, offers a typical illustration of this perception of belonging:

“Interviewer: To what extent did you experience this? This brotherhood?” Respondent 2: “Oh, extremely close, absolutely and certainly later on at, yes, the time of extremism, [it] is that you really feel that you are in the trenches together against a communal enemy, that you also really have to trust each other, that if someone is a traitor, you simply go to jail or something. You know, you have some sort of relation, a deep, deep relation with others that is simply incomparable to anything. [That] is totally incomparable to how you have friends now or something.” (Respondent 2, Study III)

Altogether, the strong internal orientation of members of Turkish Dutch communities that is regularly presented as hindering the process of incorporation into Dutch society and consequently as a risk of radicalization, can instead be argued to offer a positive source of identity and seemingly functions as a barrier to radicalization by neutralizing experiences of exclusion and discrimination.<sup>32</sup> On the side of the converts, such perceptions of exclusion and discrimination coincide with processes of alienation. Moreover,

a positive alternative source of belonging and barrier against radicalization are missing. Their feeling of alienation from their former social groups can thus be argued to contribute to radicalization through interaction with likeminded peers, the identification with the suffering of Muslims worldwide and the strong sense of brotherhood within Islamist extremist movements.

### ***Religious Institutions and Pathways to Religious Socialization***

With religious relational embeddedness we refer to the individual's incorporation in religious communities, its institutions as well as the socialization into the religious community. Klingenberg and Sjö (2019) argue that religious socialization is a continuous, active and reciprocal process, in which the individual that becomes "socialized" is an active agent next to various other actors as well as the broader cultural context. Based on this argument, they define religious socialization as "the process in which an individual comes to hold preferences in relation to dimensions understood as religious in the surrounding context".<sup>33</sup> The principal actors involved in this process apart from the "socialized individual" have been argued to be parents, peers, and religious institutions.<sup>34</sup> In this section we will demonstrate that the role played by religious institutions in religious socialization sets Turkish-Dutch Muslim communities apart from other Muslim communities in the Netherlands and contributes to understanding the differential involvement in Islamist extremism of the groups in this study. This again constitutes an example of relational embeddedness, as the role of religious institutions points to the influence of the co-ethnic and co-religious community, through social networks, on the process of religious socialization. To make our argument, we will first describe the organization of Islamic religious institutions in the Netherlands as presented in previous studies and then link these previous findings to the empirical findings in our studies.

In the religious institutional landscape of Islam in the Netherlands Turkish-Islamic mosques occupy a unique space. Of the total number of 478 mosques in the Netherlands, the largest share of 222 mosques has a Turkish signature. In comparison, the second largest number concerns Moroccan mosques, of which the Netherlands counts 170. Other Muslim minorities in the Netherlands, such as Bosnian-Dutch, Pakistani or Indonesian-Dutch Muslims, have between 1 and 7 mosques. The only other larger groups are Surinamese mosques (37) and mosques without a specific known nationality or multiple nationalities (together 25).<sup>35</sup>

What sets the Turkish-Dutch mosques apart, however, is not necessarily their number, but their organization. Like in other Western countries, Turkish-Dutch Islam is to a large extent an "import product" in the sense that religious organizations in Turkey have established their own religious institutions in Western countries, such as the Netherlands. For the Netherlands this means that four dominant Turkish religious organizations with origins in Turkey are active: Diyanet, Süleymanlılar, Hizmet or Fethullah Gülen movement, and Milli Görüş that have competed for migrants in the Turkish diaspora. These organizations are in charge of their own mosques, but also have youth branches and offer other services, such as educational services in the form of weekend schools for primary school children and boarding schools for secondary school students.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, the imams of approximately 146 of the Turkish-Dutch

mosques received their education in Turkey. Prior to the coming to power of Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2003 that signaled a more conservative religious turn, this training had a strong secular orientation. In addition, one can recognize this so-called "long arm" of Turkey through the principal language in the mosques being Turkish and the focus on the construction of a pious Islamic and Turkish identity within these religious institutions.<sup>37</sup> In terms of the development in religiosity among Turkish-Dutch individuals, Huijnk (2019) mentions the contradictory observation that part of the second generation Turkish-Dutch shows secularizing tendencies—more than for example the Moroccan-Dutch second generation—while there is a simultaneous development visible toward increased religiosity. To understand this observation Huijnk (2019) points to the "individualisation thesis" that explains how youngsters in pluralist and individualized societies increasingly follow an individualized religious path.<sup>38</sup>

In our own study, the important role that these Turkish-Dutch religious institutions play in the religious socialization of Turkish-Dutch youngsters as well as the individual pathways to and meanings of religiosity found confirmation. Regarding the institutionalization of Turkish Islam, we argue that this institutionalization forms a barrier against involvement in Islamist extremism. One professional working at a local municipality points, for example, to the historic tendency of secularism in Turkish Islam—at least prior to the coming into power of the AKP—to explain why he believes that Turkish-Dutch youngsters do not become involved in extremism:

"Turks have a completely different view of the experience of Islam. First of all, that is much more from a secular approach. While in all other Islamic countries, Islam is everything." (Professional 15, Study I)

However, this barrier is not reserved to former or contemporary secularist currents within Turkish Islam nor does this barrier require a choice of Turkish-Dutch youngsters for one Turkish-Islamic organization over the other or others due to the individual meaning these different organizations can have to the Turkish-Dutch youngsters in our study:

"When I look at my own 'current-career' look, then I have been with all of them. I learned to read the Quran with the Süleymancı movement. (...) My grandfather was the founder of a Diyanet mosque in [name city], I come there often. In my youthful years I became active with Milli Görüş, I have been there too. I also went to the student houses of the Fethullah Gülen movement every now and then and I have also participated in activities of the Sufi movement. And I could find myself in everything. And that's why... it is not bad if someone says 'he is from Milli Görüş', but I don't consider it important, I don't value that." (Respondent 6, Study II)

This Turkish-Dutch religious socialization contrasts in particular with the situation of converts in the Netherlands. Unless they marry into a Muslim family that helps to socialize them into Islam, the converts in our study regularly mentioned to have felt out of place in Turkish- or Moroccan-Dutch mosques. One reason for this feeling out of place is that much of the religious socialization in Turkish-Dutch mosques and other institutions of major Turkish-Dutch organizations takes place in Turkish (and for that matter, in Arabic in Moroccan mosques), as a result of which the language barrier required them to search for knowledge elsewhere. In addition to this, several convert respondents refer to the sometimes condescending attitude that more

traditionally oriented mosque visitors express toward converts who in their view “know nothing of Islam yet”. Finally, we observed that convert organizations did not fill this gap. There was an annual convert meeting, but online convert organizations were hardly present nor did they get involved in Islamic teaching. Although several convert websites have since then professionalized, it is still websites and social media with a Salafi and more orthodox signature that are most active in spreading knowledge about Islam in the Dutch or English language.<sup>39</sup> Due to the Salafi focus on building a global Muslim community that is not bound by ethnicity and nationalities, they appear to be the most welcoming to converts and hence fill the void in the religious socialization of Muslims. Next to this accessibility, Salafism seems to have another attraction: whether orthodox or extremist in orientation, Salafism strives for a “pure Islam”, an Islam that is purified from cultural pollution and other innovations. Moreover, Salafism has a global ummah as ideal, that offers space for Muslims regardless of their ethnicity and nationality.<sup>40</sup> This makes that converts with their ethnically diverse backgrounds find a place in Salafism and even have an advantage over those who were socialized into traditional Islamic communities; whereas those who were socialized into a “Moroccan interpretation” of Islam express the need to get rid of cultural and innovative pollution, converts can immediately start learning “the real” and “pure” Islam.<sup>41</sup> This message thus promises them a sense of fitting in with Salafi communities.

In our convert study, several converts that neither were nor had been involved in Islamist extremism went to a Dutch, orthodox Salafi mosque, either solely for the *shahada* or by staying active through keeping in touch with the contact person for converts, by following classes on Islam in Dutch and Arabic classes to learn to read the Quran and attending the Friday sermon that was held in Dutch. Yet, for various other converts, their convert’s zeal and search for knowledge took primarily shape in gathering information on online channels, mostly in interaction with likeminded peers they met online or offline and without guidance from non-Islamist extremist Muslim relatives, peers or imams. A typical example of how this form of religious socialization takes place is offered by the two convert couples in our study that both got involved in Islamist extremism through religious socialization in extremist Salafi circles. Of one of these couples, a female convert describes her and her convert partner’s path and active participation into Islamist extremism as follows:

“This is how everything started. We started reading and he went to the mosque and met brothers and well, eventually those took him to another more extreme one, me as well of course, because I went along with it. But anyway, that is how our journey began, so really reading books and yes, gain knowledge by ourselves, especially that. (...) Not with an imam, not with a supervisor. That was really our pitfall I think and that is the case for many converts who eventually start self-studying. And in itself self-study is not bad, but you have to know what you are going to study and with whom and so on. (...) Every person that starts practicing [Islam] goes through such a phase that you start to teach yourself stuff. Then you get arrogant and start to think that you know everything even though you might have read one book and know it a little bit by heart.” (Respondent 20, Study III)

Concluding, the relational embeddedness resulting in support of co-religious and co-ethnic communities forms an important difference between the religious socialization of Turkish-Dutch youngsters and Dutch converts. Turkish-Dutch youngsters are highly

likely to become engaged in religious socialization in interaction with various Turkish religious organizations, which at a later age might contribute to a religious and/or cultural barrier against Islamist extremism. Converts are more reliant on contacts that do not hold their lack of knowledge on Islam against them and channels that offer information about Islam in Dutch or English, especially if they do not marry into a Muslim family. In addition, their lack of a religious and cultural barrier, moreover, can be argued to contribute to a greater susceptibility to Islamist extremist messages.

### ***Available Pathways for Political Action***

The third type of relational embeddedness we discerned and that can help to understand the differential involvement of the groups in our studies is formed by the individual's embeddedness in political networks, whether political parties or Turkish-Dutch and convert grass root organizations. In comparison to other ethnic minority groups in the Netherlands, Turkish-Dutch communities are represented better in terms of political participation, either by actively participating in especially local politics and by voting for other Turkish-Dutch community members.<sup>42</sup> As Kranendonk and Vermeulen (2019) assert, political participation can be encouraged by both formal and informal networks when relational embeddedness in these group networks is combined with social identification with the groups at hand. For Turkish-Dutch as well as for Moroccan-Dutch citizens in the Netherlands this can mean that their embeddedness and social identification with their ethnic and/or Muslim communities could offer them pathways to political participation, whether in the form of voting or becoming active in a political party. According to Kranendonk and Vermeulen, moreover, this political activity amongst Turkish-Dutch citizens is especially present for those who are embedded in ethnic networks, more than for those who are embedded in religious networks. The authors suggest that the Turkish-Dutch turn-out can have become even higher since the establishment of DENK in 2015, an immigrant party led by Turkish-Dutch and Moroccan-Dutch politicians. The name "DENK" refers to what the party stands for: "think" in Dutch and "equal" in Turkish, thereby pointing to the agenda of cultural diversity and equality for minority groups in the Netherlands.<sup>43</sup> Additional analyses of the relational embeddedness of the electorate of this party are not available at the time of this contribution, yet Vermeulen et al. (2020) do demonstrate that Turkish-Dutch citizens make up a considerable part of the electorate and that this electorate is highly embedded in and identifies strongly with its immigrant communities. Moreover, these authors suggest that countries that have higher thresholds for political participation risk "further frustration from immigrant groups".<sup>44</sup> In other words, countries with lower thresholds for political participation, such as the Netherlands, could be argued to canalize frustrations through the political routes that these lower thresholds enable.

In comparison to these findings from the literature review, our data supports this thesis of alternative pathways to claim one's position in society and/or ventilate frustration. To begin with, these political initiatives are partly organized through ethnic and nationalistic lines, more than religiously. This became particularly clear in our first study where the political organization of Turkish-Kurdish networks in the

Netherlands was a focus point. Several of the respondents expressed support for the PKK, yet they did not feel the need to participate in the PKK's battle themselves. As one Kurdish, female respondent argued:

“There is a difference between me and the people who actually go to the mountains, apart from the courage of course. But also in terms of the position in which you find yourself. We have many possibilities here to push the current situation into a different direction, to try and force a political solution.” (Respondent 6, Study I).

Moreover, in our second study on Turkish-Dutch involvement in Islamist extremism, we interviewed youngsters who joined the “Multicultureel Plus Partij” (Multicultural Plus Party), an at the time new local party in Amsterdam with a Turkish-Dutch party leader, who felt that they could help to improve the acceptance and social position of their ethnic community in Dutch society through active democratic political participation.

In comparison, for converts there are no such evident political pathways. On the contrary, in line with their general loss of former communities and the lack of religious institutions that focus on converts, there are no convert networks or organizations that offer an evident route to political participation. With the coming into existence of DENK, converts might have come to recognize themselves in the multicultural ideals and the focus on minorities. While none of our converted respondents were embedded in political networks nor participated actively in politics, it is not possible to come to a conclusive answer about whether or not DENK has altered this availability of political pathways for converts in general. Apart from the incapacity to generalize the findings of our small-scale qualitative study, the question remains to what extent converts identify with DENK. For example, DENK is not a Muslim party. From the start, there have also been non-Muslim and non-religious members of the Party who held a seat in Dutch Parliament.<sup>45</sup>

All in all, we have argued that our studies indicate that Turkish-Dutch youngsters are more embedded in social structures that provide access to democratic forms of political participation than converts. Based on this observation it can be concluded that such embeddedness forms a barrier against involvement in Islamist extremism by offering alternative strategies for dealing with frustrations stemming from, for example, experiences of marginalization, discrimination, alienation, and a socio-economically disadvantaged position.

## Discussion

This contribution has discussed the relevance of relational embeddedness in the process of becoming involved in Islamist extremist movements, such as IS. We have argued that the assistance and constraints that co-ethnic and co-religious communities offer to achieve a sense of belonging and to create meaningful pathways for religious socialization and democratic political participation can affect Islamist extremist involvement. In the case of underrepresented Turkish-Dutch youngsters in Islamist extremism, our studies suggest that the assistance and constraints of the Turkish-Dutch communities and the relational embeddedness they offer, all contribute to a sense of belonging, a form of social bonding, and to religious socialization and democratic forms of political

participation, both of which include forms of social bridging and social linking. The converts in our study, in comparison, are embedded in a different relational context and consequently have less available or obvious pathways to a—sometimes lost—sense of belonging, religious socialization and democratic political participation. To make a theoretical generalization, we argue that the degree and type of relational embeddedness within ethnic and religious communities can form either a barrier against or a push toward involvement in Islamist extremism. The Turkish-Dutch youngsters in our studies generally experience a strong relational embeddedness within specific religious, social and political settings that partially overlap and that is even difficult to ignore. It can be argued that this relational embeddedness diminishes their susceptibility to Islamic extremism. The Dutch converts in our studies overall face a different relational embeddedness that is characterized much more by exclusion and alienation from dominant society as well as their former social networks and communities with no real sense of belonging to new in-groups except for Salafi and Islamist extremist groups that welcome them.

Our findings point to two central conclusions. The first conclusion is in view of the widespread political concern in the Netherlands, as in other Western-European countries, that a strong inward orientation of migrant groups, such as Turkish-Dutch groups, might foster radicalization. In Dutch politics this distrust toward these communities fueled several research projects, our studies included. Our contribution contradicts this suspicion and indicates instead, that an inward focus can form a barrier to radicalization. Second, our contribution highlights the complexity of the radicalization puzzle. The presence of risk factors in itself does not sufficiently explain radicalization, nor does the convert's zeal for the overrepresentation of converts: their effect depends on the interplay with other factors. Through our community focus it becomes clear how and why the social embeddedness alters the individual context of choosing to *refrain* from violence. Thereby our studies strengthen the case for the relevance of the broader social context, including communities and their embeddedness in society at large.

## Notes

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4. AIVD, *Syria's Legacy. Global Jihadism Remains a Threat to Europe*. General Intelligence and Security Service, November 2018. <https://english.aivd.nl/publications/publications/2018/11/09/the-legacy-of-syria-global-jihadism-remains-a-threat-to-europe>
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- Mosul, 2.35 percent of the Dutch population was born or at least one of their parents was born in Turkey and hence ‘Turkish-Dutch’.
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  15. Kamaldeep Bhui, Brian Everitt, and Edgar Jones, “Might Depression, Psychosocial Adversity, and Limited Social Assets Explain Vulnerability to and Resistance against Violent Radicalisation?” *PLOS ONE* 9, no. 9 (2014): e105918. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0105918>. Bhui et al. operationalize social capital in a rather unusual way through closed and scaled questions as (1) how satisfied respondents felt about living in the area, (2) the number of years they were living in a particular area, (3) how many people they felt to be trusted in the specific area, and (4) to what extent they felt safe while being alone in the area during nighttime. The scores to these answers were used on a scale in which a higher score mirrored higher social capital (2014: 3).
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## Ethics Statement

At the time of the data collection for the three studies on which this contribution is based, written informed consent was not yet required by Dutch law. Moreover, it was not required to

get permission from an ethical committee. Of course, we did take measures to conduct research in an ethically responsible manner. This means that we obtained oral informed consent from all research participants prior to their participation, we asked their permission for recordings, and only included adults. Further, we gave the respondents the opportunity to read the transcripts and the final reports with their own quotes and we tried to give them something in return in the form of giving lectures and presentations within the researched communities. The chosen approach of oral informed consent as well as the data management procedure was approved by the universities of the researchers involved (Erasmus University Rotterdam, VU University and Leiden University), as well as by the supervisory committees for these studies.

## ORCID

Fiore Geelhoed  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6747-6535>

Richard Staring  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6352-9911>