“God Betrayed Us”
The Deconversion of Syrian Refugees
God Betrayed Us: How Trauma affects the Deconversion of Syrian Refugees in The Netherlands
STATEMENT 1

I hereby declare that this thesis is an original work. It is the result of my own research, and was written entirely by me, except where otherwise stated. Any information and ideas from other sources are explicitly and fully acknowledged in the text or the notes. A bibliography is appended.

Harlem, 17 July 2019

(place and date)  (signature)

STATEMENT 2

I hereby give consent for my thesis, if acceptable, to be made publicly available as follows: for photocopying; for inter-library loans; and for the title and summary to be made available to outside organizations and to be published by VU University Amsterdam.

Harlem, 17 July 2019

(place and date)  (signature)
Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Article .................................................................................................................. 5
  Abstract................................................................................................................................. 5
  Introduction........................................................................................................................... 5
    Leaving religion behind: Conversion, apostasy or deconversion?................................. 6
    Trauma and refugees theory: How is it related to religion?............................................ 8
  Methodology ....................................................................................................................... 10
  Findings ............................................................................................................................... 11
    Pre-deconversion: Between "religious" and "doubt in Islam" narratives..................... 11
    Deconversion: War, a fleeing journey, and displacement as turning points ... ............. 12
    Post-Deconversion: Cognition of deconversion and reflection...................................... 16
  Discussion .......................................................................................................................... 18
  Conclusion ......................................................................................................................... 21
  Bibliography ...................................................................................................................... 23

Chapter 2: Methodology ..................................................................................................... 26
  Methodology, Approach and Method .............................................................................. 26
  Research Population and Sampling ............................................................................... 27
  Data Analysis ................................................................................................................... 28
  Researcher reflection ........................................................................................................ 29
    The Bias in the Research ............................................................................................... 29
  Ethics of research on trauma survivors ......................................................................... 30
  Physical and emotional safety of the researcher ............................................................ 32
  Bibliography ...................................................................................................................... 33
Chapter 1: Article

Abstract:
How can trauma affect our belief system? Based on in-depth interviews with 12 former Muslim Syrian refugees, this article tries to understand narratives of deconversion, associated with Islamic tradition through analytical sociology approach. The narrative data presented in this article depicts a potential reaction when Muslim believers are exposed to acute, war-related trauma, exacerbated when religion is a tool for torture. The findings suggest that a conscious rejection of faith after war comes from the emotional shock when a loss of God's support during trauma is felt, followed by thoughtful reflection on Islam. The negative role of religion and Muslim clerics paired with an Islamic weakness in disaster situation coping mechanisms force “de-converts” to explore their existence amidst newfound freedom of thought in the light of who they once were.

Keywords:
Deconversion, Islam, Trauma, Refugees, Syria, War

Introduction:
In the secular age, deconversion studies are vital in understanding the reasons behind the disillusionment that bonds a person and his religion. Religious mobility and the freedom to choose a belief system is a relatively new social phenomenon. Hence, it is not only significant in studies of people who change religions and sects, but it is also key in the growing field of non-religious studies looking at those abandoning religion (Lois, 2012).

Broadly, it is noticeable that economics dominated religious mobility literature (Stark and Finke, 2000), while the human experience is less considered (Berger, 1976). Looking at religious mobility from only a rational perspective is very reductionist, as considering the emotional experience that motivates the religious shift is very important (Borer and Schafer, 2011). Trauma is one of the most important experiences related to religion. Although trauma as a concept is more common in medical studies, more scholars are introducing it into sociological theories (Ganzevoort and Semac, 2018). This article seeks to understand religious mobility associated with deconversion experiences from a sociological perspective, by focusing on Syrian refugees who are exiting Islam in The Netherlands. It aims to draw a line between trauma and some religious-exiting experiences and answer the main question: how do war-related experiences affect the deconversion narratives of Syrian refugees? Thus, this article attempts to understand the stages of religious exodus from Islam, the motives and factors that led to it in relation to war and asylum, the usefulness of Islamic methods in dealing with trauma, and finally, the reflection and analytical results reached by the 12 refugees themselves.

The Syrian conflict, launched in part by the Arab Spring of March 2011, has created one of the worst humanitarian crises in our time. As anti-government protests spread, the conflict in Syria became an armed one. Cities the likes of Aleppo and Homs were demolished, and horrific human rights violations became widespread. As of May 16, 2018, the UN declared on its website that around 400 thousand Syrians were killed in the first 5 years of the war.
The UN estimated more than 5 million Syrians have fled the country and 6 million are internally displaced.

With massive displacement, a tumultuous journey post-fleeing combined with a search for stability in a new country influences the inner and outer selves of refugees (Steel, 2006). Despite the absence of clear statistics, personal observation shows several refugees deconverted from Islam after settling down in European countries. This research highlights the relationship between the traumatic event, the loss of faith and the disaffection of religion. Using an analytical sociology perspective, data is drawn from 12 refugee interviews and their perceived narratives of their deconversion.

The following section will begin with a critical discussion of the central concepts of this research article, focusing on the notion of deconversion. After this, there will be a brief exploration of the theoretical relationships between deconversion, on the one hand, and trauma and the refugee’s life on the other. In addition, some background information about the Syrian case will be offered. Following this will be a section about the methodology used to gather the findings and the outcomes of the interviews. A discussion section will follow, and I will link the findings with the theoretical framework. And finally, the section will end with a conclusion about the research.

**Leaving religion behind: Conversion, apostasy or deconversion?**

In this section, I will discuss the concept of controversial “deconversion” and its relationship to other concepts such as “conversion” and “apostasy”. I will try to link this concept to Islamic traditions and discuss it from this perspective.

We can't simply define “deconversion” without shedding light on the root of “conversion”. The work of John D. Barbour (1994) is significant as a starting point, as Barbour connected roots of the term “conversion” to “transformation” or “turn around,” which means turning to faith in God, and attaining a group of beliefs and adhering to the rules and convictions of the declared religion.

Mossièrè Géraldine (2007) describes religious conversion as being an emotionally complex process that involves individuals who are intertwined in body, mind, and self. Scholar William James (2012) indicates that man is a social creature, so his conversion is a process of moving from unhappiness and disaffiliation to happiness and affiliation. James writes that conversion may occur suddenly or gradually. Lewis Rambo (1993) referred to the social aspect and cultural impact of conversion, as culture either impedes or facilitates any religious change. Anthropologists cite hope or fear as main motivators of any change a person initiates. In direct relation, change in religion is often an attempt to solve life’s mysteries and man’s origins. Conversion manifests in different forms. It can occur from the absence or presence of faith, moving from one religious system to another, or evolution within the same system. Anthony J. Blasi (2009) added an important note, writing that conversion may be a “quiet” change in religious preference while belonging officially to the organization he originally embraced, or it can be an explicit move, perhaps taking action on the membership of the other religion through commitment and engagement.
However, deconversion is considered a new addition to religious mobility terminology, described as exiting one religion without intention of committing themselves to another (Streib, 2014). But, is that not a conversion? Ryan Cragun and Joseph Hammer (2011, 159) argued the term “deconversion” limits the word “conversion” to a change between religions, although one who ultimately rejects their faith entirely should still be viewed as a convert. John Barbour agrees, as he explained that every conversion is a deconversion, and every deconversion is a conversion.

Barbour (1994) who was one of the first scholars to discuss the "deconversion" term, defined it simply as the deprivation and loss of religious faith. Barbour distinguished between “deconversion” and “secularization”. Deconversion is a cognitive decision and recognition of faith rejection following a series of events that led to the decision. Secularization, however, points more to a gradual fading of faith, and is thought to be the more common path today.

In this study, I will adopt the conceptualization of Heinz Streib and Barbara Keller (2004) of deconversion who built on Barbour and Glock (1962) lists, proposing five characteristics of deconversion: 1) Experiential dimension: The loss of the God experience and the purpose of life. 2) Ideological dimension: The denial and disagreement with the system of beliefs. 3) Ritualistic Dimension: The rejection of practices and applications on moral judgment. 4) Consequential Dimension: The loss of social support, safety and embeddedness. 5) Social Dimension: The disaffiliation with the community and the unsubscribing of their practices. It seems their approach is most appropriate when it comes to studying deconversion from Islam, due to a very important point that Streib mentioned, which is that this approach doesn’t assume that deconversion involves a termination of membership from the religious organization. In contrast, the deconverted person may privately end participation in the applications of the religious group without a formal announcement of withdrawal. That’s very significant regarding Islam as outspoken deconversion from the religion may lead to civil or physical death. This increases the likelihood that thoughts or decisions of deconversion will remain private.

However, deconversion studies have focused on Christianity more than other religions, as the topic is almost never studied in the Islamic tradition. From a theological Islamic point of view, both conversion and deconversion are considered as apostasy (Arabic: Riddah or Iritidâ).1 Apostasy in Islam refers to the renunciation of Islam by Muslim, either to another religion or to non-religion. This can lead to dire consequences, mainly the death penalty, for those who "turn from" or "disbelieve after having believed" (Esposito, 2003). Many Muslim countries which adopt Sharia, also adhere to Riddah law. However, in the Quran there is no explicit text stating the apostate must be killed (Quran, 2:17, 3:87, 9:74, 18:29). On the other hand, in the Sunnah, there are many hadiths2 referencing prophet Mohammad and his companions ordering to kill those who left Islam (e.g. Al Bukhari), as well as other hadiths where they forgive (e.g.Sunan an-Nasa’i, Book 37:104 or Sunan Abi Dawud, Book 40:8). Therefore, the Riddah law is controversial and ambiguous. Even in non-Islamic traditions, “apostasy” is the most frequently used term to describe leaving a religion according to

---

1 According to the Encyclopedia of Islam, apostasy can be committed verbally by violation of one Islamic principle, or by action, for example treating Quran in disrespectful way (Encyclopedia of Islam, 1998).
2 Hadith in Islam refers to the record of the words, actions, and the silent approval, of the Islamic prophet Muhammad. Hadith have been called “the backbone” of Islamic civilization, and within that religion the authority of hadith as a source for religious law and moral guidance ranks second only to that of the Qur’an.
Cragun and Hammer (2011, 153), referring to a group of people who leave their religion without telling how, why and where they will end up. David G. Bromley (1998) brought a slightly negative definition of “apostasy,” referring to subversive groups who leave the religion with intention to destroy or undermine the former religion.

Now that I have discussed the concept of deconversion, I will address the relation between trauma and religion, as the deconversion that has been seen in the Syrian case can be directly linked to war and asylum.

Trauma and refugees theory: How is it related to religion?

One can't talk about the deconversion of Syrian refugees without considering the trauma of the war in a refugee’s life. First, one must begin with defining trauma. According to scholar Katie E. Cherry; trauma can occur in events that threaten human life, health, safety or stability. One can be traumatized directly if he or she was the victim of trauma, or indirectly if someone close to them experienced trauma. Rarely, it can have a positive effect on people, like revealing a person’s resistance. However, most of the effects of trauma are negative, far-reaching and may affect future generations. Trauma can have a significant negative effect on the human brain according to Ruard Ganzevoort and Srdjan Sermac (2018)³. Today, traumatic events are often caused by wars, mass destruction and natural disasters, and in turn result in anger, hatred, fear and despair that persist and can accumulate over time (Cherry, 2015). But it is important in this piece to explore the specific suffering Syrian refugees experienced.

The war in Syria has been ongoing for eight years. Through many mediums, the world witnessed intense and nearly indigestible images of bombings, barbaric killings and destruction. Considering that war is the oldest man-made disaster in the world, its ability to cause fear, terror, injury, death and displacement is strong (Martz, 2010). War is high on the list of trauma causes, as those who experience it can rightly question an entire world view. The war in Syria wasn't only on the ground, as many Syrians also left the country because of persecution. As of November 17, 2018, the Independent referred on its website that civil society organizations reported more than 95,000 Syrians disappeared since the uprising of the March 2011 demonstrations and more than 80,000 were arrested by the Assad regime and other political parties. Torture, sexual violence and humiliation were unavoidable in the detention centres. Ganzevoort and Sermac (2018, 15) explained the relation of torture to trauma, as torture serves to gain information or punish. Torture causes intentional physical, emotional and mental suffering. Moreover, there are two types of torture. A “classic” torture leaves marks on the body and the “modern” surpasses the body to touch the mind and self, leaving many victims mute, depressed, ashamed, afraid and without dignity for the rest of their lives.

³ Ganzevoort and Sermac distinguishes between 3 functions of the human brain. The “primary” function controls the basic needs of the body such as alerting the body of being safe or unsafe. The “limbic” system is involved in motivation, emotion, learning, and memory, and that system controls the stress hormones, for instance. The last system is the “neocortex,” which controls sensory perception, decisions, interpretations and conscious thought. Typically, the three functions of the brain work well to return any possible stress back to normal. In a case of trauma, the mechanism of this system becomes ineffective due to the stress overload in the primary and limbic system.
When millions of Syrians fled the country and sought asylum in other parts of the world, it added another layer to Syrian trauma. The journey itself comes with its own intensity and this type of migration called acute movement according to Egon F. Kunz (1981). Refugees are forced to leave their homes on a moment's notice in response to the threat of death, thus, they are unprepared when chasing survival. Further layers of danger are added when one considers their journey is often illegal, forcing routes and methods taken to be the most dangerous. Unprepared and unsafe boats going from Turkey, Libya or Egypt to Europe are led by human trafficking smugglers. The work of Barry N. Stein (1981) helps to thoroughly understand the journey of refugees. Stein refers to the “flight” phase as the first, where refugees have the highest feeling of trauma, due to a chaotic mix of loss, guilt, vulnerability and aggression. This is followed by the “camp” stage, in which refugees can feel a lack of privacy, anxiety, fear, frustration and emotional disturbance, in addition to missing their homeland. The final stage is called “resettlement,” a complicated, multi-faceted and difficult experience. Refugees are expected to leave their homeland’s culture behind, adjust and assimilate. While refugee theory provides reasoning behind specific behaviours, and trauma theory gives a biological explanation of the trauma of the refugees, it is now necessary to understand how trauma infiltrates their belief system.

Kenneth Pargament (1996) pointed out that the reason trauma has a great effect on human life and religious beliefs is because all religions depict the world as ideal, that is, "bad is for the bad person, good is for the good person." Thus, trauma leads one to reflect inward about their sins and seek to understand the reason behind God’s “punishment.” On the other hand, trauma may strengthen a person's attachment to their religion, as many survivors cling to religion as a tool to survive and endure trauma. So while it's therefore unclear which direction a set of religious beliefs may change post-trauma, it may depend highly on which religion it is. Pargament (1997) indicates that each religion offers ways to cope and deal with tragedy, hardship and suffering, with some more helpful than others. Judith L. Herman (1992) previously stated that survivors try to find meaning in the traumatic event. Questions of “why me?” are seemingly inescapable, and the lack of ability to find a moral answer to survivor’s guilt may contribute to the loss of their ability to reconstruct a sense of meaning. Research supports the Pargament and Herman theory, (Falsetti, Resick and Davis, 2003) indicating that most trauma survivors’ beliefs are decomposed and set into perturbation, as trauma naturally attacks the foundation of beliefs and challenges survivors set of accommodation and ingestion. While others like Kathryn M. Connor, Jonathan R.T. Davidson and Li-Ching Lee (2003) disagree with the negative effect of trauma on religion, indicating that religions and spiritual practices can help the overcoming and recovering, giving a hope of justice in the midst of an unjust circumstance.

Scholar Larry R. Decker (1993) also claimed that spirituality in a non-traditional sense, excluding praying and worship, can best integrated in the individual healing program in order to reduce trauma difficulties stemming from combat and war. In the same way, trauma increases the spiritual development in the search for the purpose and the meaning of life.

In this section, I have explored the concept of "trauma" and linked it to religion and refugee theory. Thus, with the concept of “deconversion”, I have established the basis of my theoretical framework. In the following section, I will explain my methodological approach to the research and describe my methods of data collection and analysis.

---

4 The other kind of migration Kunz referred to is the anticipatory migration where refugees know in advance that they have to leave, and they plan for it before the crisis occurs.
Methodology:

This research relies on a qualitative method analysing the religious exit of former Muslim believers, Syrian refugees specifically, who deconverted from Islam after the war in Syria. As a researcher I was most interested in the lived experience of the Syrian during the war, as well as the trauma associated with post-war fleeing and refugee life and it’s correlation with exiting Islam. It is necessary to mention that this study is limited regarding the size and representation and therefore it cannot be generalized to the entire Muslim non-believer population.

There were a few criteria for sample inclusion which liaise with the purpose of the study. I recruited participants who fled Syria and settled in the Netherlands, had been exposed to war, killing, trauma and death in the last year(s) of their life in Syria and deconverted from Islam, expressing a lost of faith after the war. All the participants were older than 18 years old.

The total number of this sample is 12 participants, 10 males and 2 females. The disparity in gender is because most Syrian refugees in the Netherlands are male, in addition to the widely accepted Syrian cultural note that males are able to talk about deconversion easier than women. The reason for this is because the Syrian community believes that men have more power and dominance in terms of making decision, while women are expected to stick more closely to the traditions that have been linked to them. The average age of participants is 32.

Education level is also noteworthy, as most of the participants in this sample are highly educated, achieving a University-level degree with few exceptions. Most continued their study in the Netherlands or integrated into the Dutch job market. They have an intellectual and analytical approach, where they link every fact that they are given to a specific reason. They are eager to do research about the reasons behind what has happened to them, and they are critical in dealing with these topics. I haven’t offered detailed data for the safety of the participants.

Within my sample, three types of self-expressed non-believers were present: atheists (5 participants), agnostics (4 participants) and those who deem themselves spiritual, known as SBNR or SBNA⁵ (3 participants). Atheism is defined as the belief that there is no God or Gods, but it doesn’t mean that atheists don’t value or seek morality, meaning of life or human good (Baggini, 2003). Most atheists ask for evidence of a Godly existence that can be tested and refuse to believe in religion without investigation (Bullivant, 2008).

Agnosticism is neither the belief nor disbelief of the existence of God. Agnostics often find it difficult for the human being to understand how the universe is created or whether a divine being exists (Schurman, 1895). SBNRs are those who are disillusioned with institutional religion, but they prefer to maintain “religious wisdom” without committing to a religious organization. (Parsons, 2018).

I reached my participants via a Facebook group owned by a “Refugee Start Force” organization, that new Syrians to the Netherlands joined for integration and networking purposes. I also began with an initial source of my personal contacts who led me to others according to the “snowball sampling method.” My status as a refugee speaking the participants’ native language allowed me to recruit through convenience sampling.

---

⁵ (SBNR) "Spiritual but not religious", or (SBNA) "Spiritual but not affiliated" are popular phrases referring to people who identify as spiritual without an organized religion.
In order to closely understand how the war in Syria and related traumas influence Syrian refugees to deconvert from Islam, I used the conversational approach during the interview with open-ended questions. I began each interview with a short introduction about my research and its purpose and about my personal story as a Syrian refugee, which helped me create trust for detailed narratives.

The interviews were held in the participants' home, my home or a location of their choice. The length of the interview depended on the narrative of the participant, lasting 2 to 4 hours. Interviews were audio recorded, translated from Arabic to English and transcribed. In addition, alternative names were used for the safety of the participants.

I have used a categorical approach to analyse the data, following the guiding concepts of Amia Lieblich, Rivka Tuval-Mashiach, and Tamar Zilber (1998). This thematic approach focuses on finding thematic similarities and differences between the various narratives, breaking the text into small units according to the research questions.

I have divided my analysis into three main categories, depending on the narrative’s chronology, and I have broken those three categories down further into subcategories, which represent the narrative’s main points and how those points are related to the research questions.

The data presented in this article should be interpreted as subjective discursive constructions, depending on the narratives of the participants and not as empirical facts received by the researcher.

Findings:

The participants of this study shared different personal stories as former Muslim believers. Leaving their Muslim tradition after experiencing a brutal war, participants consolidated these stories into one story of religious relegation that was told from a deconversion perspective. Based on the structure of the narratives, I divided the stories of conversion into three stages.

**Pre-deconversion: Between “religious” and “doubt in Islam” narratives**

The common characteristic of the study participants is that all were raised in a Muslim environment. Being a non-Muslim was not an option in the Syrian context. As Bader (Atheist) explained:

“In Syria, society forces you to cope based on God’s existence. Dealing with this society is done through the religion.”

According to Bader, Islam was more tradition than belief. In Syrian society, children are being raised within a religious tradition and expected to share their parents' religious affiliation. Some participants stressed the important role of Islamic leaders in society and the expectations of people for their moral and spiritual guidance. But the religious traditions did not always make sense according to Majid (Spiritual):
“My family was conservative. There were a lot of traditions that controlled our life. But it was religion that wasn’t based on deep knowledge.”

The social pressure led people to believe unconsciously in Islam. The practices of Islam were like axioms that can’t be violated and who dares can be judged or even bullied. Tamer (Atheist) gave an example of it:

“If I don’t go to Friday prayer, I will be asked why. If I don’t fast, people would say, ‘Shame on you.’”

However, some participants were convinced that Islam was the best authentic religion, responsible in maintaining social moral orders. As Kasem (Atheist) explained:

“Since my childhood, I remember going to special institutes to memorize the Quran. Even my social relations were within this frame, judging everything in my life on ‘Halal and Haram’ principle. Islam for me was right, the first and the last.”

Some really questioned the contradictions in Islam, especially discrepancies within the Quran itself. This caused an emotional distress that shaped the foundation of spiritual doubt, particularly as questions are socially unacceptable. As Tarek (Atheist) explained:

“I noticed a lot of contradictions. I contacted a lot of scholars, none could give me answers. On the contrary, some insulted me because questions are taboo.”

Other participants reported that some stories in the Quran did not make sense, such as Isra and Mi’raj⁶ or are terrifying, like Munker and Nakir.⁷ Some participants reported from a feminist perspective their frustrations on legalized polygamy.

**Deconversion: War, a fleeing journey, and displacement as turning points**

In the pre-deconversion narrative stage, some participants only confronted some intellectual contradictions, others believed deeply in Islam, but none had the intention of leaving their faith tradition. However, the war started in 2011 was the spark of most deconversion decisions. Tarek explained, the Syrian situation pushed him to make the decision to deconvert:

“The first two years of the revolution, I felt like we were victims of conspiracy. If God really exists, Bashar Al-Asad should have been taken out.”

Kasem who felt sheltered by God before the war, lost his faith in God's care in the war situation:

“During the war I was always wondering, ‘Where is God, doesn’t he see us?’ There is oppression. My trust in religion was shaken. I knew that God is fair, but what was happening is

---

⁶ The Isra and Mi’raj is two parts of a one-night journey, which is considered to be holy in Islamic tradition. It refers to the journey and the ascent of Mohammad from the Mecca to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem on the back of a white winged mule-like beast, called Buraq. At the mosque, Muhammad is said to have led the other prophets into prayer (The Oxford Dictionary of Islam).

⁷ Munkar and Nakir in Islamic eschatology, are two angels who examine and if necessary, punish the dead in their tombs. They ask the infidels and the faithful about their opinion of Mohammad. Only the righteous and faithful will answer, that he is the Apostle of Allāh; and be left without punishment (Encyclopaedia of Islam).
unfair! The excuse was always the same… ‘God’s wisdom.’ I don’t understand the wisdom that God is trying to show through killing people.”

Feeling lonely and depressed was extremely common in all the participants of the study, as most mentioned this. The decisions of the deconversion were taken during the war and when they were fleeing from violence in their country, seeking refuge and safety abroad:

*Living the war:*

The experience of war was for all interviewees a traumatic experience. Being confronted with violence, torture and injustice clearly affected their religious beliefs. The question is how these experiences affect their religious beliefs?

Sara was a typical girl raised in a Muslim family. She wore a Hijab in the will of God. When the war broke out, she decided that God doesn’t exist anymore, and took off the hijab:

“My brother was arrested by the Assad regime. I was shocked when I visited him. He was a very good, religious guy, followed all the religious rules, then his fate was in a detention centre and he was likely to remain. He was about to die, no brain, no body. I didn’t pray to God then because I couldn’t believe at that moment that God exists. I wanted something back from God. We gave him everything. My house was destroyed, my family left the country. God betrayed us.”

They were not mad, they felt betrayed. This is how most Syrians described their trauma-driven damaged worldviews, diminished humanity and religious beliefs. Although Rami (Atheist) was raised in a not-so-religious family, he reported being religious and would attend early morning prayers at the mosque daily. He had no doubt in God’s wisdom until the war:

“I was going to work when I saw bodies thrown in the street, they were normal resident people without weapons. The regime killed a lot of people from Darayya. They arrested a lot of people, tortured and killed them. If people are children of God and he left these children, they must also leave him.”

Sadness, denial and emotional outbursts are symptoms of the trauma. Adam (Spiritual) experienced it after hearing of the death of his brother.

“They shelled the school next to his work. He ran fast to help other people, then they shelled another barrel. He died. ‘This is your brother,’ someone told me, I saw a covered body. I can’t forget. Until now I feel there is a nerve that hurts me every time I remember.”

*The role of religious leaders in the war:*

In Islam, the role of a religious leader is to help guide people in through religion in a time of peace and spread peace in a time of crisis. That wasn’t the case in Syria according to the participants. Some went far describing this as a reason for their deconversion.

Ammar had a hope Sheikhs would help stop the war and raise awareness:

“In the war, there should have been a big role for Islamic scholars to bring people together. On the contrary, they split into 2 parties- with the regime or with the opposition. This is one of the reasons why I left Islam.”
Al-Aroor was one of the scholars that most participants criticized, Salem (Agnostic) described:

“He encouraged killing. He has this approach of raising the adrenaline in a body. He is a politician who started to be sheik. Sheiks are used for politics. They brainwash people. They earn money to use Islam to fight wars.”

Rami had no hope in religious scholars because he doesn’t believe that they’re even religious:

“Friday speech in all mosques is all about how to follow and obey the ruler. Sheiks have political goals in their interest. Most Sheiks are intelligence members.”

Apart from religious leaders, ISIS was one of the reasons that made some participants reconsider Islam. Hanan (Spiritual) explained:

“ISIS actually represents Islam. But ISIS also exploits the contrasts in the Quran too. ISIS is an organization that follows only chosen details in. They gave a very negative savage image of Islam. When I realized what ISIS was doing, I felt I didn't want to be Muslim anymore.”

**Detention and torture:**

The Syrian war went beyond the ground and into prisons. Multiple participants explained that dying on the ground would have been much better than a detention centre. Tamer (Atheist), who was raised Muslim in Aleppo, found God unhelpful during a horrible prison experience:

“Never saw a sun there. The room was 5-6m and we were 88 people in it. One could sleep while the other had to stand waiting. The guy who was the investigator hung me on what we called ‘Shabeh,’ which means hanging a person from their hands at a high level for a long time. After the first 2 minutes, you stop feeling your body, then you feel your body is shredded. For one year, at the same time, the process is repeated with a different means of torture. The investigators were competing for who could be crueller. I try to forget this story, but my body marks live with me. God was very weak there, we were praying for him with humbleness in secret because there they don’t allow us to pray. Everyday there were 15-20 dead bodies, from sickness, fear or torture… different reasons.”

Tamer deconverted from Islam after coming to the Netherlands. He believes that religion makes no sense and science is the only religion people have to believe in.

For Bader, the detention centre was a big part of his deconversion decision. Bader was the type of religious person provoking on websites with specialized knowledge on the subject. He convinced others to move toward religion, however, the war changed his perspective. Bader was violently arrested in front of his daughters by the Al-Assad regime:

"They asked me many times, ‘Who is your God?’ I was forced to answer, ‘Bashar,’ just to avoid them putting me in tires and drowning me in water containers. Then I wondered, ‘Where is the only God that we believe in?’ Yet, I didn’t lose my beliefs. I was waiting for the miracle of God to intervene. There were holes in my body where you could see the bones through my leg. Some people had worms in their wounds. I was a body mover. I was carrying the dead people and burying them. A lot of educated people who I buried with my hands in 1 metre

---

8 Adnan Mohammed Al-Aroor is a Salafi cleric from Hama, Syria. He became widely known and promoted after the start of the Syrian Public Revolution. He favors arming the Syrian opposition and a foreign military intervention.
deep, without registering them. I paid them seven million SP to get out. I’m not getting any treatment, but I think that I’m traumatized. The thing that they took from me in the detainment centre will never come back. They destroyed my identity and my self-appreciation.”

After getting out from the detention centre, Bader decided to travel to Turkey. But things didn’t go well there, so he decided to make his way to Europe by boat, the illegal way, and it was then he lost his faith completely.

Fleeing journey:

The “journey of death” that killed so many Syrians was a particularly defining turning point for most Syrians in losing their faith. For example, what happened to Bader. When he was at sea from Turkey to Greece, the Turkish Navy Police shot the rubber boat and left them. Bader was shocked to see that the perpetrators were Muslims, and that their religion didn’t stop them doing such a thing:

“There were 37 people with me, 8 of them women and about 5 children. The guy whose wife wore a niqab was praying to God in the middle of the water, drowning. He was trying to pull his child up, then his wife drowned. He was trying to pull his wife up, then the child fell. Then they all drowned. He was calling, ‘God, God, God!’ The water was swallowing them. All the children drowned. I died a thousand times watching them die. Where are you God? If God doesn’t show himself at this time, I don’t need him in the peaceful time.”

Hasan (Agnostic) was a child when the war started in Syria. He was raised in the Muslim city of Aleppo and never knew disbelieving was even a choice. He chose to travel from Turkey to Greece by means of an illegal boat. It was in the boat when he felt the first spark of his deconversion:

“My religious life changed after fleeing. A time of catastrophe is the highest point of the existential crisis. It was so dark, and I started realising it. I was 17 years old, why should I be here? What did I do in life as a child to have this horrible journey? Why did I make it and a lot of children in other boats drowned? Why did God choose me to be alive and other children not?!”

Kasem also spoke of the spiritual situation on board. Kasem had lived in Qudsaya, a hot spot in Damascus during the war. He had been demonstrating against the regime. He was very religious, memorised quarters of the Quran and thousands of Hadith, many Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence. But the war had changed him. He felt that the war affected his belief and the journey after fleeing only enhanced his doubts:

“From Turkey, I travelled to Algeria, then to Libya, then by boat to Italy. We went in July in the middle of the desert and the heat was too intense. We got lost in the desert. Then we went through the sea where a lot of problems happened. We sailed for 8 hours until the motor of the boat was burned, we were about to die. People around me were praying, “God help us.” I was laughing at them… “Does he really exist?” At these moments, usually the believer gets closer to God and his beliefs. What happened with me is the opposite. I felt that it’s enough to think about it as, if God exists, he wouldn’t put us here.”

---

9 That is equal to 13,592 USD nowadays, while at the beginning or before the war it was equal to about 140,000 USD, close to the time of which Bader was speaking. The Syrian pound depreciated dramatically against the dollar after the war.
Settling in the Netherlands:

The participants went through difficult situations in both the asylum camp and resettlement stages. In the asylum camp, participants reported a lack of privacy and difficulties finding ways to restart their life. In the resettlement stage, they found it tough adjusting to a new pattern of life. Adam had major depression in a camp where he had to adopt the life of a refugee:

“In the camp, we were like 500 people in one hall. I was so depressed that I became aggressive. You wait for a long time without papers when your children are in another country... so stressful.”

After moving from the camp to new houses, participants reported feeling alone and depressed being in a new country without family or friends.

On the other hand, being in the Netherlands reinforced the deconversion decision of some participants. They began to observe new facts they weren’t aware of. Adam finally made his decision to deconvert when he started to meet and know Dutch people:

“[People back home] were fooling us. They were telling us that Europeans are bad, unethical people. I realized that the Dutch people are honest, they don’t lie.”

That was not the only reason. Kasem was very religious in Syria and lost his faith after the war and fleeing journey, but the Netherlands gave him the right environment to make his deconversion decision official. Kasem added:

“In our community you can’t share your ideas because people reject you. Here, dealing with people doesn’t interfere with religion. When Europeans leave religion, they can concentrate on their life more and be more successful.”

Post-Deconversion: Cognition of deconversion and reflection

After a period of deconversion, a new existential question emerged forcing the participants to reflect and consider what they believed in. This process was important to ensure an identity transformation. Some participants went back to the sources of Islam to rethink about it. Bader started researching the history to answer his own questions:

“The stories in the Quran are old and they’re myths. In many Surats in the Quran, it was said that the oppositions of Mohammad were saying about the Quran, ‘These things are the writings of the ancients.’ So this group of people actually knew the reality. With some research is the Sumer civilization, I made sure all that was a lie. The story of Prophet Moses was written there. The story of Isra and Mi’raj was also written. We’re not idiots, this civilization existed before Islam and Ibrahim. Epic of Gilgamesh is great evidence.”

Bader thinks that Mohammad learnt these myths from the priest Waraka ibn Nawfal\(^\text{10}\), the cousin of Khadija bint Khuwaylid (First wife of Mohammad). Rami agrees with that. He also tried to interpret many things in Islam:

---

\(^{10}\) Warqah ibn Nawfal was an Arab priest and the paternal first cousin of Khadija bint Khuwaylid, the first wife of the Islamic prophet Muhammad. Warqah presumably died in 610 CE, shortly after Mohammed received his
“If we look at the Quran, you see that it took the story of the Babylonian creation myth! How the earth and the sky were one part and then they split. It’s the same story! Waraka told Mohammad and taught him the Quran. It seems that the revelation was Waraka.”

Waraka ibn Nawfal wasn’t the only name mentioned as evidence that Mohammad created the Quran from stories he heard. Kasem, who graduated from religious schools, agrees with other participants after looking back at the Islam he believed in for so long:

“Mohammad didn’t bring anything new. The Quran is built on Christianity and Judaism, adding Babylonian, Sumer myths, Greek philosophy, like the origin of life philosophy, which belongs to Ariston. Mohammad was dealing with Suhayb ar-Rumi and Salman the Persian, and they told him a lot of myths.”

Kasem went further into Mohammad’s life, a key topic most participants talked about. Most participants criticized his polygamist ways or marrying a 9-year-old girl when he was old, and some participants even spoke about stories of oppression Mohammad committed that was never mentioned in Islam. Kasem said:

“What he brought new is, for instance, is (Surah An Nisa 3 (4:3) And if you fear that you’ll not deal justly with orphan girls, then marry those that please you of [other] women, two or three or four). When Mohammad wanted something, he was creating a Surah for it. He married Aaesha who was 9 years old when he was 57. That is not acceptable.”

Bader made the same argument Kasem made, when he argued:

“Why did he marry 9 women?! Their reason was also to spread Islam through having children. Why should Mohammad have more children?! There are many Muslim men. What is more surprising is that Mohammad had no sons.”

This information made participants compile facts confirming the grounds for their decision of deconversion. It is a form of rationalization, giving rational arguments to defend their decision to leave Islam. Rami thinks that God is a myth religious people created to control the population:

“They say that every person will have his rights in the afterworld. I think if God exists, he has to control both life and the afterworld.”

The deconversion of the participants can affect their social network with multiple consequences. Religious affiliation has multiple social ties that would be severed after disaffiliation. However, sharing the deconversion decision is still taboo for most participants. For example, Sara who had finally moved to the Netherlands to live alone without her overtly-religious family, feels that this decision will affect that relationship:

“I don’t think that Syrians or my family will accept me. I don’t share my thoughts on social media either. Once I did and there was a huge attack against me. Then I decided to save it for myself.”

It was the same for Tamer:

“I don’t share my thoughts because I don’t want to lose my family.”

The deconversion did, however, provide a window into a more liberating world. Sara stated:

---

“Since I became a disbeliever, I feel more comfortable dealing with people from different religions.”

Participants reported this feeling of freedom was enhanced by being in a country that respects people beliefs. Hanan said:

“I feel free to express myself without people judging me. The Dutch accept you whoever you are.”

The emotional outcomes the participants stated are evident of the completion of the deconversion transition from Muslim believers to atheists, spirituality-seekers and agnostics.

**Discussion:**

Findings in this research offer a significant phenomenological contribution to the concept of deconversion from a trauma perspective. Although deconversion as a process is fluid and vague, deconversion as a narrative helps to make it distinctive.

The findings suggest that narratives can be organized into 3 stages: Pre-deconversion, deconversion, and post-deconversion.

The pre-deconversion stage revealed that all the participants were raised in a Muslim environment where Islam is a very important part of the social and educational system. Thus, the outcomes of the interviews align with what Rambo (1993) referred to, that culture shapes the atmosphere of a man’s life spiritually, intellectually and morally. Rites and practices of religion provide life guidelines which are ultimately adopted by followers unconsciously.

In Syria, identifying oneself as a non-believer, agnostic or atheist is almost impossible as the state forces its citizens to state their religion on their identity cards. The Syrian state depends on the Islamic Sharia in its law, thus one might face legal consequences when declaring disaffiliation. Socially, one might be rejected by family and friends. These strict constraints often stop people from wondering about and questioning any of the contradictions found in Islam. In general, leaving Islam has great consequences, not only within Islam dominated countries like Syria, but also in secular contexts like the Netherlands. Although in the Netherlands there is no legal consequences, social ones are still applicable.

Studying the deconversion stage of the participants, revealed that they are highly traumatized, directly and indirectly, according to Cherry’s definition (2015) who referred to trauma as a manifested of events that threaten a human life, health and safety or the safety of individuals close to them. The participants suffered a blow physically and emotionally. Also, their dignity and sense of self-worth was affected through separation and degradation, which is consistent with Samantha L. Anders, Patricia A. Frazier and Sheila B. Frankfurt's (2011) work on the wider understanding of trauma. They argue that death or physical abuse will certainly lead to trauma. But many events can be traumatic, even those that don’t necessarily put a life at risk or where injury is a possibility. Traumatic events can include emotional abuse, dignity abuse, separation or humiliation. This type of trauma is represented, in the Syrian case, by witnessing acute killing, bombing and shelling, the loss of loved ones, exposure to detention and torture, a merciless fleeing journey and the frustrating dilemmas of replacement and resettlement in a new country.
As the stories of the participants revealed, these experiences have had a great impact on their religious beliefs, raised questions about their faith’s traditions, and over time resulted in them abandoning their religion and deconversion.

The post deconversion stage indicates that a new identity emerged in participants’ need to overcome existential problems, digging deep into what they formerly believed through self-reflection and resisting social pressure.

The deconversion the participants experienced can be defined as full deconversion according to Streib’s conceptualization of the process. The experiential dimension was essentially embodied in the deconversion stage by the loss of God’s support during the war. Most participants reported missing God’s power. Many participants echoed the sentiment, “God betrayed us.” They saw the contradiction clearly, feeling that what a follower of Islam deserved and what they got in the end didn’t match. It is important here to refer to what Pargament (1997) explained about the power of religions and their ways in dealing with tragedy. Islam also has ways to deal with trauma. In the Quran, God tells Muslims that disasters happen, and that it’s a test of their patience and faith. In Islam suffering and tragedy is explained in the form of test of believer's patience and faith. The Quran it is emphasized that the world is only temporary and offers a perspective of the after world in which Muslims will blossom. Furthermore, the Quran explains that God controls everything. However, Islam’s suggestions for coping were not sufficient for the extreme traumatic experiences for all the participants. The magnitude of the disaster they were exposed to was bigger than their ability to justify that it could be a test from God, especially when the Quran refers that God controls everything. Therefore, to them either Allah is able but betrayed them or he doesn’t exist at all. The explanation of evil in the world was not sufficient or convincing neither for the participants. Whereas there seems to be a promise of reasoning behind the evil, one can only understand this wisdom with a “life test.” However, participants stated that they can't understand this wisdom or the seemingly unjust waiting period to get their rights in the afterlife. They longed for justice in the real life.

Based on the above, war-related trauma had a major impact on the deconversion of these research participants, which parallels Pargament (1996) and Herman’s (1992) arguments that trauma may attack our belief system and challenge our ability to find the meaning of the trauma. On the other hand, the outcome of this research contradicts Kathryn M. Connor, Jonathan R.T. Davidson and Li-Ching Lee’s (2003) point of view that spiritual practices help overcome trauma, as none of my participants reported any connection between spiritual practices and their recovery. However, Pargament implied that in extreme traumatic situations, religion can fail as a coping mechanism and not offer support for survivors. My research focused on Syrians who lost their faith after trauma, while there are other Syrians who became more attached to Islam after the war. Siblings who have the same socio-

11 “And We will surely test you with something of fear and hunger and a loss of wealth and lives and fruits, but give good tidings to the patient, who, when disaster strikes them, say, ‘Indeed we belong to Allah, and indeed to Him we will return’” (Q. 2:155-156)
12 “O Allah, Owner of Sovereignty, You give sovereignty to whom You will and You take sovereignty away from whom You will. You honour whom You will, and You humble whom You will. In Your hand is [all] good. Indeed, you are over all things competent” (Qur’an 3:26).
13 The Quran and Sunnah do not claim that the power of Evil can be reconciled with the existence of the all-powerful God.
economic class and education level reacted differently when it came to more or less attachment to religion post-war. Hence, it is unclear why some lose their faith through traumatic experiences while others keep the faith. I suggest therefore that comparative research among those who have been through the same type of experiences is needed to investigate the nature of deconversion processes.

Revisiting Streib and the second characteristic of the deconversion, ideological dimension manifests in the three phases of deconversion in this research. In the pre-deconversion phase some participants reported questioning some contradictions and lack of logic in Islam.

In the deconversion phase, the participants expressed their frustration and anger of how Islam was being used by the different parties involved during the war. It is significant to point to the role of the religious leaders during the war, and the connection between Islam and politics. An aversion was created from Islam itself as religious leaders, including ISIS, represented Islam. This point was emphasized by Armenak Tokmajyan (2014) in his research “Religion, Religious Leaders, and Violence in the Conflict in Syria,” as he referred to different leaders and their ways to inflame the war in Syria.14 The role of religious leaders in the Syrian conflict was significant according to the participants, supporting Yusuf Sidani’s (2005) arguments on the important “impact of Ulama” in Muslim societies’ daily lives. These “heirs of the Prophets” are leaders to whom Syrians turned to for guidance in any issue related to their spiritual, social and political affairs in the Syrian war. This seemed to perpetuate the tradition of Islam where religion boldly and seamlessly intertwines with the state.

Finally, it was in the post-deconversion phase that most of the participants, and especially those who were highly religious pre-war, evaluated the Islamic tradition (Quran, Sunnah) to sort through their newfound feelings. In this way, they rationalized their deconversion decision with arguments and evidence. That aligns with what Barbour (1994, 138) called “realization and thoughtful reflection” within apology and apostasy, where deconverted people search in what they initially believed rather than a sudden yielding to external influence. The participants indeed refused basing their deconversion on emotional whim and instead found their evidence in claims surrounding the Quran.

The moral Dimension was clear also in both deconversion and post-deconversion phases. During the detention phase, religion was also used against some participants as a tool of torture. Detainee participants were not allowed to pray in the regime’s centres. They were tortured and forced to deny their faith and acknowledge Al-Assad as God. More importantly, the fact that their perpetrators were Muslims (or considered Muslims) resulted in a deep mistrust of other believers and the credibility of Islam in general.15

---

14 Tokmajyan referred to the Fatwa (a judgement made on someone’s behavior by a religious leader) of Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, the President of the International Union for Muslim Scholars, as he declared that Jihad against the regime is a duty for each Muslim. On the other hand, the leader of Hezbollah (whose members are Lebanese Shiites), Sayyed Hassan Nasr Allah, stated that he has troops to support the regime in Syria. The Grant Mufti of Syria, Sheikh Badar Al-Din Hassoun, urged Syrians to fight with the regime as a religious obligation.

15 It is important to refer that Amnesty (2012) published a study on around 25 ways of torture in Syria during the conflict, but using religion as a form of torture was missed. This form of torture supports Ganzevoort and Sermac’s (2018) argument that modern torture can go beyond physical torture and touch self-appreciation and people’s values as a way to humiliate.
The increasing tension between the inherited faith tradition and experience of the interviewees was also exposed in the narratives of the fleeing journey as the story of the boat shot by fellow Muslims, being the Turkish navy reveals. By contrast, the participants recalled the good treatment and help from non-believers, being Dutch people. In pre- and post-deconversion stages, participants reported disagreement with a lot of Islamic rules and practices, such as the legalization of marrying multiple women or the punishment tactics within Islam, the likes of cutting off hands, stoning or the throwing from high buildings. An added layer of distaste were regarding Mohammad’s life, specifically marrying many women including a 9-year-old wife.

The consequential dimension characterized by the refugee life in this research caused grief, guilt and loneliness among participants, which is consistent with Stein’s theory of refugee’s phases (Flight, camp, resettlement).

Ultimately, the social factor is representative of a disaffiliation with the Muslim community and its traditions and practices. It’s important to note that a commonality between the participants was their decision to avoid any official announcements of their deconversion to avoid physical and emotional consequences.

That seems consistent with Mahmoud Ayoub's (1994) work, as he reported that apostasy is a public declaration of religious and social schism, which cuts the offender off from the religious community spiritually, socially and sometimes physically. However, most participants pointed out that their deconversion experience was eventually a liberating experience. This is compatible with the work of Scot McKnight and Hauna Ondrey (2008) in Anatomy of Apostasy, where they declared that even though apostates feel shame, they are ultimately satisfied with the sense of freedom and weight lifted.

**Conclusion:**

This research aims to understand the deconversion in the Islamic tradition from traumatic experience, through Syrian refugee narratives. I have argued that deconversion as a theory was more associated with Christianity, although this research aims to contribute slightly to the deconversion theories from an Islamic perspective.

The findings of this research suggest first that like conversion stories, the deconversion narrative can be organized into 3 narrative stages. Pre-deconversion, deconversion and post-deconversion. The features of pre-deconversion, such as social constructions and legal restrictions in Syria make the non-believer category practically non-existent, and these consequences were reflected in the narratives. The spiritual doubts were reflected in intellectual discrepancies found by participants in Islam, although this doubt had not yet developed into a deconversion stage.

The deconversion stage was marked by an emotional decision to reject the beliefs, as the loving relationship between God and these refugees were broken after what they label as "betrayal.” The acute trauma the refugees were exposed too from war was enough for them to lose their faith in the God who was until then understood as being a Protector. Hence, the Islamic means to cope with trauma, was not sufficient according to the deconverted.
Finally, the post-deconversion stage was marked by an intellectual, conscious decision to deconvert, and time is spent self-reflecting, reconsidering, researching and reinvestigating Islam with all its rules and characteristics. This inner process produced personal transformations where participants’ former faith tradition was denounced on the basis of rational arguments.

My finding addresses the various motivations of deconversion in relation to trauma and religious theory. Refugees experience acute types of trauma after witnessing elements of war the likes of bombing, shelling and loss of loved ones and homes. This has enormous and far reaching effects on the way people receive religion (Cherry, 2015). The war experience continued into detainment and torture for some, where religion was used as a tool of torture against detainees, might be one of the most important motivations of deconversion in the time of war (Ganzwevoort and Sermac, 2018). The refugees’ journey was one of the key factors, as the "flight" phase was often the harshest as they witnessed unjust treatment after already terrible circumstances, all with the absence of God’s support (Stein, 1981). One of the most interesting factors is the role of the religious leader in fanning the flames of war, especially given the role of Muslim leaders as spiritual and moral authority figures. The political-religious relationship also proved vital, and the state’s entanglement with Islam coupled with the issue of ISIS created an aversion to Islam when these leaders claimed to represent the faith. Lastly, resettlement in the Netherlands, a country with a different religion as majority and a substantial population of non-believers, broke the stereotype on non-Muslim people as savage. On the contrary, the Netherlands gave ample space and freedom to participants to think freely and objectively once out of the bubble of their former Muslim community.

The findings of this study must be considered in the light of some limitations. First, the sample used is relatively small, and the snowball and convenient sampling may affect the depth of the data collected, hence I don't claim that the findings should be generalised. As the research analysed narratives of the participants from their words, recall bias is likely to occur when individuals recount negative life events. In addition, the socio-demographic feature of the sample might result in findings that represent them only, so I do not claim that people in general react to trauma as the participants of this research.

Despite the aforementioned limitations, this study can be used as a springboard to expand the deconversion theory in non-Christian settings. From a traumatic perspective, these narratives can be used for further studies on ways in which trauma can affect the religious status across different denominations and religions, and further study the deconversion from the Psychological approach when people react differently despite the similarity of socio-economical-demographic features.
Bibliography:


Chapter 2: Methodology

Methodology, Approach and Method:

My research links different theories. My primary theory is “deconversion”, one of the newest theoretical concepts in religious studies. My secondary theory is the Contemporary trauma theory, in which I link trauma with generalized religion and deconversion in particular, and ultimately explore the Refugee’s theory to closely understand the Syrian refugee’s case.

Given the research question, “How does the war experience affect the deconversion narrative of the Syrian refugee in the Netherlands?”, a qualitative research approach was selected. In contrast to quantitative research that begins with a theory and tests it, the qualitative approach is used when we need to observe and interpret reality to develop a theory that will explain what was experienced (Flick, 2009). The differences between qualitative and quantitative methods are based on the assumptions of the research and whether they are measurable or not (Newman 1998). My research is indeed not measurable and the best way to understand deconversion is with qualitative research.

To closely discover how migration from war affects the religious deconversion of Syrian refugees, Life history interviews and a Narrative approach will be taken. A Narrative approach is a critical way of understanding the subject we interview. As humans are immersed in narratives, many views recognized that narratives are the mode in which experiences are shared and storied. It is the transformation from positivism towards interpretation of behaviour in social sciences. Narratives can be presented in languages, images, gestures and myths (Sandelowski, 1991).

The Life history approach evolved from life history, oral history and other ethnographic disciplines. It is a way of collecting information and data of the full life of the interviewer through a narrative formed in their own words. It is the method of taking an all-encompassing look at their life and carrying out an in-depth study. The Life history approach was used at the beginning of anthropological studies to study humanity. It has become a tool for scholars seeking to study not only a life across time, but also the individual interaction with the whole (Atkinson, 1998).

Many scholars emphasize the significance of narratives in understanding human behavior. The philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre and theorist Kenneth Burke agree that the dramatist analysis of human behavior is based on the assumption that drama can influence, and shape social lives. It is also impossible to understand human conduct without its intentions, and it is impossible to understand intentions when ignoring the settings in which they make sense, such as the context, the social life and the institutions (Czarniawska, 1998).

The narrative approach will allow me to understand “deconversion” itself and the effect of the war experience on the deconversion of Syrian refugees, considering the context in which the deconversion happens.

In terms of the techniques used to conduct the interviews, I opted to conduct open ended, semi-structured in-depth interviews. The semi-structured interview is a qualitative tool for collecting data, which can be best used for small samples. This tool provides the researcher
insight into the topic under study and can be very effective for studying specific sensitive situations.

The semi-structured interview is marked for its accommodation to a range of research goals. It can contain various types of questions such as those that are open-ended, concrete or theoretically based (Galletta and Cross, 2013). In semi-structured interviews, the researcher asks a set of open-ended questions, with follow-ups that aim to get more details and discover the contextual background. The answers of the interviewees should provide rich, in-depth information that helps the researcher understand the topic under study based on their unique experiences and their own situations (Maziriri and Madinga, 2015).

The interviews begin with questions about the participant’s life history covering the following topics: demographic information, past life events, past beliefs, the impact of the religious community on the participants, war and trauma experience, the refugee’s journey, the deconversion experience and, finally, the impact of resettlement in a new country on the deconversion decision.

**Research Population and Sampling:**

This research used non-probability samples for selecting the participants. In this kind of sampling, features are considered within the sampled population to select the units. Hence, the sample is not intended to be statistically representative, as the characteristics of the population are used as the basis of selection. In this approach, the selection of participants, settings or other sampling units is criterion based or purposive (Ritchie Smith et al. 2013).

Thus, the sampling strategy will be designed to target participants suitable for the aim of the study. Participant profiles will be those who were displaced from Syria after witnessing war, death or trauma and deconverted from Islam, losing their faith after living in the Netherlands. More specifically, participants were chosen when all of the below criteria was met:

- Anyone who fled Syria to the Netherlands post-war.
- Anyone who witnessed or experienced war, killing, trauma and death in the last year(s) of their life in Syria.
- Anyone who deconverted from Islam and lost their faith after the war.
- Anyone who is 18 years old or older.
- Anyone who is willing to share their life story.

I began from an initial set of personal contacts who could lead to a larger network, mirroring a “snowball sampling method”. However, it is important to mention that in addition to the chain/snowball sampling, I found several participants using Facebook. I published an advert on a group entitled “Refugee Start Force” which aims to integrate refugees to the Dutch community. Some of the participants called me willing to be involved in the research.

The research population consists of 12 autobiographical stories of refugees who witnessed the war, are displaced from their country and had experienced the deconversion from Islam.

Interviews lasted 2 to 3 hours, and were held in either the participants' house, my house or a location of their choice. I chose to do all interviews in Arabic, the mother language of the
participants, as it was more efficient to express themselves. All materials were audio-recorded, transcribed, and translated into English. In addition, alternative names were used for the safety of the participants.

Due to the sensitivity of the subject, my material will not be saved on any cloud system. The material will be saved on a hidden file on my personal laptop with a strong password. The personal information is detached and stored separately from the material. After conducting the research, the material will be saved on a special archive at the university and will be deleted from the researcher’s storage.

**Data Analysis:**

Narrative analysis is a creative process of organizing the data to shape a full understanding of a phenomenon by piecing together stories, making the invisible apparent and deciding what is important and what is unimportant (Salkind, 2010). The analysis of a narrative aims to find and shape meaning of the participant’s story. There are two kinds of approaches to analysing the data of a narrative; categorical and holistic. A categorial approach compares all references of the chosen phenomenon through one or several interviews. A holistic approach tries to understand how a specific part of a text is a part of life history narrated in one or more interviews by the same individual (Earthy and Cronin, 2008).

In this research I followed the categorical analysis model by Amia Lieblich, Rivka Tuval-Mashiach, and Tamar Zilber (1998).

The steps in the categorical approach described in this model can be used with a thematic approach. This approach focuses on finding thematic similarities and differences between the narratives. The categorical approach by Lieblich suggests breaking the text into small units. Here are the steps of the analysis:

*Selection of the subtexts and segments:*

These sections are selected according to the research questions. All sections in the interview transcripts are marked to be assembled as subtext. In this research the subtexts are not treated independently from the total context as I tried to link them as much as possible to the whole participant’s narrative.

*Definition of thematic categories:*

After choosing the subtexts, themes and perspectives should be identified. The identification can be done by words, a single sentence or multiple sentences. Since I linked many theories in my research, I haven't depended on a particular theory for identifications of the subtexts. I carefully read the narratives, suggested categories and sorted the subtexts into categories. I divided my analysis into three main subtitles depending on the narratives’ chronology and the main subtitles into subcategories representing the main points of the narratives.

*Sorting the material into categories:*

At this stage, I separated the material into sentences that fit the categories. In this way, all similarities and differences related to the research hypotheses are grouped under the thematic categories.
**Drawing conclusions:**

The content assigned to each thematic category was used to assign meanings to the narratives and answer the research question.

**Researcher reflection:**

Being part of the research community as a researcher has its pros and cons. Positive aspects include the relatively easy access to the research community, smooth communication in terms of language and the ability to build confidence between the researcher and the participants in the interviews. But my close connection with the topic being researched, as my experiences are similar, may lead to bias in the research and the results. Moreover, as a researcher I might be affected by the research personally.

Therefore, it is very important to refer to the kinds of bias I might have as a researcher, and my attempt to avoid it and keep high ethics standards during research.

**The Bias in the Research:**

**Definition of Bias:**

Bias happens when a methodological error is often committed at the phase of sampling or selecting or encouraging a specific result or outcome over others. However, bias can occur at any stage of the study or the research. The bias may take place at the stage of information collection or the design of the study, or it may also occur in the later stages of data analysis, results or publication. Since bias inevitably exists in research, readers should consider the degree to which bias affects the research results by looking at the design and the implementation of the study (Pannucci and Wilkins, 2010).

**Types of bias:**

**Design bias:** Poor research design may increase the likelihood of bias. This usually occurs if there is a discrepancy between the goal of the study and the method used. For example: the aim of the research may be to measure the impact of a given film on the beliefs of the audience, but the method used is an interview with the director of the film. Bias can occur when the beliefs and personality of the researcher influence the choice of methodology and research questions (Smith and Noble, 2014).

**Reflection:** As my research is exploring the impact of war on the “deconversion” from Islam of Syrian refugees in the Netherlands, I found that the best methodology to follow is the interviews with the refugees themselves. With my supervisors, it was decided to conduct the narrative approach/ life history interviews. The narrative approach allows us to understand the “deconversion” in its social context and cultural influences. Through a life history approach, the description of the spiritual changes of the deconverted person with traumatic experience will be possible.

**Selection/ Participants bias:** Selection bias occurs when the sample is selected in a subjective manner. This leads to non-representation of the research sample to the research
community. This can be avoided by ensuring that the participants in the study meet the research requirements and meet the objectives of the study determined beforehand (Tuijnman, 1992).

Reflection: The sampling strategy of the research is designed to target participants who are suitable for the aim of the study. The participants will be chosen according to pre-determined criteria. I sought out participants who were displaced from Syria after witnessing war, death or trauma and then deconverted from Islam after living in the Netherlands. This process began with an initial set of primary contacts with the potential to lead me to more, in line with the “snowball sampling method,” while also relying on a Facebook page for refugee organizations called “Refugee Start Force.” However, I don’t claim that my sample is representative statically and the data presented in this article should be interpreted as subjective, broad constructions, not as empirical facts.

Data collection bias: Biases occur in data collection when the author's personality and beliefs affect the way in which the data is collected. For example, in qualitative research, the interview is often adopted as a method of data collection. The questions raised, the way in which the question is formulated and posed to the participant may contain a lot of bias (Sica, 2006).

Reflection: To avoid bias in questions raised during the interviews, I followed the life history approach strategy, where I ask the participant to tell me his/her life story without any intervention from myself as a researcher. The participant should cover most of my research questions. However, to avoid a lack of content, a list of questions was prepared with and looked over by my supervisors to avoid any bias in formulating the questions.

Analysis and publication bias: The bias in data analysis occurs naturally when the researcher focuses on data that supports their hypothesis and their desired outcome, while ignoring data that does not conform to their hypothesis or leads to opposite results. Bias happens often in the publishing process. In quantitative research, research with statistically significant results is more likely to be published, while qualitative research may not be published if the methodology is unclear or the results are not presented clearly (Easterbrook et al. 1991).

Reflection: As a researcher, I used a fair coding system where I can take most of the data collected from the interviews. As my research is depending on questions rather than a hypothesis, any data can be valid to answer these questions.

Ethics of research on trauma survivors:

Before conducting the interviews, it was necessary to consider that I was interviewing survivors of trauma, and therefore the sensitivity of the subject requires a knowledge of research ethics and the ethics of dealing with them specifically.

Some research, particularly qualitative research, may require interviews with people who have been exposed to life-threatening or life-altering events (physical violence, rape, torture, war, natural disasters, etc.) making them potentially more vulnerable than others. According to the International Guidelines for Ethical Review of Epidemiological Studies (1991), the researcher must first consider the general research ethics, which include concerns about confidentiality, disclosure, prior consent and the risk of harm to participants. When a
researcher explores human subjects, he or she should take into consideration four basics which encourage respect for a person (including respect for autonomy and protection of vulnerable participants), beneficence (the duty to maximize possible benefits and to minimize possible harms and wrongs to participants), non-maleficence (avoidable harm to research subjects), and justice (balancing the risks with the benefits).

In terms of traumatic research, there are many debates about whether one of these principles should be introduced to take precedence over others. It is very important to know that all research on human rights violations is inherently risky, that any breach of confidential information can lead to severe harm and even death. Three potential risks were of great importance. First, sanctions by the governments of the countries on the participants of the research. Second, any great risk to the researchers who carry out the research. And third, the difficulty of obtaining valid data (Beyrer and Kass 2002).

Refugees or survivors of war or violence do not easily disclose situations they have been exposed to or memories for fear of persecution or abuse. Although data indicates that among refugees there are high rates of PTSD, depression and anxiety disorders, it seems only few ask for help for fear of secrecy, lack of confidence in the other, and fears that talking about the experience could lead to renewed pain (Zungu-Dirwayi et al. 2004).

It is therefore necessary to build confidence between the researcher and the participant so that they feel safe that the information they're providing will remain confidential and will not cause any harm to them or others.

Refugees are complex subjects in terms of research because of their sensitive, complex situation. They are displaced persons and have little political rights in their new host country. They may also continue to face repression and humiliation even after resettlement. The ethical principle of confidentiality, not harming and informed consent might be challenging because of the language, cultural and social norm differences (Leaning, 2001). Doing research on the refugees’ trauma may stimulate the risk of retribution, so the researcher should be equally aware of the risks of the research as the benefits.

Reflection:

The safety of the participants was one of the most important points we were focused on, therefore many standards were taken into consideration:

- The participants should feel safe to share their stories, requiring me to give a lengthy introduction about myself as a researcher before and during the interview. The participants could ask any question about my background in order to make them feel safe.
- The participants were not pushed to share any details they didn’t want to share.
- The participants had the right to stop recording or to stop the interview whenever they wished.
- I prepared a consent form guaranteeing the participants confidentiality of their information, and the form is signed by both the participant and the researcher prior to questioning.
- The interviews will be anonymous; none of the participants’ names will be mentioned in the final research.
- The content will be highly protected, saved at the university where no one has access without permission. All the interviews, scripts and records will be deleted from the researcher’s storage after finishing the research. The interviews will be never saved on the cloud.

**Physical and emotional safety of the researcher:**

The research environment and interviews may provide space for sharing information and feelings between the researcher and the participant. This immense amount of emotional information is a deep experience for the researcher that may trigger challenging feelings during the research. While most studies take into consideration the physical safety of the researcher and participants, the emotional safety is often ignored. However, how should a researcher protect themselves from the emotional damage that may be caused by research interviews?

The researcher should have a range of skills that enable him or her to cope effectively with emotionally distressing experiences. Their background, personal and professional experience should provide support while conducting interviews. The researcher must be hyper aware should any emotional damage be occurring. They might also require additional emotional support from external sources such as counselling (Williamson and Burns, 2014).

Maintaining a researcher’s “emotional safety” requires a shame-free acceptance that being emotionally affected by the process can and will occur. Although common knowledge and research tells us that involving emotions can be seen as irrational or unprofessional, recent social science is warming to the idea that a researcher’s reactions and feelings in the research can be an important aspect and source of information. Qualitative research has many instances of this, as researchers are more accepted as human beings making sense of the events surrounding them (Johnson, 2009).

As a researcher I decided not to eliminate my experience and my strong emotional ties to the research topic. During the interviews, I recognized that my story and background helped extensively to gain the trust of the participants, thus gaining more valuable information for the research. At some points I indeed felt stories were emotionally difficult for me, but I tried not to block emotions and instead tried to express them. I realized that knowledge cannot be objective and excluded from our experience, emotions and bodies but it is created through our experience.
Bibliography:


