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Views on political Islam among Australian converts to Islam: findings of a national survey

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Abstract

Over the past few decades, interest in and conversion to Islam among non-Muslims in the West has been on the rise. There is a view in the scholarly literature that Western converts to Islam are overrepresented in regard to politicized interpretations of the religion, commonly referred to as political Islam or Islamism, and even militancy or jihadism. This article presents the findings of a national survey of Muslim Australians. It focuses on views amongst Australian converts to Islam concerning political Islam, including views and understandings of such concepts as the caliphate, shariah, and jihad, and the relationship between Islam and politics, democracy, and conflict. The findings suggest that in the Australian context, converts to Islam are not more likely, and in some cases less likely, than the broader born-Muslim population, to understand and interpret Islam in accordance with political Islamist ideology.

Keywords: caliphate; democracy; interreligious relations; jihad; political Islam; Religious conversion; shariah

Introduction

Emerging in the post-colonial period, the phenomenon of political Islam, or Islamism, has since become a dominant influence on how many Muslims and non-Muslims understand and perceive the religion of Islam and its adherents (Bokhari and Senzai, 2013; Rane *et al.*, 2020). Central to this political ideology are the concepts and institutions of the caliphate, shariah law, and, in certain cases, jihad. Jihad is commonly understood as meaning "holy war" (Barlas, 2003, 46; Al-Dawoody, 2011, 5; Afsaruddin, 2022) among Western media and right-wing political discourses—but more broadly understood among Muslims to range in meaning from spiritual and other forms of struggle to defensive and offensive armed struggle (Rane, 2009; Al-Dawoody, 2011; Afsaruddin, 2022). In recent years, these concepts have come to be commonly associated with violent Islamist groups such as Islamic State (ISIS) and Al Qaeda, and have been framed by those in the far-right[1] as examples of the "threat" posed by Islam to Western societies (Wang, 2017; Abbas, 2021; American Civil Liberties Union, 2021). Such framings are symptomatic of an

evolution of the broader far-right movement in the opening decades of the 21st century, in which the notion of the political and security threat Islam poses to the West having become a salient feature of the movement's ideology (Miller, 2017).

Questions pertaining to political Islam and militancy are particularly relevant in the context of conversion to Islam, given assertions in both mass media and within academia that converts to Islam are more susceptible to extremist ideology and radicalization than their born Muslim counterparts (Schuurman *et al.*, 2016; Sealy, 2017). Despite such assertions, however, the existing scholarship has largely neglected to explore Western converts' understandings of, and perspectives on, political Islam and its associated concepts. In order to address this deficit, this article presents a nuanced examination of political Islam as understood by Australian converts to Islam, also considering the question of how these views compare to those of Australian "born-Muslims." It outlines participants' perspectives on a variety of topics, considering understandings of the nature of the concepts of the caliphate, shariah, and jihad, as well as the relationship between Islam and politics, law and conflict in a broader context. These findings address a significant gap in the existing scholarship on conversion to Islam by providing an in-depth examination of a generally overlooked aspect of Western converts' religious beliefs, and providing comparative analyses based on the variables of gender and conversion status.

Ultimately, this paper seeks to provide insight into two key questions—firstly, how do Australian converts to Islam understand their faith in relation to the phenomenon of political Islam, and secondly, how do these views compare to those of Australian born-Muslims. While the lack of existing comparative data and the resulting exploratory nature of this study preclude any firm conclusions on these questions, the data suggest that despite theories of the "convert's zeal," the variable of conversion status does not appear to be a predictor of a greater tendency toward political Islamist ideology amongst participants in this study.

Conversion to Islam and extremism

Over the past two decades, the phenomenon of conversion to Islam in Western societies has been the subject of an increasing number of sociological studies. In the context of political Islam, and particularly jihadism and militancy, there have been assertions that in a Western context, converts to Islam are over-represented amongst jihadists in comparison to born Muslims, and that converts are particularly susceptible to extremist ideology (Brice, 2010; Sealy, 2017). While some data do appear to support an overrepresentation of converts amongst jihadists in certain contexts, such as the United States (Kleinmann, 2012; Vidino and Hughes, 2015), such claims appear premature in a broader Western context. This is due to a dearth of reliable, empirical data regarding the overall number/percentage of converts in various Western nations (Schuurman *et al.*, 2016), as well as limitations in publicly available information regarding the identities and backgrounds of terrorism suspects (Vidino and Hughes, 2015). In the Australian context, existing data do not appear to support converts' overrepresentation in this area. An ongoing study of "Australian citizens and residents charged with terrorism offences or known to have joined radical Islamist terrorist organisations since the start of the Syrian civil war" (Lowy Institute,

n.d.) has found that amongst this cohort, approximately 8.7% were converts to Islam. Recent research on conversion to Islam in Australia (Mitchell and Rane, 2021) has estimated that approximately 15.8% of Muslim Australians are converts to Islam, suggesting that converts may in fact be under-represented amongst Australian jihadists.

Studies which have asserted that converts are more prone to extremism and radicalization than born Muslims often rely upon several primary explanatory arguments. Among these are the notion of the "convert's zeal," which suggests that converts are often desperate to demonstrate their commitment to their new faith, and as such are "willing to do anything, including perpetrating the most atrocious acts of political violence" (Bartoszewicz, 2013, 17). Underlying such assertions are assumptions about Islam in relation to violence and militancy, which Muslim Australians overwhelmingly reject (Rane *et al.*, 2020).

Other arguments have suggested that recent converts lack sufficient levels of religious literacy to "filter out extremist rhetoric" (Rabasa and Bernard, 2015, 90), thus making them "easy prey for radicals" (Bartoszewicz, 2013, 17). The aforementioned theories regarding the apparent vulnerabilities of converts to radicalization have been challenged by Jones and Dawson (2021), who note that despite the potential merit of these theoretical explanations, they are often not supported by empirical evidence. The authors further suggest that the tendency amongst some scholars to conflate conversion to Islam with "conversion" to extremism is problematic, and that more attention should be paid to the post-conversion experiences of converts in order to identify potential factors which may contribute to radicalization.

The notion of the "convert's zeal" in the Islamic context is further problematized by Snook *et al.* (2020), whose comparative analysis of religiousness between American Muslim converts and non-converts "directly contradict the idea that U.S. Muslim converts are especially zealous," with converts exhibiting lower levels of religiousness across a range of variables compared to non-converts. The authors also caution against blind acceptance of the "convert's zeal" theory, asserting that "speculation about this phenomenon has made converting to Islam an even more stigmatizing and marginalizing process" (2021, 4).

Other empirical research does, however, support assertions of higher tendencies toward activism and radicalism amongst converts compared to born Muslims. Fodeman *et al.*'s (2020) study of Muslim Americans, which measured participants' attitudes based on the Activism and Radicalism Intention Scale (ARIS), found that converts were more likely than born Muslims to support both violent and non-violent means "to advocate for Muslim's rights" (2020, 694). Overall, however, there is currently no consensus within the empirical research regarding whether or not converts are over-represented amongst Western jihadists more broadly, nor why this may be the case. Furthermore, existing studies have tended to focus on specific, narrow measures of religiosity and activism, rather than considering converts' understandings of, and perspectives on, key issues associated with political Islam and *jihadism*.

Defining political Islam

While scholars have proposed and utilized different terms over the past several decades, such as Islamism, Islamic fundamentalism, and Islamic totalism (which

are often used interchangeably), for the purpose of clarity and consistency, this article primarily utilizes the term "political Islam." Within discussions of political Islam, it is important to be aware of the distinction between this phenomenon and the religion of Islam. Tibi explains that Islam and Islamism are not the same thing, that "there is a distinction between the faith of Islam and the religionized politics of Islamism, which employs religious symbols for political ends" (2012, vii). More specifically, the post-colonial phenomenon of political Islam has been described as a political ideology which "selectively uses the teachings of Islam to form the sets of ideas that comprise the ideology, which it reproduces as legitimate religious obligations" (Mozaffari, 2007; Rane, 2019, 6). In particular, these ideas revolve around political Islam's central goal of "the establishment of an Islamic state or caliphate based on the implementation of legal code called shariah" (Duderija and Rane, 2019, 90). There is, however, no universally accepted definition of political Islam/Islamism, and different scholars define this phenomenon in different ways (Martin and Barzegar, 2010, 10).

Political Islam extends across a spectrum that includes movements and individuals of both violent and non-violent persuasions. Tibi (2012) identifies two broad group-ings in this regard—*institutional* Islamists, and *jihadist* Islamists. As described by Tibi (2012), institutional Islamists are those who seek to achieve their objectives through democratic processes, rather than by violent means. Some examples of institutional Islamists include Turkey's AKP (Justice and Development Party), Morocco's PJD (Justice and Development Party), and Tunisia's Ennahda Party, although some par-ties including the AKP do not necessarily self-label as Islamist or Islamic. Conversely, *jihadist* Islamists willingly utilize violence, including against civilians, in order to impose their vision of an "Islamic state." Examples of *jihadist* Islamists include Al Qaeda and ISIS, and their various offshoots, that have employed "terrorism in the name of Islam to achieve their political goals" (Duderija and Rane, 2019, 166). Despite the differences between institutional and jihadist Islamists in terms of the uti-lization of violence, they both maintain a "radical agenda for remaking the existing political order" according to Tibi (2012, 10).

Overall, while there are numerous definitions of this phenomenon, political Islamists can be broadly "identified in relation to their pursuit of an Islam-based political agenda" (Rane, 2019, 6). This tends to involve some reinterpretation and reapplication of concepts, institutions, and traditions derived from the pre-modern era, particularly corresponding to the reign of the Abbasid caliphate, when much of what is considered the corpus of Islamic doctrinal, legal, theological, and political thought was formulated and compiled. Scholars such as Tibi (2012) have argued that through its "invention of tradition," political Islam has centered its ideological focus on specific understandings of Islam and associated concepts which do not necessarily cohere with the foundational text of the Quran, nor the example and practice of the Prophet Muhammad. In particular, Tibi refers to political Islam's "call for a 'return' to shari'a law" and the demand for a "state legal order based on shari'a" (2012, 24). Farooq and El-Ghattis (2018) assert that despite the central position which "shariah law" maintains in contemporary political Islamist thought, nowhere in the Quran nor the hadith is the term "shariah" used in reference to a divine law or legal code as it came to be understood in the centuries after the passing of Prophet Muhammad in 632.

While the term "*shariah*" has come to be synonymous with a concept of a divine Islamic law, the body of jurisprudence which comprises what is termed "shariah" is the result of the scholarly interpretations and opinions of Islamic jurists over the course of centuries and vast territories (Kamali, 2008, 5; El-Fadl, 2014). Tibi explains that while *shariah* was developed by scholars and jurists as an "Islamic legal tradition" from the 8th century, this was primarily concerned with aspects of civil law and was neither a state law nor a "uniform legal code" (2012, 24). Political Islam's fixation on the implementation of shariah as a comprehensive legal code is thus considered to be "an entirely new phenomenon within Islam, and the claim that it restores some historical institution is precisely an invention of tradition" (Tibi, 2012, 25). This process of what Tibi (2012) deems the "Shari'atization of Islam" was heavily influenced by Hassan al-Banna and Abu al-A`la al-Mawdudi, described as the "forefathers of contemporary political Islam," who conceptualized shariah as an "an alternative unifying concept" for the *umma* following the collapse of the Ottoman caliphate in the early 20th century (Esposito and Shahin, 2018, 5). In this context, al-Banna and Mawdudi were successful "in reproducing shari`a as a comprehensive body of laws, a way of life, guidelines for Muslims, divine legislation, a source of unity and stability for the Muslim community, and a shared worldview" (Esposito and Shahin, 2018, 5).

Similar arguments have also been made in relation to the concept of the caliphate (*khilafah*) and the title of Caliph (or *khalifah*) regarding their usage and conceptualization within the foundational text of Islam. While, over the centuries, the caliphate came to be viewed by many Muslims as the legitimate form of Islamic governance (Anjum, 2012; March, 2019), such an institution is not mentioned within the Quran, nor was it implemented during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad or his immediate successors by this name (Donner, 2010). The idea of the caliphate being an "Islamic" religious requirement received endorsement from 11th-century scholars such as al-Marwardi at a time when this political institution was in decline (Rane, 2019). During the post-colonial period, the notion of establishing a caliphate as a religious obligation amongst Muslims experienced a resurgence, becoming a central component of political Islamist ideology, specifically Islamist groups and parties with a global (Hizb ut-Tahrir, Al Qaeda, ISIS) rather than a national outlook AKP, PJD, En-Nahda).

Regarding the title of caliph, commonly understood to mean "successor" or "deputy," the Quran uses the term not in reference to a political leader or institution but human beings in general as inheritors of, being entrusted with, the earth (Quran 6:165, 27:62, and 35:39), and to administer this trust with wisdom and justice (Quran 2:251 and 38:26) guided by revelation (Quran 2:2) (Rane, 2019, 13). In a contemporary context, there are differing views amongst scholars on when the title of caliph first came into usage. For example, Crone and Hinds (1986, 5–23) assert that after the Prophet's death, the leaders of the Muslim community assumed variations of the title of "caliph," such as "*Khalifat rasul Allah*" (successor of the messenger of God) and "*Khalifat Allah*" (successor to God). The latter title was adopted by Uthman (d. 656), and many of the ruling Umayyads (r. 661–750), who considered themselves as deriving their authority directly from God, rather than as successors of the messenger of God (*khalifat rasul Allah*). This view supports the thesis that religious and caliphal/political authority in early Islam were entirely fused and that the

institution of the caliphate was a religious institution rather than a merely political one. This conceptualization of the caliphate eventually became the view of the Muslim orthodoxy in the 11th–12th century CE (Anjum, 2012; March, 2019).

Donner's (2010) research, however, challenges assertions such as those made by Crone and Hinds regarding the title of "caliph" in early Islam. The author suggests that the title of "caliph" did not, in fact, come into usage until approximately 50 years after the death of the Prophet Muhammad. According to Donner (2010), Muhammad's immediate successors were known by the title *Amir al-Mu'mineen* (commander of the believers or commander of the faithful), with the title of caliph being applied to the early leaders retrospectively. While it is beyond the scope of this article to provide a comprehensive overview of the history and complexities of political Islam and its associated concepts, it is hoped that this discussion provides sufficient background to, and contestation associated with, the key concepts concerning political Islam referred to in this article.

Method and participants

The findings presented in this article are derived from data collected in an online, national survey of Muslim Australians, titled the Islam in Australia Survey (Rane *et al.*, 2020). The survey was conducted by a research team based at Griffith University, Brisbane, and was fielded over a two-month period from September to October 2019.[2] The overall objective of the survey was to gain insight into the ways in which Muslim Australians understand, interpret, and experience Islam. In order to achieve this, approximately 150 questions were included in the survey, covering topics ranging from basic demographics, religiosity, and perspectives on political Islam. An additional sub-set of questions was also included for participants who self-identified as converts to Islam. Subsequent to the completion of the survey, a series of seven qualitative focus groups were conducted in various Australian cities.

Participant recruitment for both the survey and focus groups was primarily conducted via social media, with the construction of a Facebook page and online engagement with Muslim community groups and organizations throughout Australia. These organizations provided assistance in promoting the research project and sharing links to the survey and focus group registration pages. Participation in the survey and focus groups was voluntary, and no incentives, financial or otherwise, were provided.

A total of 1034 Muslim Australian citizens and permanent residents completed the survey. Of this total, 871 (84.2%) self-identified as being born/raised Muslim, while 163 (15.8%) self-identified as converts to Islam. Survey data were analyzed utilizing Lime Survey and SPSS (version 26). Basic frequencies were calculated in Lime Survey, while statistical significance and odds ratios were calculated through SPSS descriptive statistics. While the primary focus of this article is the responses of converts, comparisons are also made with those identifying as born Muslims.

Findings

Examining data collected in the Islam in Australia survey, the following sections outline findings regarding Australian converts' beliefs and perspectives on issues relating

to the phenomenon of political Islam. These findings include the proportion of participants falling within "political Islamist" and "militant" typologies, views on the relationship between Islam and politics, democracy and the institution of the caliphate, views on Islamic law and the nature of shariah, perspectives on the concept of jihad and armed conflict within Islam, as well as views on contemporary Muslim-majority nations. Furthermore, the variables of both gender and conversion status are considered, providing comparative analyses between (1) female and male converts to Islam and (2) Australian converts and born Muslims. Broader analyses of these variables in relation to identity, religious belief, and social connectivity are further explored elsewhere (Mitchell and Rane, 2021; Mitchell *et al.*, 2021).

Converts and political Islam

The Islam in Australian survey (Rane *et al.*, 2020), on which the findings of this article are derived, identified various Muslim typologies (or Islamic orientations), including two—political Islamist and militant—that are particularly relevant to this article. Amongst the survey participants, 17.2% of converts overall identified with the political Islamist typology. Identification with this typology was based upon the number of participants who agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "I am a committed Muslim who believes politics is part of Islam and advocates for an Islamic state based on shariah laws." Male converts were found to be more likely than female converts to identify with the "political Islamist" typology, with this difference found to be statistically significant.[3] With regard to conversion status, it was observed that a higher proportion of born Muslims (21.8%) than converts identified as such, though this difference was not found to be statistically significant.[4]

Relevant to the issues of Islamist extremism and jihadism, it was also found that a minority of converts (8.0%) fell under the "militant" typology. Identification with this typology was based upon the number of participants who agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "I am a committed Muslim who believes an Islamic political order and shariah should be implemented by force if necessary." A higher proportion of male converts than female converts fell into this category (though this disparity was not found to be statistically significant), while similar proportions of converts and born Muslims agreed/strongly agreed with this statement.[5] While further research in this area is needed, these findings present an interesting contrast to broader assertions that Western converts to Islam are more susceptible to violence and extremism than their born Muslim counterparts (Kleinmann, 2012; Schuurman *et al.*, 2016).

Unfortunately, there is no existing comparative data regarding the percentage of Western converts to Islam who may fall within these (or similar typologies), nor comparisons between converts and born Muslims. Goli and Rezaei's (2011) study of Muslims in Denmark does, however, provide some comparative data in the context of Western Muslims more broadly. Amongst participants in their survey, 27% were classified as fundamentalists, 18% were classified as radical Islamists, and 6% as militants. Beyond the context of Western nations, Achilov and Sen's (2017) survey of 53,800 Muslims in 13 Muslim-majority countries classified participants under two broad categories—those of "politically moderate" Islamists and "politically radical"

Table 1. Views on Islam and politics

Statement	Female converts (%)	Male converts (%)	Total converts (%)	Total born Muslims (%)
"Do you believe that Islam advocates a particular political system?"				
Yes	15.0	40.3	24.5	24.5
No	57.0	50.0	54.6	48.1
Don't know/ unsure	28.0	9.7	20.9	27.4
Is the caliphate (*khilafa*) a religious obligation?				
Total agree	13.0	33.9	20.9	23.6
Total disagree	45.0	38.7	43.0	37.5
Neutral/ unsure	42.0	27.4	36.2	38.9

Islamists. These categories were informed by factors such as attitudes toward political pluralism, perspectives on civil and political rights, views on shariah and secular law, and perspectives on political leadership. The authors found that amongst their participants, "75% of religious Muslims appear to support politically moderate Islam, while 25% show support for politically radical Islam" (Achilov and Sen, 2017, 618). While it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide an in-depth overview of existing typologies, further discussion of these conceptual frameworks and their influence of the present study can be found elsewhere (Rane and Duderija, 2021).

Views on Islam, politics, and democracy

A series of questions were included in the survey in order to gain insight into participants' understandings of the relationship between Islam and politics, as well as regarding the institution of the caliphate (Table 1). Firstly, participants were asked if they believed that Islam advocates a particular political system. A slight majority of converts (54.6%) selected "no," while approximately one-quarter (24.5%) said "yes." A further 20.9% selected "don't know/unsure." When the variable of gender was considered, it was found that male converts were more likely than females to agree with this proposition. This disparity was found to be statistically significant, with male converts being 3.829 (OR) times more likely than female converts to believe that Islam advocates a particular political system.[6] Only minimal differences were observed between converts and born Muslims in relation to this question, none of which were found to be statistically significant.

Further considering the relationship between Islam and politics, participants were asked "to what extent do you agree or disagree that the form of government referred to as a *khilafah*/caliphate is an Islamic religious obligation?"[7] Approximately one-fifth of converts (20.9%) strongly agreed/agreed with this statement, while approximately 40.0% disagreed or strongly disagreed. A further 17.2% selected "neither agree nor disagree," while 19.0% were unsure. As with the previous question, there was

Table 2. Islam and democracy[a]

Are Islam and democracy compatible?	Female converts (%)	Male converts (%)	Total converts (%)	Total born Muslims (%)
Yes, completely	44.0	35.5	41.1	42.7
Mostly	33.0	35.5	33.7	39.4
Not very	8.0	12.9	9.8	5.1
Not at all	6.0	9.7	7.4	3.4
Unsure	9.0	6.5	8.0	9.4

[a]Question: Is Islam compatible with the principles of democracy?

found to be a statistical significance in relation to gender, with male converts being 3.428 (OR) times more likely than female converts to believe that the caliphate was a religious obligation. Similarly, gender disparities were also observed amongst born Muslims, with males more likely than females to believe that the caliphate was a religious obligation. When the variable of conversion status was taken into consideration, it was found that born Muslim survey respondents were slightly more likely to agree that the caliphate was a religious obligation (23.7%) and somewhat less likely to disagree (37.4%) with this proposition than were converts. These differences were minor, however, and were not found to be statistically significant.

Comparatively, limited existing research does suggest considerable support for the institution of the caliphate in some parts of the Muslim world. For example, a survey conducted by World Public Opinion found that majorities in Pakistan (74%), Morocco (71%), and Egypt (67%) supported "unifying all Islamic countries into a single Islamic state or Caliphate," while slightly less than half (49%) of respondents in Indonesia supported this goal (Kull, 2007). In a Western context, a 2015 survey of British Muslims conducted by ICM for Channel 4 found that 7% of respondents supported the establishment of a "'Caliphate,' or an Islamic state, led by a group of religious authorities under a supreme leader" (Ipsos MORI, 2018, 69), though this survey has come under criticism regarding methodological rigor (Taylor, 2016). It should also be noted that the institution of the caliphate has been further discredited in recent years due to the conduct of ISIS (Akyol, 2019).

Convert respondents were also asked for their opinion on the question "is Islam compatible with the principles of democracy?" (see Table 2). The largest plurality (41.1%) answered "yes, completely," while a further 33.7% answered "mostly." Smaller numbers believed that Islam is "not very" (9.8%) or "not at all" (7.4%) compatible with democracy, with the remaining 8.0% being unsure. Overall, while a minority of participants expressed uncertainty, or indeed rejection, regarding the compatibility of Islam and democracy, it is important to highlight that a clear majority believe that Islam is either completely or mostly compatible with the principles of democracy.

Comparatively, the responses of female and male converts to these questions aligned fairly closely. While a smaller proportion of male than female converts believed that Islam and democracy were "completely" compatible (Table 2), and a

Table 3. Agreement with democratic principles[a]

Principle	Female converts (%)	Male converts (%)	Total converts (%)	Total born Muslims (%)
Freedom of religion	86.0	91.9	88.3	94.4
Equality of all people under the law	88.0	83.9	86.5	92.0
Human rights, civil liberties, and political freedoms	84.0	82.3	83.4	87.6
The rule of law	76.0	80.7	77.9	83.4
Freedom of expression	77.0	79.0	77.9	81.2
Free and independent media	70.0	83.9	75.5	78.0
Independent judiciary	71.0	79.0	74.2	77.2
Elected political representatives	72.0	74.2	72.4	78.5
Separation of political and religious authorities	63.0	53.2	59.5	52.9

[a]Question: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following principles of democracy?

higher proportion of males believed that Islam was "not very" or "not at all" compatible with democracy, there was not found to be a statistically significant relationship between the variable of gender and responses to this question. When the variable of conversion status was taken into account, it was found that converts were slightly less likely than born Muslims to believe that Islam and democracy were completely or mostly compatible, though these differences were not found to be statistically significant.

Participants were also asked to what extent they personally agreed or disagreed with various principles of democracy (Table 3). Majorities of converts expressed agreement with: freedom of religion (88.3%); equality of all people under the law (86.5%); human rights, civil liberties, and political freedoms (83.4%); the rule of law (77.9%); freedom of expression (77.9%); free and independent media (75.5%); independent judiciary (74.2%); elected political representatives (72.4%); and the separation of political and religious authorities (59.5%).

With regard to gender, only minor differences were observed between the responses of female and male converts. While no statistically significant differences were found, it is noteworthy that for six out of nine democratic principles listed, slightly higher proportions of male converts than female converts expressed agreement. This presents an interesting point of comparison as male converts were found to be slightly less likely than females to believe that Islam and democracy were compatible, and significantly more likely to believe that Islam advocates a particular political system, and that the caliphate represents a religious obligation. Future

qualitative research may shed some light on gender-based differences regarding converts' perspectives on the relationship between Islam, politics, and democracy.

Regarding the variable of conversion status, it was found that the responses of converts and born Muslims aligned fairly closely. Interestingly, however, born Muslims were slightly more likely than converts to express agreement with almost all of the listed principles of democracy, with the one exception here being the separation of political and religious authorities.[8]

Shariah and Islamic law

While scholars such as Tibi (2012) and Farooq and El Ghattis (2018) assert that the term "shariah" is not used in the Quran or hadith in reference to a divine law or legal code, shariah has nevertheless come to be commonly understood by Muslims and non-Muslims as the divine or revealed law of Islam. Research conducted by the Pew Research Center found that among Muslims in 17 out of 23 countries, majorities believed that shariah was the "revealed word of God," rather than being "developed by men, based on word of God" (Pew, 2013). Today, a number of modern Muslim-majority nations have implemented various interpretations of "shariah law" (Wasti, 2009), while numerous Islamist movements, of both violent and non-violent persuasions, have the creation of an Islamic state under shariah law as one of their primary objectives (Gerges, 2009, 43).

Participants were asked about their views on the nature of shariah and their desire to see the implementation of certain aspects of shariah law. Regarding the nature of shariah, participants were asked if they believed that this was a divine/revealed law/legal code, or the opinions and rulings of Islamic jurists. Participants were divided in their understanding of this concept, with similar proportions viewing shariah as being either divine in nature (44.8%) or constructed by men (43.6%). Smaller numbers were unsure (8.6%) or selected "other" (3.1%). Those who selected other were prompted to include a written response, though, unfortunately, of the five written responses provided, none were considered sufficient for coding or analysis.

With regard to gender, only minimal differences were observed between female and male converts. Amongst both groups, understandings of shariah were evenly divided between "divine/revealed law/legal code" and "Islamic jurists' opinions and interpretations based on the Quran and other sources." This finding represents an interesting contrast to other questions relating to political Islam and associated concepts and institutions. For example, while female and male converts displayed similar understandings of the nature of shariah, male converts were, overall, more likely to associate with politicized and legalistic understandings of Islam in general. While it is difficult to theorize as to why this particular issue goes against broader trends, further research on this point may shed some light on how various elements of the conversion process and lived experiences, such as information seeking and learning, may shape converts understandings of various concepts associated with Islam.

Comparatively, whilst converts were evenly split on their understanding of the nature of shariah, born Muslims were more likely to understand shariah as being Islamic jurists' opinions and rulings, rather than a divine/revealed legal code. A slight majority (52.5%) of born Muslims viewed shariah as being a man-made construct,

while a minority (34.8%) viewed this as a divine law. As with converts, smaller numbers were unsure (9.1%) or selected "other" (3.7%).

Several additional survey questions were included in order to measure desire for specific aspects of classical shariah laws (Table 4). These included family law, polygamy, and classical punishments (generally known as *hudud*).[9] With regard to family law, survey participants were asked to rate their level of agreement or disagreement with the statement "I would like classical shariah laws relating to family matters, such as marriage, divorce and inheritance, recognised in Australian law." A total of 36.8% of converts indicated agreement with this statement, with 31.3% disagreeing. A further 31.9% were either unsure or selected "neither agree nor disagree."

The topic of classical shariah punishments, or *hudud*, was also raised in this section. These punitive aspects of shariah refer to several crimes and their corresponding punishments which are referenced in the Quran and the hadith (Peters, 2006; Rane, 2010). In response to the statement "I would like to live in a country where classical shariah punishments are implemented," less than one-fifth (18.4%) of participants agreed or strongly agreed, while a majority (60.1%) disagreed or strongly disagreed. A further 21.5% of participants were unsure or selected "neither agree nor disagree." These findings suggest that while there is a noteworthy level of uncertainty amongst converts regarding the desirability of *hudud* punishments, a clear majority of Australian converts do not wish to live in a country which implements such punishments.

Further considering views on the application of classical shariah laws, participants were presented with the statement "countries today that implement classical shariah laws are more just and fair than Australia." A clear majority of respondents rejected this statement, with 61.4% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. Only 10.4% of participants agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, while approximately 28.2% were unsure or selected the response option of "neither agree nor disagree."

As with other questions relating to political Islam, some noteworthy gender differences were observed regarding participants' views on shariah and its desirability. As noted earlier in this article, female and male converts displayed similar understandings of the nature of shariah, with both groups being evenly split on whether this construct was a divine law or the opinions and rulings of jurists. However, regarding desire for specific aspects of shariah law, male converts were more likely than females to express a desire for family-related laws to be recognized in Australia, or to live in a country where polygamy or classical shariah punishments were implemented. Regarding family law, half of male converts (50.0%) agreed or strongly agreed that they would like such aspects of shariah recognized in Australian law, compared to less than one-third (29.0%) of female converts. This gender disparity was found to be statistically significant, with male converts being 2.448 times (OR) more likely than female converts to express a desire for family-related shariah laws in Australia.[10] Approximately one-third (30.6%) of male converts agreed or strongly agreed that they would like to live in a country where polygamy was legal, compared to 11.0% of female converts. Again, this gender disparity was found to be statistically significant, with male converts being 3.575 (OR) times more likely than female converts to express desire for polygamy.[11] A similar gender breakdown was observed regarding a desire for classical shariah punishments. In this regard,

Table 4. Views on shariah[a]

Statement	Strongly agree/agree		Neither agree nor disagree/unsure		Disagree/strongly disagree	
	Female converts (%)	Male converts (%)	Female converts (%)	Male converts (%)	Female converts (%)	Male converts (%)
I would like classical shariah laws relating to family matters, such as marriage, divorce, and inheritance, recognized in Australian law	29.0	50.0	32.0	30.6	39.0	19.4
	36.8		**31.9**		**31.3**	
I would like to live in a country where polygamy (polygyny: a man marrying multiple women) is legal	11.0	30.6	28.0	41.9	61.0	27.4
	18.4		**33.1**		**48.5**	
I would like to live in a country where classical shariah punishments are implemented	12.0	29.0	21.0	22.6	67.0	48.4
	18.4		**21.5**		**60.1**	
Countries today that implement classical shariah laws are more just and fair than Australia	6.0%	17.7	30.0	25.8	64.0	56.5
	10.4%		**28.2**		**61.35**	

Bold serves to highlight combined responses of both male and female participants.
[a]Question: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about Islam and classical shariah laws in relation to Australian laws and legal system?

male converts were 3.000 (OR) times more likely than female converts to agree/ strongly agree that they would like to live in a country which implemented classical shariah punishments.[12] These findings are reflective of a broader trend wherein male converts were more likely than females to exhibit legalistic approaches toward, and understandings of, Islam. With regard to questions about Australia's legal system and freedom to practice Islam in Australia, a higher proportion of female than male converts expressed that they were "content with the extent to which Muslims are currently able to practice Islam in Australia," while a slightly higher number of females agreed that "Australia's legal system upholds principles of justice and I am generally satisfied with it." While these differences were not found to be statistically significant, they again form part of a larger trend observed in the survey data in which male converts were more critical of Australian society and government, as well as regarding their freedom to practice "Islam" in Australia.

Regarding the differences and commonalities between converts and born Muslim participants (Table 5), the responses of both groups were observed to be fairly similar in a number of cases. For example, similar proportions of both converts and born Muslims expressed a desire to live in a country in which polygamy was legal or in which classical shariah punishments were implemented. Similar proportions also agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that "countries today that implement classical shariah laws are more just and fair than Australia."

Some differences were, however, observed in relation to other questions. For example, a higher proportion of born Muslims (54.4%) than converts (36.8%) agreed or strongly agreed that they would like classical shariah laws relating to family matters to be recognized in Australian law. There was found to be a statistically significant difference in relation to this question, with born Muslims being 2.050 (OR) times more likely than converts to agree or strongly agree with this proposition.[13]

Jihad and armed conflict

In recent decades, the concept of jihad has become a key focus in discourses concerning Islam and Muslims, particularly in the context of militancy and extremism (Cook 2005, 93–128). The Arabic term *jihad* means to "strive, struggle or make an effort in the broadest sense" and "refers to spiritual, charitable, intellectual, physical, humanitarian and armed struggles" (Rane, 2010, 171–172). Within the Quran, the term jihad can be identified 35 times, with only four of these being "militant or combative" in nature (Rane, 2010, 172). Based upon his analysis of the Quran, Al-Dawoody concluded that "apart from defense against military aggression, the religious persecution of Muslims and the need to secure freedom of religion, there is no text in the Qur'ān that supports force of arms, let alone for the purpose of compelling others to accept Islam" (2011, 68). Over time, however, jihad has come to be understood in increasingly aggressive contexts, in some cases as a violent struggle to be waged in order to spread Islam and fight against non-Muslims (Cook, 2005, 93–128; Rane, 2019, 13–14). In recent years, the concept of jihad as a "holy war" has become prominent amongst both Muslims and non-Muslims, a development which has arguably been driven, to a certain extent, by terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda and ISIS justifying their violent actions, including the attacking of civilians and non-combatants, as

Table 5. Views on shariah by conversion status

Statement	Strongly agree/agree		Neither agree nor disagree/ unsure		Disagree/strongly disagree	
	Converts (%)	Born Muslims (%)	Converts (%)	Born Muslims (%)	Converts (%)	Born Muslims (%)
I would like classical shariah laws relating to family matters, such as marriage, divorce, and inheritance, recognized in Australian law	36.8	54.4	31.9	26.9	31.3	18.7
I would like to live in a country where polygamy (polygyny: a man marrying multiple women) is legal	18.4	20.8	33.1	32.6	48.5	46.6
I would like to live in a country where classical shariah punishments are implemented	18.4	17.8	21.5	32.5	60.1	49.7
Countries today that implement classical shariah laws are more just and fair than Australia	10.4	9.4	28.2	30.8	61.35	59.8

acts of "jihad" (Cook, 2005, 128–163; Roy, 2017). In light of claims that converts to Islam are over-represented amongst Western jihadists, it was considered crucial to gain insight into how Australian converts understand this term.

Survey participants were asked several questions regarding their understanding of the term jihad (Table 6), as well as regarding the use of violence and armed conflict within Islam more broadly. Regarding the concept of jihad, respondents were asked "what is your understanding of the term jihad according to how it is used in the Quran and in the example of the Prophet Muhammad?" A majority of converts (66.3%) understood this as "to strive/struggle through spiritual, charitable or good deeds, including armed struggle in self-defence only," with a minority (22.7%) understanding this as "to strive/struggle through spiritual, charitable or good deeds, including defensive and offensive armed struggle." A further 3.7% of participants were unsure. Participants were also able to select "other" and provide a written response to this question. Twelve participants (7.4%) selected this option, with 11 providing a definition or understanding divergent from the definitions offered. Of the 12 respondents, eight participants (4.9% of all converts) expressed a belief that jihad referred to an internal or spiritual struggle only, while one participant defined the Quranic usage of jihad as "to strive/struggle through spiritual, charitable or good deeds, including armed struggle in self-defence and to free others from invasion and oppression."[14]

Considering the variable of gender, a higher proportion of female (70.0%) than male (59.7%) converts believed jihad to include armed struggle in the context of self-defense only, while male converts were slightly more likely than female converts to believe that jihad included armed conflict in the context of both self-defense *and* offensive armed struggle. Regarding the differences between converts and born Muslims, only minimal differences were observed in the responses to this question, with converts slightly less likely to view jihad as including armed struggle in self-

Table 6. Understandings of Jihad[a]

Jihad means…	Female converts (%)	Male converts (%)	Total converts (%)	Total born Muslims (%)
…to strive/struggle through spiritual, charitable or good deeds, including armed struggle in self-defense only	70.0	59.7	66.3	68.7
…to strive/struggle through spiritual, charitable or good deeds, including defensive and offensive armed struggle	21.0	25.8	22.7	18.0
Unsure	4.0	3.2	3.7	8.8
Other	5.0	11.3	7.4	4.5

[a]Question: What is your understanding of the term jihad according to how it is used in the Quran and in the example of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh)?

defense only, and slightly more likely to view jihad as including armed struggle in both defensive and offensive contexts. These differences were not found to be statistically significant. It is worth noting that, as raised within one focus group, there may have been some confusion amongst respondents regarding the specific definitions of "offensive" armed struggle. For example, one focus group participant questioned if this may have been understood by some as involving armed struggle to overcome oppression—an element which is identified by some scholars as being one of the "higher objectives" of jihad.

In addition to their understanding of the term jihad, survey respondents were also asked about their understanding of attitudes toward armed conflict within Islam, specifically in relation to civilians and non-combatants (Table 7). When asked "in relation to armed conflict, what is your understanding of how Islam regards civilians/non-combatants?", an overwhelming majority (81.6%) of converts believed that "Islam never permits armed conflict against civilians/non-combatants." A minority of respondents (6.8%) believed that "Islam sometimes permits armed conflict against civilians/non-combatants," while 3.1% believed that "Islam generally permits armed conflict against civilians/non-combatants." A further 8.6% of respondents were unsure or did not know.

Regarding gender, only minimal differences were observed between male and female participants, none of which were found to be statistically significant. These results indicate that while there are some comparative gender differences in regard to certain concepts such as jihad, female and male converts hold similar views when it comes to the permissibility in Islam of armed conflict against civilians and non-combatants. Regarding the differences between converts and born Muslims, some slight variations were observed in participant understandings of this issue. While the aforementioned disparities may warrant further investigation, these differences were not found to be statistically significant and, overall, these findings still suggest that Australian converts overwhelmingly reject the notion that violence against civilians is ever permissible within Islam.

Table 7. Views on armed conflict[a]

Statement	Female converts (%)	Male converts (%)	Total converts (%)	Born Muslims (%)
Islam never permits armed conflict against civilians/non-combatants	81.0	82.3	81.6	90.9
Islam sometimes permits armed conflict against civilians/non-combatants	6.0	8.1	6.8	3.4
Islam generally permits armed conflict against civilians/non-combatants	4.0	1.6	3.1	0.5
Don't know/unsure	9.0	8.1	8.6	5.2

[a]Question: In relation to armed conflict, what is your understanding of how Islam regards civilians/non-combatants?

Survey participants were also asked about their views on martyrdom in relation to attacks on civilian targets (Table 7). While the concepts of martyrdom and self-sacrifice within Islam are full of complexities and have historically manifested in different ways, contemporary jihadist groups have utilized tactics such as suicide bombings against civilians, in the name of jihad and in pursuit of martyrdom and its purported heavenly rewards (Thayer and Hudson, 2010, 42; Maher, 2016, 40). Yet the vast majority of Muslim scholars "reject the legitimacy of suicide bombing within Islam" (Rane, 2010, 183).

Participants were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the statement that "someone who dies attacking innocent civilians is *not* a martyr (*shaheed*)." An overwhelming majority of converts were in agreement with this statement, with 81.6% strongly agreeing and a further 11.0% agreeing. A small minority either disagreed (1.2%) or strongly disagreed (1.8%) with this statement. Convert responses to this question were largely consistent with those of born Muslims, with slight differences observed which were not found to be statistically significant. Regarding the variable of gender, only minimal differences were observed between the perspectives of female and male converts, none of which were found to be statistically significant.

While no direct comparative data are available regarding this question, research on Western Muslim communities has found widespread opposition to suicide bombing and violence against civilians in the name of Islam. For example, a study conducted by the Pew Research Center (2006) found that majorities believed such actions were never justified, including in: Germany (83%), Britain (70%), Spain (69%), and France (64%). Additionally, a 2011 survey of Muslim Americans found that 81% of respondents believed that suicide bombing and other violence against civilians for the purpose of defending Islam was never justified (Pew Research Center, 2011). Overall, these findings suggest that despite some slight differences in relation to gender and conversion status, Muslim Australians overwhelmingly reject the notion that one who dies attacking civilians should be considered a martyr. This adds further support to other findings presented in this article which demonstrate that a majority of Muslim Australians (both converts and born Muslims) do not adhere to interpretations or understandings of Islam which support violence and the targeting of civilians in the name of their religion.

Engaging with non-Muslims

In addition to examining participants' perspectives and understandings of the caliphate, shariah, and jihad, the survey also sought to gain insight into participant views on other concepts linked to certain forms of political Islam, such as Salafism. One key concept considered here relates to contemporary Salafist perspectives on the permissibility of engagement with non-Muslims. As Shavit explains, the doctrine of *al-walāʾ wa-al-barā* (loyalty and disavowal) advocated by contemporary Salafists asserts that "God and His Prophet commanded the believers to reserve their love and friendship for Muslims and to disassociate themselves from infidels, despise them and avoid imitating their beliefs and customs" (2014). Shavit further explains that "the concept has evolved to become a pillar of the salafi approach, justifying its call to minimize Muslim interactions with non-Muslims as well as to curtail the integration of

Western norms into Muslim societies" (2014, 67). Such a concept has become problematic in the context of Muslim communities in Western societies, where the notion of "loyalty and disavowal" has "proliferated in Western mosques and on internet portals, promoting an anti-integration agenda" (Shavit, 2014, 68). For Western converts who accept such a concept, the implication is that positive relations with non-Muslim family members and friends is forbidden. Despite suggestions that Salafism has become an increasingly popular form of Islam amongst Western converts (Duderija and Rane, 2019, 157), only minimal research to date has sought to understand the ways in which this particular concept is perceived and accepted by converts (Shanneik, 2012). Existing qualitative research does suggest that Western converts who adhere to Salafist interpretations of Islam do accept this understanding of interfaith and intrafaith relations to varying degrees. For example, Shanneik's study of female Salafi converts in Ireland found that participants exhibited a "need to detach and separate themselves from the majority of society and from other Muslims with a different understanding of Islam" (2012, 177).

Participants were presented with a series of statements and asked "which of the following statements is closest to what you think about engaging with non-Muslims as family, friends, colleagues and in general social interactions?" (Table 8). An overwhelming majority of converts (89.6%) said that engaging with non-Muslims is normal and good, while 9.2% believed that such interaction should be done primarily in the pursuit of da'wah (proselytizing). Only two converts (1.2%) believed that engagement with non-Muslims was discouraged in Islam, and no participants believed that such engagement was forbidden.

Only minimal differences were observed between the responses of female and male converts, none of which were found to be statistically significant. Only minimal

Table 8. Views on engaging with non-Muslims[a]

Statement	Female converts (%)	Male converts (%)	Total converts (%)	Total born Muslims (%)
Engaging with non-Muslims is normal and good	89.0	90.3	89.6	92.7
Engaging with non-Muslims should be primarily done for da'wah (to spread Islam)	10.0	8.1	9.2	5.1
Engaging with non-Muslims is discouraged in Islam and should be kept to a minimum	1.0	1.6	1.2	0.8
Engaging with non-Muslims is forbidden in Islam and should be avoided	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.2
Don't know/unsure	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.3

[a]Question: Which of the following statements is closest to what you think about engaging with non-Muslims as family, friends, colleagues, and in general social interactions?

differences were observed in relation to conversion status, with similar proportions of converts and born Muslims viewing engagement with non-Muslims as normal and good. Overall, these findings suggest that amongst all survey respondents, there is little support for doctrines like *al-walā' wa-al-barā* which seek to prohibit positive relations between Muslims and non-Muslims.

Conclusion

This article has examined the views and understandings of the relationship between Islam, politics, law, and conflict amongst Australian converts to Islam—complex and important issues often associated with the phenomenon of political Islam. Overall, it was found that a minority of participants fell under the typology of political Islamist, while varying degrees of support were observed in relation to concepts and institutions associated with political Islam. An even smaller subgroup could be classified as militant. In the context of politics, a majority of participants rejected the notions that Islam advocates a particular political system, and that the institution of the caliphate represents a religious obligation for Muslims. Furthermore, the findings suggest that a majority believe in the compatibility of Islam and democracy and are supportive of many key democratic principles. Regarding the concept of shariah, commonly known as "Islamic law," participants were divided on whether this was a divine legal code or a man-made construct. While there was no unanimity regarding the nature of shariah, a majority of participants nevertheless rejected the notion of living in a country where various aspects of such a system were implemented, nor expressed a desire for aspects of classical shariah laws to be implemented in Australia. Finally, in the context of jihad, a clear majority of participants understood this to involve armed struggle in the context of self-defense only, rather than offensive armed struggle. A majority of converts also rejected notions that Islam permits violence against civilians and that individuals who die while attacking civilians can be considered martyrs.

Regarding the variable of gender, a comparative analysis of female and male converts provides some support for the notion that amongst Australian Muslim converts, males display a greater tendency than females to understand Islam in politicized and legalistic ways. This was particularly evident in relation to specific concepts, such as the belief that Islam advocates a specific political system, a belief that the institution of the caliphate represents a religious obligation for Muslims, and the desire for certain aspects of shariah law. Regarding these concepts, the higher level of agreement from male converts was observed to be statistically significant. Other differences were also observed, such as male converts being more likely than females to fall under "political Islamist" and "militant" orientations or typologies. There was found to be a statistically significant difference in relation to the political Islamist typology, however this was not the case for the militant typology.

Regarding the variable of conversion status, a comparative analysis of converts and born Muslims found generally minimal differences between these two groups. In terms of these differences, statistical significance was only observed in relation to the topic of shariah and family law, where born Muslims displayed a greater despite for the implementation of such within the Australian legal system. While further

research in this area is recommended, the findings of this paper problematize the notion that converts to Islam are more inclined toward political Islam and its various conceptual underpinnings than are their born Muslim counterparts. Overall, these findings suggest that while there is less agreement in some areas than in others, converts overwhelmingly understand Islam in ways that embrace or accept the principles of democracy and reject violence and armed conflict in the name of their religion. This article does not find definitive support for the notion that converts are more susceptible to the views of political Islamist ideology than born Muslims.

Notes

1. While there are definitional complexities regarding the concept of the "far-right" or "extreme right," the authors here refer to contemporary popular and political movements commonly characterized by nationalist, anti-immigrant, and anti-Islam ideologies. The definitional problems with all of these terms have been discussed at length in the relevant literature. See, for example, Tore and Ravndal (2019).
2. Ethical clearance was obtained from Griffith University's Human Research Ethics Committee, Reference 2019/042. Informed consent was received from all survey respondents and focus group participants prior to participation.
3. The odds of a male convert identifying as a political Islamist was 2.551 (OR) times greater than a female convert identifying as such, 95% CI (1.113–5.844), $p = 0.024$.
4. Further analyses of converts and Muslim typologies have been published elsewhere (see Mitchell and Rane, 2021; Mitchell *et al.*, 2021).
5. Amongst participants who self-identified as born Muslims, 21.8% fell under the political Islamist typology, and 7.8% fell under the militant typology.
6. Statistical significance: 95% CI (1.813–8.085), $p \leq 0.001$.
7. See Table 1.
8. This disparity was not found to be statistically significant.
9. Plural of "*hadd*." This term means "boundary/boundaries" or "limit/limits" but is generally used in reference to offenses that have a fixed penalty in the Qur'an.
10. Statistical significance: 95% CI (1.267–4.733), $p = 0.007$.
11. Statistical significance: 95% CI (1.564–8.174), $p = 0.002$.
12. Statistical significance: 95% CI (1.328–6.779), $p = 0.007$.
13. Statistical significance: 95% CI (1.451–2.894), $p \leq 0.001$.
14. Survey participant S545.

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