

ISLAMIC PROSELYTISM IN THE MIRROR. BETWEEN RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND SECURITY RISKS

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Abstract:

Religious proselytism, characterized by the policy of converting new followers in order to practice religious beliefs, is a subject that generates confusion in terms of ensuring the balance between respecting religious freedoms and preventing national security risks. Starting from the distinction between improper religious proselytism that uses undemocratic methods to attract new followers and conventional religious proselytism that falls within the sphere of religious freedom, we believe that a mirror analysis of the two types of proselytism can lead to highlighting key aspects that exceed the manifestation of religious freedom, and in some cases, it can lead to the initiation of the process of Islamic radicalization. The premise of the article is that the relationship between improper Islamic religious proselytism and the process of Islamic radicalization is a whole-to-part relationship: the early signs that indicate the advanced stage of Islamic radicalization in the cases pronounced by Romanian court decisions demonstrate that improper Islamic proselytism accompanies the process of violent radicalization.

As a methodology, the method of combining two theories is applied: the theory of conversion and radicalization as a sub-type of radicalization to highlight the relationship between conventional proselytism and the process of religious conversion on the one hand, and on the other hand, the relationship between improper proselytism and violent Islamic radicalization. The methodological tool used is the analysis of the decisions of the European Court of Human Rights in which there were identified cases of proselytism and of the decisions of the national courts in Romania, through which the radicalized immigrants were expelled.

Keywords: *Islamic proselytism, Islamic radicalization, religious freedom, religious conversion theory, radicalization as a sub-type of conversion, security risks.*

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Introduction

The rationale for analysing the concept of Islamic proselytism (Malik, 2018) consists of two objectives: 1) the distinction between the two types of Islamic religious proselytism: improper versus conventional, by analysing the interpretation in the jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights, with the aim of identifying which type of proselytism involves national security risks; and 2) highlighting the relationship between improper religious proselytism and the process of radicalization (Olsson, 2014) in the light of the theory of radicalization as a sub-type of religious conversion. We mirrored the relationship between conventional proselytism and the process of religious conversion to highlight the contrast with the improper Islamic proselytizing-violent Islamic radicalization relationship.

In order to highlight the objectives of the research, we have selected two theories: the theory of religious conversion and radicalization as a sub-type of religious conversion, in the idea that the last theory emerged in the knowledge stage from the study of the relationship between religious conversion and violent radicalization as a phenomenon. Although violent Islamic radicalization has been explained through the lens of several theories and currents (sociological and socio-psychological theories, psychological theories related to cognitive, behaviourist, and psychoanalytic currents, cultural theories, and religious theories), we have selected for the coherence of the analysis theories that explain radicalization from a religious perspective: religious conversion, and further reviewing this theory through the theory of radicalization as a sub-type of religious conversion.

Also, although several types of violent radicalization are identified in the specialized literature (political radicalization, religious radicalization, radicalization with ecological objectives, ethnic radicalization), we selected Islamic religious radicalization and proselytism for the same religion. This fact should not lead to the idea that Islamic radicalization is the only manifestation of the spectrum of religious radicalization; there are cases such as Orthodox radicalization in Georgia (Chifu et al., 2012). Equally, the selection of Islamic proselytism as a benchmark of the analysis should not lead to the idea that this pattern is the only manifestation in the sphere of proselytism in Romania. From the

category of improper proselytism, we mention the case of religious sects that encourage the violation of human rights (Torres, 2020) or illegal activities – sexual perversions, pornography, prostitution – to support their goals, for example, the MISA cult created by Gregorian Bivolaru (Šorytè, 2022), and from the spectrum of conventional proselytism in Romania, we mention the proselytism pursued by Pentecostals (Ilie, 2023).

Romania was selected as an area of interest in relation to the following considerations. First, the topic of improper Islamic proselytism in relation to violent radicalization may be of interest from the perspective of early warning and prevention of terrorism. For example, we can mention several cases of Islamic proselytism on Romanian territory (HotNews, 2011), following which prosecutors investigated individuals regarding the presence of violent radicalization and the potential for terrorist attacks (Juridice, 2011). The fact that Romania does not present a magnitude of the phenomenon of violent radicalization to the extent that it requires countermeasures should not lead to the erroneous premise that it is not necessary to emphasize some elements related to early warning and can constitute lessons learned in order to manage trends in ongoing radicalization. Secondly, the threat of violent Islamic radicalization in relation to Romania must be analysed in relation to the impact of regional trends that can have long-term effects, also in the case of European states that do not record terrorist attacks or terrorist nuclei on their national territory (National Defence Strategy of Romania, 2020-2024). For example, the impact of Islamic radicalization as a phenomenon is evaluated not only at a quantitative level in a state but also regarding the sources of terrorist inspiration in relation to the waves of extremism at the regional level in a reference period (the wave of terrorism inspired by the Islamic State, the new wave of extremism triggered by the crisis in the Gaza Strip).

Regarding improper proselytism as an integral part of the Islamic radicalization process, it should be specified that identifying improper proselytism sequences is a main indicator for potential violent radicalization. Improper Islamic proselytism as a characteristic element of the advanced stage of radicalization can manifest itself through the dissemination of jihadist propaganda in the online environment, the

promotion of radical and violent ideological materials (Wiktorowicz, 2005), the attraction of new members through incitement to violence, the de-legitimization of state authority, or the killing of people who do not share the same religious beliefs (Sageman, 2004). For example, we can mention several cases in Romania in which jihadist propaganda activities were carried out (Rise Project, 2015; HotNews, 2015).

Of course, other risks generated by improper proselytism concern jeopardizing the democratic values and the restriction of the religious freedom of other people. For these reasons, we believe that by using a comparative analysis of the elements of improper and conventional proselytism, it should contribute to the clarification of some conceptual gaps and the delimitation between what falls within the scope of religious freedom and the elements that exceed it and tip the balance towards generating risks of security.

We propose the following research question: Referring to the concept of Islamic proselytism, how can the balance of proportionality between respecting religious freedom and ensuring national security regarding risk prevention be characterized? We appreciate that the article offers the following novelties. First, in the security literature, the concept of Islamic proselytism has rarely been addressed, especially in relation to the security risks it can generate. Also, in the specialized literature related to human rights, certain elements can be identified that characterize the types of proselytism, but these are not approached from a security perspective. In essence, as can be seen in the ECtHR jurisprudence, it is relevant for a state to maintain the balance and proportionality between respecting the rights and freedoms of citizens and ensuring national security measures.

Conceptual elements and theoretical framework

In the specialized literature regarding human rights, it has been observed that, in the conceptualization of the notion of proselytism, the focus was more on the delimitation of conventional proselytism from the improper one and on the tension between the respect of personal religious freedom and the violation of other people's rights rather than on defining the concept. On the other hand, from a security perspective, the concept is rarely approached in relation to other phenomena that can

generate risks for national security, for example, violent radicalization. However, from the perspective of national programmatic documents, we observe that “the intensification of global Islamist-jihadist propaganda feeds the risks of radicalization on the national territory, including among Romanian citizens” (National Defence Strategy 2020-2024, p. 27), considering the background “of unpredictable risks in extremist actions depending on regional crises” (National Defence Strategy 2020-2024, p. 28).

A first aspect of the research premise is highlighted: although there is no scale of the phenomenon for Romania, based on the regional impact, there is a need to prevent manifestations on the national territory because there were national cases where authorities enforced several measures to prevent a potential extension of the phenomenon. Dissemination of jihadist propaganda represents another specific element regarding the development of the radicalization process but is also constitutive of an improper type of proselytism through the attempt to attract new followers or indoctrination through radical materials. Therefore, from the perspective of national security implications, the connections between improper Islamic proselytism and concepts such as radicalization, extremism, and terrorism are analysed (Olsson, 2014).

In order to extract some elements that differentiate between the two types of proselytism, it is important to also emphasize references from the specific human rights literature in the context in which these elements can be applied from a security perspective in the comparative analysis for the typology of Islamic proselytism. The concept of proselytism is presented in the field of international human rights law (Stahnke, 1999) or European law (Arnaiz, Torrez Perez, Iglesias, and Toniatti, 2013), from the perspective of respecting the religious freedom of each person, as well as the limitations provided in jurisprudence. Many authors considered the thematic approach of proselytism to be a delicate one (Hirsh, 1998) or an uncertain notion, approached differently from one religion to another (Bickley, 2015, p. 27). However, some authors preferred to define proselytism as the active promotion of religious conversion regarding a certain religious philosophy or belief in accordance with the exercise of religious practices and rituals (Lynch and Schwarz, 2016, p. 636) or planned, programmed actions to attract new converts to a religion (Major, 2023).

In this sense, conventional proselytism is indirectly understood from the perspective of United Nations documents as part of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, implying the freedom to have or adopt a new religion, as well as the freedom to manifest one's religion individually or in common, in public and in private regarding the performance of rites and practices, as well as the freedom of any person to change his religion without being coerced (United Nations, 1966). From the perspective of the European Convention on Human Rights, the same indirect approach of conventional proselytism in the area of Article 9 regarding freedom of thought, conscience, and religion is observed, in the sense that any person has the right to change his religion and to manifest his religion individually or collectively, in public or in private, for the performance of rituals (European Convention on Human Rights, 1950).

Although conventional proselytism is not explicitly mentioned in any human rights document, the concept emerges indirectly as the positive freedom of a person to change his religion or to try to change the religious beliefs of others using peaceful means, non-coercive in the context in which it does not interfere with or threaten the freedom of belief of others (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948). However, this right is not absolute, a fact demonstrated by the limitations of the UN and ECHR documents, which provide for the restriction of this right in the conditions where it violates public order, undermines state legitimacy, or restricts the sphere of religious freedom and conscience of other people by violent means of conversion or propaganda (United Nations Organization, 1966). We believe that, through opposition, the provisions of reference documents at the European and international level inevitably lead to the identification of elements of improper proselytism. In contrast to conventional proselytism, improper proselytism has been defined as promoting a religious message in a manner that is considered insulting or offensive to another person's religious freedom with the goal of obtaining the conversion of a large number of people (Garnett, 2005) or, on the other hand, encouraging the person through inappropriate means or exerting pressure to change their religious beliefs (Council of Europe, 2012), using in some cases violent means (Parliamentary Assembly, 1999), respectively non-democratic means. If conventional religious

proselytism involves the use of peaceful means consistent with democratic principles in a society, at the opposite pole, improper proselytism uses violence or pressure as methods for the religious conversion of new members.

Returning to the security perspective, in order to understand the security risks generated by improper proselytism, it is important to define concepts such as extremism, radicalization, and terrorism. Extremism refers to the promotion of violent political or religious ideologies that oppose a society's core values and democratic principles and human rights, or may describe the justification of undemocratic methods for political or non-state actors to achieve their goals (Neumann, 2013). Correlating religious extremism with the definition of improper proselytism, we observe a whole-to-part relationship: the promotion of a radical ideological message or a radical version of religious beliefs through anti-democratic means in order to attract new followers, being an example of the applicability of the top-down theory in radicalization (Veldhuis & Staun, 2009). The reason why we refer to a whole-to-part relationship between religious extremism and improper proselytism is that religious extremism can manifest itself in the form of waves, societal trends at the regional and international level through which certain radical beliefs are promoted (Cragin, 2014), and the energy of massive groups of people is conserved, which may include the transmission of these beliefs through improper proselytism pursued by cyber means.

However, the scope of extremism may extend from the promotion of ideological justification for committing hate crimes, xenophobia, and racial cleansing and may include acts of terrorism (National Strategy for Preventing and Combating Anti-Semitism, Xenophobia, Radicalization, and Hate Speech, 2021-2023). Related to the definition of improper proselytism by promoting a religious message in an offensive way or by pressuring or encouraging followers to embrace beliefs by means unsuitable for the religious freedom of other people (Garnett, 2005), we note that the substitution of the moderate version with the radical version of a religious belief leads to the promotion of extremist messages. If in the case of extremism, the goals of promoting extremist beliefs are aimed at supporting or inciting acts of political violence in order to

obtain societal changes that legitimize racial, national, ethnic, or religious supremacy (Sinai, 2012), in the case of improper proselytism, the objective for promoting radical messages is summarized to attract new followers, a fact that does not exclude alignment at least on a cognitive level with the changes targeted by the promoted ideological message.

When we refer to the scope of extremism restricted to terrorist actions, the promotion of a violent ideological message aims to support terrorist actions and glorify terrorist violence by any means (Bötticher, 2017, pp. 73-77) with the aim of achieving changes in society, using a propaganda narrative to incite violence (Logan, Borum, & Gill, 2023). Thus, we arrive at the notion of jihadist propaganda promoted in virtual environments, most of the time including messages of jihadist ideology accompanied by videos of beheadings, arson, or machine gunning of unbelievers or apostates who do not share the radical version of Islam or photos of martyrs of suicide attacks (Husni et al., 2023) carried out to convey messages of fear to people with different religious views: moderate Muslims or people of other religions (Matusitz, 2022).

Further, the promotion of extremist messages in order to support terrorist acts leads us one step further in expanding the applicability of improper proselytism in the sphere of security risks. The promotion of jihadist propaganda aims to attract new followers for the glorification of terrorist actions or the exhortation to act in this sense (Laskowski, Laskowska, 2022), noting that the purpose of improper proselytism to attract extremists can be accompanied in this case by exhortations to commit terrorist actions or their glorification. Integrating the actions of promoting some radical religious messages directed towards various goals in a psycho-social process, we arrive at the definition of radicalization and the link between violent Islamic radicalization and the notion of improper proselytism.

The definition of violent Islamic radicalization that we propose is the following: an individual or group psycho-social process that includes three specific elements: the incorporation and transmission to others of beliefs motivated by hatred and contempt for the foreign occupation in the Middle East that seeks to undermine Islam (Drăgan, 2024), promoting a narrative of killing apostates and infidels for associating with the enemies of Islam through policies, actions, or lifestyle, and the

desire to revive Islamic civilization by establishing a global caliphate or areas of influence where Sharia Law will be imposed on everyone (Matusitz, 2022). In essence, radicalization represents the individual or group process of adherence to violent ideology (Sedgwick, 2010), which causes the cognitive and behavioural change of the set of values and beliefs into ones that justify violence (Crenshaw, 2000).

The relationship between violent radicalization and improper proselytism can be clearly seen in two points of interest with different roles: the initiation stage of the radicalization process and the advanced stage of radicalization (Schmid, 2013). Starting from the fact that radicalization involves a gradual process of incorporating violent ideology and behavioural and cognitive transformation, many authors have explained the unfolding of this psychological and social process whether by the four-stage model (Borum, 2013), by the stairway theory (Moghaddam, 2005), by the three-phases model (Sinai, 2012) or by the two-pyramids model until the transition to terrorism (McCauley and Moskalenko, 2011). Essentially, between the initiation of the radicalization process as the T0 point and the advanced stage of radicalization (Kundnani, 2012), which represents the last point until moving into action and carrying out terrorist attacks (Schmid, 2013), the phases of the radicalization process regardless of the proposed number of them in the specialized literature involve stages through which extremist beliefs intensify, being accompanied by behavioural and cognitive changes of the individual and accompanied by actions.

From this point, three probable scenarios regarding the evolution of the radicalization process branch out: the transition to the action plan and the perpetration of terrorist attacks; the stagnation of the process in the cognitive (Bartlett & Miller, 2012) or behavioural plan; or disengagement (Horgan, 2005). In the first scenario of the radicalization process (Kundnani, 2012), committing terrorist attacks involves carrying out specific actions by killing or injuring a large number of people through various methods inspired or coordinated by terrorist organizations (suicide attacks, arson attacks, machine guns, or through the techniques newer ones using white weapons), to which a violent ideology can be associated with the aim of transmitting a message of terror to society and achieving ideologically promoted changes (Schmid,

2013). It is thus highlighted that the relationship between the three proposed notions of extremism, violent radicalization, and terrorism follows on to point out the relationship between improper proselytism and the proposed concepts. Some of the specific actions in the process of radicalization that exceed radical religious practices involve disseminating jihadist propaganda to the general public to share radical beliefs, change collective perceptions, and attract other followers. The relationship between radicalization and improper proselytism is highlighted through the lens of two specific moments regarding the phases of the radicalization process.

A first moment is the triggering of the individual process of radicalization and the individual's engagement in the assimilation of violent ideology if this moment is determined by the intervention of a recruiting agent of a terrorist organization or as a result of group socialization with radicalized persons (Taylor and Horgan, 2001). A second moment is the advanced stage of radicalization, in which the radicalized person becomes the active subject and promotes violent ideological messages, disseminating them online or face-to-face to attract other people to share the same beliefs (Taylor, Horgan, 2001). In terms of the relationship between improper proselytizing and political violence, improper proselytizing actions may aim, in addition to disseminating jihadist propaganda and violent ideological messages, to attract members through undemocratic means to join the struggle and act in accordance with violent goals.

Notions branch out and become even more nuanced in the relationship between improper proselytism and terrorism in the context where this scenario could be valid in the case of terrorist organizations that share an ideology. Also, this scenario is possible considering radicalized people who are at the same time members of terrorist organizations (Hertog, 2019), because the existence of radicalization does not implicitly assume affiliation to a terrorist organization and not all terrorist objectives implicitly assume the result of a violent ideology (Horgan, 2008). A conclusive way to explain the two facets of Islamic proselytism consists in analysing it as an incident in two parallel processes: conventional Islamic proselytism as a manifestation that falls under the scope of religious freedom and conscience (Cheney, 2023) in

the course of the religious conversion process, and on the other hand, improper Islamic proselytism as a component and subsidiary manifestation in the process of Islamic radicalization.

In this regard, we selected two theories to theoretically ground the mirror analysis of Islamic proselytism: the theory of religious conversion (Fergusson and Binks, 2015) and radicalization as a sub-pattern of religious conversion. First, we specify that these theories were selected to exemplify the two facets of proselytism in two similar processes viewed from a religious perspective. Undoubtedly, the concept of radicalization has been explained theoretically from several perspectives: the sociological dimension such as social movement theory (Sageman, 2004), the theory of social and collective identity (Hogg, Terry, and White, 1955), a psychological perspective such as psychopathological theories (Borum, 2004), or the socio-economic dimension such as the theory of relative deprivation (Mansoor Murshed and Tadjoeeddin, 2009).

However, we appreciate that for the research objectives, the mirror analysis of Islamic proselytism through the lens of religious theories is relevant. Radicalization as a process was explained through the lens of theories related to religious conversion, but following the identification of cases of radicalization, and in the case of Muslims born with this religion, the approach was revised through the theory of radicalization as a sub-type of religious conversion to specifically explain that typology of cases in which people who were not born with the Islamic religion converted and later became radicalized. Also, as the two theories are related, they can explain in contrast the manifestation of both sides of proselytism: conventional proselytism as part of the process of religious conversion by promoting moderate beliefs and attracting new followers, and on the other hand, improper proselytism as part of the radicalization process, explained as a parallel process to the religious conversion process in which radical, extremist beliefs are assimilated as a substitute for moderate beliefs.

In the specialized literature, an attempt has been made to analyse the two processes – religious conversion and religious radicalization – from the perspective of similarities. The similarities between the two processes seemed obvious in the context where in the first instance the causes that triggered the processes of religious conversion or radicalization

were explained in the old paradigm as being a given, a change in traditions, customs, and confessions that happens irrationally to the individual, because then to be understood under the new paradigm, namely the processes through which the individual underwent a significant transformation, a rebirth through which he shaped his perceptions, beliefs, and habits as if he had been “born again” (Gallonier, 2022).

Moreover, the similarities did not stop there. People who chose to convert to Islam, even though they did not share this religion by birth or from a cultural point of view, believed that the reasons that triggered the conversion to Islam were closely related to the search for meaning and purpose, the response to an identity crisis that shook their understanding of life or they didn't feel connected or identify themselves with the culture/values they were born in (Chifu et al., 2012). Although these categories of factors have been proven in the literature to be subsequent causes of the initiation of the radicalization process, some of the people converted to Islam are vulnerable to Islamic radicalization (Ferguson, Binks, 2015); however, a dilemma still exists in explaining the two processes as being juxtaposed through the lens of the same theory: why only a part of the people converted to Islam end up radicalizing later (Gallonier, 2022)?

Moreover, the theory according to which conversion to Islam could be considered vulnerability to radicalization or predisposition to terrorism has been refuted in practice by some authors (Fodeman, Snook, Horgan, 2020), which is why a new model tried to explain the process of radicalization understood as a sub-pattern of religious conversion (van den Elzen, 2018). Religious conversion follows a process triggered by frustration, being characterized in a first phase by the attempt to solve an existential problem, a fact that leads to the spiritual or religious search. The next stage is a change in perspective by joining a new religious belief, often in the context of an identity crisis, with the convert then forming affective and social bonds with members of the new religious community (Long and Hadden, 1983) and leaving old connections. In the last stage of the conversion process, the converted person intensifies his religious beliefs and incorporates new rituals and practices at the behavioural level (Lofland and Stark, 1965).

On the other hand, religious radicalization is similar to religious conversion from the perspective of the existence of a gradual and staged psycho-social process at the individual level, but it differs in two aspects. First of all, the individual substitutes the new religious belief or spiritual philosophy with the incorporation of a radically violent ideology, so the main difference between the process of religious conversion and Islamic radicalization lies in the notions of faith and moderate religious philosophy versus extremist, radical ideology as the leitmotif of cognitive beliefs (van den Elzen, 2018). A second difference consists in the fact that in the process of religious conversion, adherence to a new religion operates both cognitively (Taylor, 1976) and behaviourally, and the key element is the practice of rituals, customs, and traditions specific to the new faith (Balch, 1980). Compared to religious conversion, violent radicalization may in some cases operate only at the cognitive level and in other cases may include both cognitive and behavioural manifestations (McCauley and Moskalenko, 2011).

Methodology

In the specialized literature, the authors have focused on methods such as the use of the interview method of foreign jihadists who went to Syria to join Daes (Perliger & Milton, 2016) or groups of foreign fighters who carried out terrorist attacks inspired by ISIS (Günther, 2020) to investigate the applicability of the theory of religious conversion as a transition to antecedent to the process of Islamic radicalization. Another methodological tool used in the specialized literature was constituted by case studies (Walter *et al*, 2017), through which the biographies of the jihadists indicted for committing terrorist attacks were investigated, and part of the documentation was constituted by the judicial documents consulted at the courts, considering the high level of accuracy and truthfulness of information regarding the conditions and motivations related to the commission of a terrorist attack.

Regarding the applicability of the conversion theory, the interview method and the development of case studies were used in the literature to capture the set of motivations (Hegghammer, 2013) that were the basis of the conversion. However, the theories related to religious conversion and those that explain the radicalization process have been

criticized in relation to the lack of solid empirical and ethnographic studies to identify the triggering causes. Moreover, it is essential to mention that studies explaining the theories of conversion were also restricted as an area of application, therefore studies in the US, Canada or Australia do not necessarily apply in terms of academic findings to the same conclusions as the studies researching the European region. In this sense, analysing the ways of previous research in the field is important to underline the motivation for choosing the systematic approach used in this article.

First of all, it can be observed that, compared to the previously discussed methods, the comparative analysis of court sentences of national and European courts (Klausen *et al*, 2020) offers the analysis a high level of accuracy and truthfulness of information compared to the collection of data from biographies or interviews that present a high degree of subjectivity. Moreover, those retained by the ECHR regarding the elements of religious proselytism constitute the official interpretation of a European judicial body with the competence to analyse the proportionality of the measures ordered by the states in ensuring the balance between the respect of human rights and the prevention of security risks. Also, by analysing the European cases, it is possible to analyse in detail the reasoning of the Court in assessing the balance ensured by the authorities of the competent states between the observance of religious freedom in the case of conventional proselytism and the disposition of measures regarding the risks generated by improper proselytism.

On the other hand, in the case of national-level studies on heterogeneous populations, it has been shown that not so much the citizens of the state are vulnerable to radicalization as the resident immigrants (Galam, 2016). These conclusions can also be considered valid in the case of Romania in the period 2011-2024 from the perspective of the existence of a number of 63 court decisions expelling radicalized Muslim immigrants compared to a number of six decisions condemning radicalized Romanian citizens (Drăgan, 2023). The reasons for the expulsion of radicalized immigrants from Romania by the courts consisted in the dissemination of jihadist propaganda by them in the online environment and the improper proselytizing activities carried

out, as well as the pursuit of objectives contrary to the national interests of Romania in the sense of planning a terrorist attack. Following this rationale, it can be appreciated that improper proselytizing activities consisting in the promotion of jihadist propaganda represent an indicator of the advanced stage of Islamic radicalization, identified by practitioners in cases of radicalization to thwart a terrorist attack (Spaaij, 2012, p. 86-88).

Another methodological technique used in this article is the collection of data following the analysis of ECtHR decisions regarding the interpretation of Article 9 on religious freedom from the European Convention on Human Rights, being a method used in specialized literature (Hucal, 2021) to identify cases of proselytism conventional and those characterized by improper proselytizing. The methodological design proposed in this article consists, on the one hand, in the analysis of court documents represented by the decisions of the European Court of Human Rights in order to extract the characteristics of conventional proselytism and those assimilated to improper proselytism. In this sense, following the research carried out in the Indaco database, all the decisions of the ECHR were selected that responded to the searches carried out by the phrase "religious proselytism" without distinguishing in relation to the nature of the proselytism.

Afterwards, the decisions of the ECHR were analysed qualitatively by dividing them according to the nature of proselytism in order to highlight the interpretation of the European body with competence in the matter of human rights and to clarify aspects of interest for research, respectively: what are the limits of the manifestation of freedom of religion and conscience and how can be characterized conventional proselytism respecting the legal limits? The method of analysis consisted in evaluating the reasoning of the Court in relation to the observance of Article 9 of the Convention by the member states in various cases in which proselytizing activities were incidental. As a consequence, the Court analysed the proportionality of the measures ordered by the member states in order to ensure national security equally with respect for the manifestation of freedom of conscience and religion of the citizens in situations where religious proselytism was incident in the analysed cases.

Using inductive reasoning, although the notion of proselytism was not expressly defined, the Court's decisions contained the classification of elements characteristic of conventional proselytism versus those specific to improper proselytism. Also, national court decisions were analysed in the reference period 2014-2024 that provided references regarding the cases of radicalization registered until now. In this sense, the national decisions on the expulsion of Muslim immigrants contained references and specifications regarding the incidence of improper Islamic proselytism, as an action manifested in the radicalization process.

The limitations of the qualitative analysis used in the text consisted in the restricted degree of generalizability of the analysis, in the sense that the sample used for data collection, namely 19 ECHR decisions and 63 national court decisions on the expulsion of Muslim immigrants, can be considered to a small extent representative for a wider population but may be useful for a smaller group. Another limiting aspect emerged from the fact that, of the 19 ECtHR judgments that responded to searches due to the use of keywords such as "proselytism," "conventional proselytism," and "improper proselytism" in the most extensive reference period offered by the Indaco database regarding the judgments issued by the European Court, only five judgments could emphasize through substantial details the court's reasoning, of which basis can be separated the elements of comparison between the two types of religious proselytism. In addition to that, it is important to mention that some proselytism cases were categorized differently by judges in order to secure a prosecution, so therefore some offenses weren't linked officially to terrorism offenses or radicalization.

Islamic proselytism in the mirror: improper proselytism versus conventional proselytism

By analysing the ECtHR jurisprudence, it was observed that, although the Court does not explicitly define what proselytism of any kind entails, nor does it distinguish between proselytism conventional versus improper, as long as an individual does not carry out propaganda that affects the religious freedom of other people (the case of *Ebrahimian and others v. France*) it cannot be considered improper proselytizing. Also, it is understood conventional proselytism as long as by promoting

religious ideas, it is distinguished critical thinking, lack of indoctrination, respect for other religions, and the category to which the message is addressed is not obliged to believe or prevented from believing (Case of Lautsi and others v. Italy, case of J Appel Irggang and others v. Germany).

Last but not least, religious proselytism that undermines the good morals of society (Case of Movement Raëlien Suisse against Switzerland) and aims to impose a single religion as superior to other religions through practices that oppose the democratic values of society by imposing Sharia (Case Zehra Foundation and Others v. Turkey) can be classified as improper proselytizing. As the mission and specific objectives of a proselytizing activity are evaluated in accordance with the respect and maintenance of the state of stability at the national level in order not to pose security risks, it appears that the actions of promoting extremist materials and jihadist propaganda in the virtual or social environment with the aim of attracting new members to join Jihad or glorifying acts of terrorism not only amount to improper proselytizing but undermine democratic values and domestic order and stability.

Regarding the notion of conventional proselytism, in the case of the process of religious conversion, this action has the role of attracting new followers by explaining the theoretical pillars that characterize the religion while respecting the dignity of other religions. On the other hand, in the case of the manifestation of improper proselytism, some of the ways that can be complementary to the triggering state of radicalization or can accompany the process towards intensification in the advanced stage involve the distribution of jihadist propaganda through videos, texts, or videos with a high content of violence from those several times online in order to attract new followers (Whittaker, 2022). In addition to their violent content, the attraction of new members to violent radicalization incites the de-legitimization of state authority through the hate narrative directed against the West and democratic values (Schmid, 2016).

Another characteristic found in cases of radicalization involves the dissemination of Jihadist propaganda addressed to a vast category of people with the aim of recruiting or joining Jihad as a holy mission to wage war against the West and against apostasy (the elimination of any other religions or beliefs which are not considered valid outside of Islam,

including according to the extremist narrative of moderate versions of Islam, structured in Islamic schools of thought) (Matusitz, 2022). Also, exhortations to carry out Islamic Jihad through suicide or the apology of martyrs who have committed terrorist attacks constitute another common element found in jihadist propaganda used in the online environment to attract new members to terrorist organizations (Ware, 2023) or as a conductor in the advancement states of Islamic radicalization.

Conclusions

The results of this research contribute to covering a void in the knowledge stage regarding the theories that explain the development of the radicalization process or theories related to religious conversion. A process of religious conversion of an individual may or may not be accompanied by conventional religious proselytism, based on the fact that choosing a new religion can be a personal choice that does not implicitly depend on intense socialization or the need for proselytizing activity to operate. However, although it is not an absolute right according to the Constitution, the limits of the freedom of expression of religious beliefs, including the attempt to influence or orient a person to a new faith, are legally acceptable and do not involve risks related to national security in the context where respect for other religions, personal choices are preserved, critical thinking is encouraged, and respect for democratic values is encouraged.

On the other hand, in the case of improper proselytism, although it can manifest itself independently of the existence of a radicalization process, some of the fundamental characteristics consist in the neglect of democratic values, the promotion of the supremacy of one religion at the expense of or by offending others, and the use of methods of pressure or coercion in attracting new followers. Moreover, the risks generated by improper proselytism are not only related to the endangerment of democratic values, but also to characteristic actions in the advancement of the process of Islamic radicalization.

The common elements of the manifestation of improper proselytism in the Islamic radicalization process consist in the dissemination of jihadist propaganda in the online or social environment,

the glorification of martyrdom and jihadist heroes who have committed terrorist attacks, the promotion of Jihad as an obligation to wage war against the West, and an extremist ideology. Thus, if conventional proselytism is characterized by attempts to attract followers involving the promotion of the moderate faith of Islam through peaceful means, in the case of improper proselytism that accompanies the process of radicalization as a complementary action, the promotion of extremist ideologies and the goals of inciting violence or the glorification of terrorist actions. This would be an additional argument why radicalization as a process, including improper proselytism actions, can be explained as a sub-pattern of religious conversion by adopting a violent ideology as a pillar, while conventional proselytizing actions can trigger the conversion process in the case of moderate religious approaches.

The elements provided by this article may constitute warning signals of interest for crises with global impact that are generated by religious conflicts, in which the balance between respecting the religious freedom of other people is strongly shaken and can swing towards radicalization and polarization. In addition to these aspects, this article can contribute to the transposition of some interpretations related to proselytism from a security perspective, equally proposing a paradigm for the applicability of religious theories that explain the radicalization process. The analysis focused on highlighting this balance of proportionality between respecting religious freedom and ensuring national security with regard to the concepts of proselytism and radicalization. Regionally and internationally, these elements can be traced to a wave of extremism generated by the Gaza conflict, involving polarization, radicalization, improper proselytizing, and propaganda with global impact.

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Bucharest Court of Appeal: Decision no. 133/2010, Decision no. 5971/2011, Decision no. 546/2011, Decision no. 1826/2012, Decision no. 3310/2012, Decision no. 4520/2012, Decision no. 4648/2012, Decision no. 6055/2012, Decision no. 6386/2012, Decision no. 6906/2012, Decision no. 7228/2012, Decision no. 542/2013, Decision no. 2339/2013, Decision no. 3450/2013, Decision no. 927/2014, Decision no. 904/2015, Decision no. 1654/2015, Decision no. 933/2015, Decision no. 3491/2015, Decision no. 2474/2016, Decision no. 2048/2016, Decision no. 2966/2017, Decision no. 672/2017, Decision no. 3015/2017, Decision no. 124/2012, Decision no. 2903/2018, Decision no. 1812/2018, Decision no. 1112/2021, Decision no. 928/2021, Decision no. 177/2020, Decision no. 113/2019, Decision no. 386/2019, Decision no. 91/2019, Decision no. 57/2019, Decision no. 2903/2018, Decision no. 1668/2018, Decision no. 4911/2017.