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To cite this article: Benjamin J. Lee (2017) 'It's not paranoia when they are really out to get you': the role of conspiracy theories in the context of heightened security, Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression, 9:1, 4-20, DOI: [10.1080/19434472.2016.1236143](https://doi.org/10.1080/19434472.2016.1236143)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19434472.2016.1236143>



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Published online: 30 Sep 2016.



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'It's not paranoia when they are really out to get you': the role of conspiracy theories in the context of heightened security

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ABSTRACT

Conspiracy theories have been seen as important supporting components in extreme political beliefs. This paper considers conspiracy theories in the counter jihad movement, an international network combining cultural nationalism with xenophobia towards Muslims. This paper evaluates the nature of conspiracy belief through the analysis of several key texts published by counter jihad activists, and of content published on a daily basis by three core websites. The findings show the Islamisation conspiracy theory to be highly modular, with authors able to mix and match villains. The analysis of daily published content demonstrates that, at the routine level, conspiracy theory is rarely used openly as a call to action. This is in keeping with other examples of conspiracy theory in extreme right wing movements in which conspiracy is seen as justification for existing prejudices. However, the political and security context the counter jihad operates in also affords the movement opportunities to support some of their claims, often by reproducing or reinterpreting mainstream or quasi-mainstream reporting, without reverting openly to conspiracy tropes. In the case of the counter jihad movement, as well as potentially other far-right movements, conspiracy theory may be taking a back seat to a more sophisticated public relations approach.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 8 September 2016
Accepted 9 September 2016

KEYWORDS

Conspiracy; web; counter jihad; far right; narratives

Introduction

Conspiracy theories help their adherents make sense of a chaotic world. This paper focuses on an emerging extreme right movement – the counter jihad. The overall aim of the paper is to make a closer examination of the conspiratorial aspects of the counter jihad movement, with a particular focus on the use of conspiracy in routine communications. The Islamisation conspiracy theory claims that we are living through an Islamic takeover of the West and several academic accounts have presented conspiracy theory as a key component of the counter jihad movement (Bangstad, 2013; Fekete, 2011; Meleagrou-Hitchens & Brun, 2013). Despite this, analysis of the counter jihad movement's online presence suggests that the movement frequently relies on reinterpreting mainstream media to make its points (Lee, 2015). Likewise, accounts of counter jihad linked street movements such as

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the EDL make little mention of the Islamisation conspiracy theories beyond references to 'esoteric counter-jihad literature' (Busher, 2016, p. 174). Other accounts have highlighted the dynamic between the counter jihad movement and the concept of cumulative extremism, suggesting that the counter jihad and Islamist extremists reinforce one another's narratives (Feldman, 2012). With the presence of such visible and publicity-hungry antagonists in the form of Daesh et al., is conspiracy still important to extreme narratives?

With the overall aim of furthering knowledge about the counter jihad movement, and in particular the appeal of its world view, this paper seeks to (1) develop a better understanding of the form of conspiracy theory present in the counter jihad movement, and (2) establish the extent to which conspiracy explanations are present in the day-to-day communication activities of the counter jihad movement. A fuller understanding of counter jihad movement narratives is important for both understanding the movement, and for those interested in developing counter and alternative narratives. These research questions are answered through an analysis of prominent analytical texts in the counter jihad milieu including books written by Robert Spencer, Pamela Geller and the Norwegian blogger Fjordman. In addition, a content analysis was performed on a sample set of routine texts produced by three prominent counter jihad websites.

This paper suggests that the Islamisation theory is modular. While the writers included in the analysis broadly agreed that Islamisation was a threat and that the counter jihad movement was being suppressed, they often differed on why these events were taking place. The classic 'Eurabia' theory which describes a political elite as being surrendered to 'Islam' was also accompanied by theories that saw Muslim agents aggressively infiltrating the West, and Western leaders as intent on destroying Western civilisation as a result of their own hatred of nations. In addition, the analysis of material posted by the counter jihad movement on a routine basis makes minimal reference to such grand systematic conspiracies; where conspiracies are referenced these are usually presented as one-off misdeeds by known actors. While conspiracy theory remains an important part of the counter jihad movement, it is perhaps of less significance than previously thought, at least at a routine level. In light of the security and media context, including both the actions of Islamist extremists and political elites, conspiracy theory seems to take a backseat to the outrage that can be generated through overt actions.

What is a conspiracy theory?

At its root, a conspiracy theory is an explanation of how the world works. A precise definition of a conspiracy theory, however, is difficult as the term has come to be used as a pejorative by people seeking to discredit arguments they either disagree with or find inconvenient (Marmura, 2014, p. 2378). Writing in 2003 Michael Barkun argued that conspiracy theories were defined as follows:

a conspiracy belief is the belief that an organization made up of individuals or groups was or is acting covertly to achieve some malevolent end. (Barkun, 2003, p. 3)

Keys to this definition are two things, a malevolent actor either composed of individuals or groups, and covert action. Barkun emphasises that covert action can be carried out by both known and unknown actors (2003, p. 5).

Primarily, the attraction of conspiracy theory is as a tool to explain events. In the case of extreme right groups based on ethno-nationalism conspiracy theories, most infamously anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, can be used to explain why groups fail to find widespread support (Billig, 1978, p. 153). In the context of new religious movements, and millenarianism in particular, conspiracy theories have proved particularly adept at explaining both a lack of widespread recognition for groups, and the consistent failure of the world to come to an end (Barkun, 2003, p. 3; see also Hoffstadter, 1964, p. 84). Barkun goes on to suggest they are at the same time bleak in their predictions, and reassuring in that every event can be traced to an identifiable cause, stamping a reassuring cause and effect dynamic on an otherwise chaotic world (Barkun, 2003; see also Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009, p. 208). Robertson (2016, p. 208) is in similar territory in his understanding of the role of conspiracy in new religious movements, suggesting that conspiracy theories act as a 'theodicy of the dispossessed', allowing adherents to blame their own misfortunes on groups of malign outsiders rather than themselves or events. Importantly, along with their power to provide a reassuring level of causality, to believe in a conspiracy theory is to mark yourself out as different, as someone with access to special knowledge. Hoffstadter (1964, p. 84) saw belief in conspiracy theory as being simultaneously a belief in your own superiority and your own identity as a 'militant leader', fighting for the truth. Conspiracy theories have also been suggested as being confirmatory, acting as justifications for beliefs already held. In a quantitative analysis of 'birther' beliefs in the US, Pasek, Stark, Krosnick, and Tompson (2014) found a significant link between political and racial views and the belief that President Obama was born outside of the US and so was ineligible to be President.¹ Pasek et al. (2014) explained this as motivated reasoning: those with a pre-established dislike for the President, based both on politics and race, were more inclined to believe that he was not born in the US.

Unsurprisingly, given their explanatory power, the self-esteem they grant, and their value in justifying established prejudices, conspiracy beliefs are often presented as growing, usually with a strong focus on the US (Warner & Neville-Shepard, 2014, p. 3). Often this is linked to broader concerns, for example, the media falling short of the aspirations of a democratic public sphere (Marmura, 2014, p. 2390). Conspiracy theory has also been linked to developments in communications technology itself. Hofstadter, writing in 1965 argued that there was a strong connection between the emergence of mass media and the 'paranoid style'. The paranoid style he described was able to focus its animosity on specific figures that were more real and easily-identifiable than previous outbreaks of the paranoid style in the US, for example, late eighteenth century opposition to free-masonry in the US. The internet-age has also brought with it a proliferation of news outlets, many of them with staunch partisan positions. Selective exposure to news media, combined with a desire to compete in small groups to demonstrate ideological purity (Sunstein, 2007) has been interpreted as driving political extremism and conspiratorial attitudes (Warner & Neville-Shepard, 2014, p. 5). Despite this, the role of the internet is also somewhat paradoxical. The internet allows for quick and easy fact checking, theoretically making it easy to debunk conspiracy theories (Warner & Neville-Shepard, 2014, p. 1). Websites like Snopes.com, Polifact.com and in the UK fullfact.org, in theory aim to verify and present unvarnished facts.

In summary, conspiracy theories are composed of groups, either overt or covert, acting covertly to influence events for ill. Despite their outlandishness, conspiracy theories seem

to fulfil an important role for many people. Principally, they serve to layer reassuringly simplistic and unambiguous explanatory frameworks on a world that is seen as hostile and chaotic. However, they also allow believers to mark themselves out as in some way special and more knowledgeable than their unenlightened peers as well as justifying more embedded prejudices and beliefs including innate mistrust of authority. Although accurate empirical evidence is difficult to obtain, many see conspiracy theories as growing more prevalent. This is linked to both the growth of the internet as a nexus for believers to mature and disseminate theories, but it also reflects wider concerns over the pace of political and social change and the desire to find if not control at least an explanation for alarming and chaotic events. What follows attempts to evaluate the role of conspiracy theories – specifically a range of views around the ‘Islamisation’ of Western societies – within the counter jihad movement.

The counter jihad movement and the Islamisation conspiracy

The counter jihad movement is a loose association of authors, bloggers, think tanks, street movements and campaign organisations united in a common belief that the West and Islam are in a state of war. The movement is highly critical of current political leadership in Western societies, viewing Western leaders as either incompetent, or actively complicit with the Islamification of Western societies. Western values, in particular free speech, are seen as under attack by aggressive Muslims intent on imposing Islam and Sharia on Western societies, and leftist politicians who are either complicit in, or too weak, to stop this process. Given the loose nature of the counter jihad movement, defining membership is often difficult. Some activists readily identify themselves as members of the counter jihad while others are more reticent.

Academic interest in the counter jihad movement has tended to focus on specific aspects of the movement. The earliest work concentrated on the ideological basis of the movement and the emergence of counter jihad narratives and literature including *Eurabia: The Euro-Arab Axis*, a central text in counter jihad conspiracy theory (Bangstad, 2013; Carr, 2006; Zúquete, 2008). The actions of a lone actor terrorist in Norway in 2011 also led to a considerable amount of academic attention being paid to the counter jihad movement as a result of the extensive amount of material featured in the compendium put out to justify the attacks (Fekete, 2011; Gardell, 2014; Jackson, 2013; Titley, 2013). Finally, the street movement aspects of the counter jihad movement, in particular the English Defence League, have also received a great deal of academic attention (Allen, 2011; Busher, 2016; Goodwin, 2013; Meleagrou-Hitchens & Brun, 2013; Treadwell & Garland, 2011).

A consistent thread in the academic accounts of the counter jihad movement is the Islamisation conspiracy theory. Fekete summarises the Islamisation conspiracy as being a coordinated effort between Islam and European political leaders to establish Islamic supremacy in Europe.

a secret project existed between European politicians and the Arab world for the ‘Islamisation of Europe’, the purpose of which was to destroy America and Israel, with Europe a doomed continent on the brink of cultural extinction in the face of a relentless and co-ordinated campaign of domination by Muslims to transform it into an Islamic colony called Eurabia. (Fekete, 2011, p. 43)

Gardell (2014, p. 135), writing about Breivik's use of counter jihad material, argues that the role of the Islamisation conspiracy theory is to allow a connection to be drawn between the behaviour of Muslim groups in the Middle East and Muslim populations within Western countries. By suggesting all Muslims, or frequently even Islam, is actively plotting to overthrow Western democracies, counter jihad activists can more easily link the threat from Muslims in the Middle East with the threat from Muslims domestically.

The many faces of Islamisation

Despite an apparent consensus on Islamisation as the template for conspiracy theorising in the counter jihad network, there are countless variations, each with its own subtle configuration of blame. With so few barriers to entry, including virtually no publishing constraints when publishing online, any interested party can write and publish their own Islamisation-inspired theory. One, widely referenced central text in counter jihad networks is Bat Ye'or's *Eurabia: the Euro-Arab Axis*. Published in 2005, this text has received high praise from prominent activists in the counter jihad network including Robert Spencer, Fjordman and Pamela Geller. Ye'or's work was once described as the 'Protocols of the elders of Brussels' in Israeli daily newspaper Haaretz, a direct reference to the anti-Semitic fake the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. (Schwartz, 2006). Similar comparisons have been drawn by academics also (Jackson, 2013). For Bangstad, Eurabia is the 'the standard work of the Eurabia genre' but it inhabits exists in a wider genre of literature including authors such as Oriana Fallaci, Melanie Phillips, Robert Spencer, Mark Steyn and Bruce Bawer (2013, p. 371) as well as within a broader online landscape.

There are several common threads tying together Islamisation theories. The two of most relevance here deal with nature of Islamisation and the status of the counter jihad movement as outsiders. At the core of Islamisation theories is the belief that Europe and/or the US is changing or has changed to be under the influence of Islam. Islam itself is viewed as a totalitarian, hostile and homogenised political force.

But, Islam is much more than just a religion. It is a political, social, legal and structural blueprint which totally dominates a devout Muslim's life, and wishes coincidentally to dominate all devout non-Muslims' lives as well. (Weston, 2010, unpaginated)

Several counter jihad writers have attempted to be more nuanced in their accounts. Ye'or acknowledged the differences between Muslims:

Clearly, a large percentage of Muslims do not share this Islamist view; many have totally rejected these traditional interpretations, and many also ignore them. (Ye'or, 2005, p. 30)

However, academic accounts have noted the tendency of counter jihad writers to make statements of this type, but often in a superficial way. Any distinctions that can be drawn are often discarded, in particular where debates are uncontrolled and less carefully constructed (Meleagrou-Hitchens & Brun, 2013, p. 54). For example, Ye'or maintains that despite the variation their fear of Muslims remains justified, pointing out that it would be 'criminal and suicidal' to deny such a major trend (Ye'or, 2005, p. 30).

In light of this view of Islam, Muslim immigration is seen as changing the cultural make up of Europe/US as Muslims push for the imposition of Sharia law, understood as a

draconian legal code that privileges Muslims. Immigration from predominantly Muslim countries is interpreted as adding fuel to the fire and intensifying demands that Western societies bow to accommodate Muslims.

... an invasive, colonising force that has taken a relentless death grip on the present conduct and eventual shape of our singular existence. (Seneca III, 2010, unpaginated)

Islamisation as a process is thought to be supported through various cultural initiatives designed to allow the supremacy of Muslims and Sharia. The Obama Presidency chose to organise two religious events by the Whitehouse in 2009. In April 2009, a Jewish Pass-over seder was characterised by Geller and Spencer (2010, p. 208) as a 'muted affair' while a celebration of Ramadan in September the same year was a 'lavish affair'. These small details are seen as windows on some deeper truth, that the US is seeking to appease Muslims, often at the expense of other groups.

A second common theme in accounts of Eurabia is the suppression of opposition to the process of Islamisation. Paul Weston describes the media as biased against the counter jihad cause and presents the 'media' and the 'government' as more concerned with suppressing negative coverage of Islam than relaying the truth to the people:

... Quisling media and a government dedicated not to exposing Islamic outrages but instead to shutting down the man [*Tommy Robinson*] who exposed the Koranic ideology behind the hateful behaviour of some British Muslims. (Weston, 2016, unpaginated)

The counter jihad movement often presents itself as under siege, beset on all sides by the forces of, multiculturalism, liberalism and cultural Marxism. Academics are similarly viewed as hopelessly compromised ideologically and actively engaging in the suppression of truth:

By the 21st Century, these cultural Marxist traitor-moles [academics] had subverted nearly all of academia, inculcating generation after generation of students with a contempt bordering on hatred for their own national and ethnic identities. (Bracken, 2015, unpaginated)

Adherents of Islamisation theories, along with adherents of other conspiracies, share a common sense of possessing some special truth. About the police presence at the February 2016 Pegida UK launch, Seneca III writes:

And thus I came that day to wonder 'Do these uninformed, hyperventilated, self-serving State drones actually think that come the day they are going to survive the wrath of the native common man?' (2016, unpaginated)

Not only do such sentiments convey select knowledge, but they also invoke a future time at which those possessing such knowledge, and stigmatised by it, will be proved right. This sentiment also suggests that the counter jihad movement may have a hand in bringing revenge about. As Pegida UK leader Paul Weston wrote:

We might not hold power today, but given another decade, we will, and then we will hold you [political leaders] to account. You will appear before a Nuremburg-style court, and you will be tried for treason, and you will be tried for crimes against humanity, and for the first time in a very long time you will be answerable to us! (2010, unpaginated)

Who are ‘they’ and why do ‘they’ do it?

Although counter jihad activists generally agree on what is happening, and that they face challenges in disseminating their message, they often differ in the subtleties of their explanations. In Ye’or’s original *Eurabia* text, the ‘Eurabian project’ is presented as Faustian pact in which European political elites, in an attempt to shore up their own global power, were seen as consciously orientating Europe towards the Middle East (2005, p. 147). According to Fjordman, this bargain, apparently originally struck for geopolitical purposes, is seen as going badly wrong, with the Arabs turning the tables and gaining the upper hand over hapless Europeans.

The irony is that France is now held hostage by the very forces she herself set in motion. The Jihad riots by Muslim immigrants in 2005 demonstrated that *Eurabia* is no longer a matter of French foreign policy, it is now French domestic policy. France will burn unless she continues to appease Arabs and agree to their agenda. (Fjordman, 2008, unpaginated)

As with Ye’or, a key actor in Fjordman’s account is the Euro-Arab Dialogue (EAD), which is seen as:

... political, economic and cultural institution designed to ensure perfect cohesion between Europeans and Arabs. (Fjordman, 2008, unpaginated)

For the most part, in this version of the theory, European political elites are at the mercy of an aggressive Islam. The conspiracy is composed of aggressive expansionist Muslims and surrendered elites keen to appease Muslim overlords. Central to this narrative is Ye’or’s concept of a dhimmi state (dhimmitude), one that has surrendered and is under the protection of Islam (2005, p. 9). The dhimmi status of Europe, according to Ye’or, is evidenced by the EU’s willingness to hand over a mixture of loans and ransoms to Arab countries (2005, p. 201).

However, a collaborative conspiracy between Western leaders and Islam is only one potential explanation for Islamisation. Other accounts, often focused more on the US, such as Geller’s book (written with Robert Spencer) the *Post-American President* which sees US political leadership to blame for a US apparently increasingly tolerant of Muslim aggression. Geller’s account maintains that the years of Obama’s childhood spent in Indonesia under the influence of a Communist mother left him actively opposed to American interests (Geller & Spencer, 2010, pp. 37–38). Other accounts prefer to focus more heavily on perceived Muslim aggression, speculating that secret Muslim cabals are infiltrating governments to push the Islamisation agenda. Robert Spencer’s *Stealth Jihad*, for example, suggests that the US is being infiltrated by the Muslim Brotherhood. Interestingly, Spencer also discounts terrorist attacks as inconveniences to those engaged in the real attack on the US and Western culture (Spencer, 2008, p. 13)

None of these explanations are mutually exclusive. For example, in *Defeating Eurabia*, Fjordman both advances both Ye’or’s argument that the European Union is at the mercy of a hostile Islam, while at the same time arguing are more conventional anti-EU line of an aggressive and expansionist EU bureaucracy.

The European Union is basically an attempt by the elites in European nations to cooperate on usurping power, bypassing and abolishing the democratic system, a slow-motion coup d’état. Ideas such as ‘promoting peace’ or ‘promoting free trade’ are used as a pretext for this, a bone

thrown to fool the gullible masses and veil what is essentially a naked power grab. (Fjordman, 2008, p. 50)

Similarly, Robert Spencer, the author of *Stealth Jihad* is partially credited on Pamela Geller's book – *The Post-American President*. This suggests that there is little conflict between the two accounts, and that the US is simultaneously beset by a Muslim-sympathising President and subject to secret infiltration by Muslims. Partially, this level of fragmentation is likely resultant from the publishing model. Even in longer texts, it is evident that material is written as disconnected essays designed for the web. In some cases, authors create a grand union of demons to blame:

The same cabal of progressive politicians, self-dealing bureaucrats in giant Leviathan structures, postmodern-Marxist academics, labor socialists, financial criminals, mega-crooks, emotive airhead celebrities, feminists, self-haters, and their large, immigrant clientele has transformed America just as it has Europe. Should Eurabia become 'ungovernable,' the U.S. Multiculti Marines will be landing in Normandy to help not the wrecked, conquered people but to protect their 'governors' and their pet Muslim minority from the horrific consequences of the former's madness and the latter's barbarism. (Seiyo, 2015, unpaginated)

In summary, there is no one version of the Islamisation conspiracy theory. Even Eurabia, which is considered to some extent the template, has become only a source of inspiration for the current crop of writers on sites such as Gates of Vienna. This kind of fragmentation is inevitable given the organisation of the counter jihad movement, without a central authority and without centrally controlled publication or distribution, a single doctrine is unlikely to emerge. The Islamisation theory seen as a core element of the counter jihad movement should not be thought of a single coherent theory, more a collection of conspiracy beliefs for adherents to draw on and assemble in their own fashion.

Do not mention the conspiracy

A further question is how central conspiracy theories are to the counter jihad movement as a whole. While some academic accounts have highlighted the role of conspiracy theory other analyses have suggested a more limited role in day-to-day communication. Lee (2015) analysed the hyperlink network and resulting texts within the online counter jihad 'nebula' and found no explicit mention of the Eurabia theory in the sample. Likewise, many accounts of street movements linked to the counter jihad movement frequently do not reference conspiracy theory (Allen, 2011; Copsy, 2010; Garland & Treadwell, 2010, 2012; Treadwell, 2013) or mention the theory only in passing (Busher, 2016; Goodwin, 2013, p. 11).

To better understand the role of the Islamisation theory within the counter jihad movement, the author undertook a content analysis based on 10 days of content produced by three prominent counter jihad sites: Bare Naked Islam, Gates of Vienna and Front Page Mag. Sites were chosen to reflect some of the diversity of the counter jihad movement and represent a mix of styles and positions in the movement. Bare Naked Islam is a provocative site that makes extensive use of short posts, frequently with embedded videos. Gates of Vienna is more analytical and is a major repository for several counter jihad writers including Fjordman and some prolific contributors from the UK such as Paul Weston (the current Leader of Pegida UK). Front Page Mag presents itself as the online journal of the David Horowitz Freedom Institute, a counter jihad aligned think tank. The

site features contributions from figures such as Robert Spencer. This sample is far from comprehensive and while the author has attempted to capture a diverse range of opinion and approaches, he fully recognises that the counter jihad movement is much broader than these three sites and the choice of other sites may produce different results.

In order to minimise the impact of specific events on the coverage provided by blogs, days were chosen at random from within five quarter year periods covering the entirety of 2015 and the first quarter of 2016 (Table 1). Two days were chosen at random within each quarter and used as the basis for data collection. Posts made on that day were saved in .pdf format. Any video content in posts was downloaded where possible. In several cases content had been removed before it could be archived. Content linked to in posts was not considered in this analysis. This is a result of the common practice of link aggregation posts in the counter jihad sites such as Gates of Vienna regularly make posts based on links sent in by readers which can be extensive. Where posts reproduce the totality of content hosted elsewhere, for example, the complete text or an extract of a news story published within a post, or where a video hosted on an external site is embedded within a post, these are included in the data-set.

Posts were coded on three variables: the principal actor, the target of any action (actual or insinuated) and whether actions were overt or covert. This schema was designed to align with Barkun's framework of conspiracy theories which distinguishes between known and unknown actors as well as overt and covert action (2003, p. 5). Where multiple explanations existed within one post a decision was made as to which configuration was dominant in the post. Each post is only represented once in the results. In total the data-set included 220 individual posts, an average of 22 posts per day, although this was heavily skewed between sites. Front Page Mag was the most prolific site, posting 97 stories in total, Bare Naked Islam posted 80 and Gates of Vienna 43.

The question driving this analysis is the frequency of posts that reference conspiracy theory explanations for events. In total, 23% of the total output of the sample sites during the sample periods reference some form of covert action. References to covert action were not uniform and the sites differed markedly in their output. Gates of Vienna was the most conspiratorial in output, with 33% of posts referencing covert action. Bare Naked Islam referred to conspiracy theories least frequently, in 15% of posts. A further dimension for analysing conspiracy proposed by Barkun is the nature of the actor which can be either secret or not secret. Public groups performing public actions were not seen as a form of conspiracy (Barkun, 2003, p. 5). However, the actors identified in this data-set are overwhelmingly publicly known (Table 2). There was no reference to any form of organised secret group in the data-set. In the majority of cases actions coded as covert were allegations of deceptive practices on behalf of known actors, technical conspiracies perhaps, but very far removed from the dark machinations suggested in

Table 1. Sample dates.

ID	Period	Date 1	Date 2
1	Jan–March 2016	Feb 16	March 19
2	Oct–Dec 2015	Nov 28	Dec 31
3	July–Sep 2015	Aug 12	Aug 21
4	April–June 2015	April 11	May 5
5	Jan–March 2015	Feb 5	March 30

Table 2. Overt and covert actions in counter jihad web posts (*n* = 220).

	Overt	Covert	Unclassified	Total
FPM	70	26	1	97
BNI	67	12	1	80
GoV	23	14	6	43
Total	160	52	8	220

Eurabia (Figure 1). Illustrative examples include: coverage of the thwarted attack on a French train – an obvious conspiracy, but reported as an individual terrorist act, not as part of a greater whole; media bias against Republican candidates; and allegations that threatened violence against a group of Muslims in Kentucky was likely a hoax by the group itself.

Some stories did suggest a larger conspiracy at work. One example included an allegation in Front Page Mag that the US media were covering up a father's knowledge of

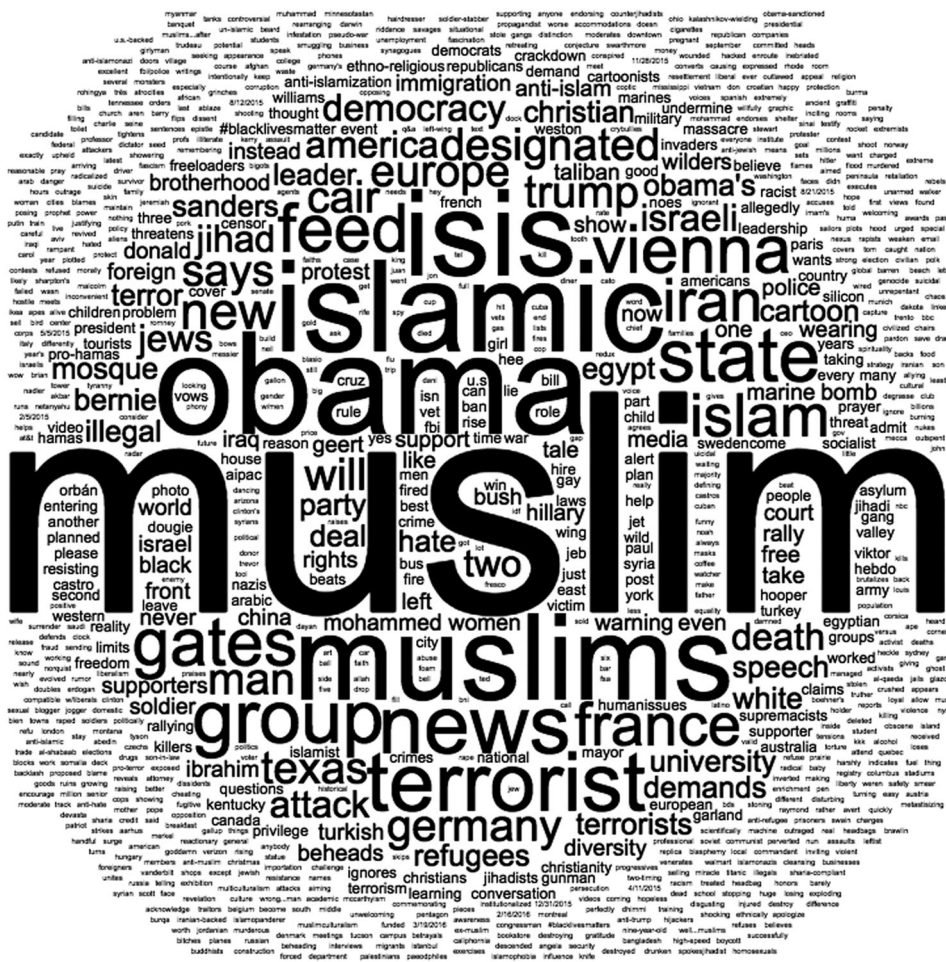


Figure 1. Word cloud summarising headlines from the data-set. The size of words reflects the frequency of use. Image produced using www.wordclouds.com.

his son's involvement with ISIS.² However, while the article is explicit in suggesting a cover up by the US media, it does not offer an explanation as to why the media would cover this information up. Instead, the audience is left to draw its own conclusions as to why the media cannot be trusted. Another story from Front Page Mag suggests that the US State Department is deliberately refusing to acknowledge the genocide of Christians in the Middle East as a result of Islamist infiltration (echoes of Stealth Jihad) and the Obama presidency's determination to promote Islam as a peaceful religion.³ In a similar vein, one post on the site Gates of Vienna suggests a concerted effort to suppress negative opinions of Islam, making specific allegations against several European politicians while at the same time the context of the article is general enough to suggest these actions form part of a wider conspiracy.⁴ The kinds of grand conspiracy theory identified in academic literature and proposed by some of the more specialist content in the counter jihad network was not present in the data-set. In all the headlines, analysed terms like 'Eurabia' or 'the Project' were wholly absent. Even associated terms such as 'Dhimmi' featured only once, a reference to the 'Dhimi Pope' on the site Bare Naked Islam.⁵

There are three reasons that might explain a lesser role for grand conspiracy theory in the counter jihad movement's daily output. First, the counter jihad can be seen as a part of a broader reconfiguration of the far right which has sought to foster political legitimacy by reducing both overt racism and reliance on conspiracy theories, replacing the latter with anti-system sentiment (Copsey, 2013, p. 296; Feldman, 2012, p. 5). Prominent examples of this transition have been the now largely defunct British National Party (Copsey, 2013) and the far more successful Front National in France (Startin, 2014). The counter jihad movement is not a political party (although it does have ties to several populist political parties) and its overall aims are relatively opaque and to some degree uncoordinated. As a campaigning organisation more generally, however, the counter jihad movement has sought to present itself as legitimate and with strong democratic credentials. Too great a role for conspiracy theories would likely undermine these claims.

Second, media and governmental narratives can be seen as working in support of the claims being made by the counter jihad movement. Several scholars have commented on the securitisation of public discourse, in particular around the role of Islam in civil society and the status of Muslim populations (Brown & Saeed, 2014; Fekete, 2004, p. 5). Put simply, security and Islam have been prominent topics in public discourse in the wake of 9/11.

Third, and relatedly, the focus on issues of religion, terrorism and security has only been exacerbated by the continuing propaganda campaign being waged by Daesh and other Islamist extremists (Pelletier, Lundmark, Gardner, Ligon, & Kilinc, 2016; Winter, 2015). This includes a highly sophisticated and targeted propaganda narrative as well as individual acts of terrorism which hold their own propaganda value (Schmid & de Graaf, 1982). It is difficult to analyse the counter jihad movement without eventually arriving at the concept of cumulative extremism. Superficially, this relationship between the counter jihad movement and Islamist extremism looks like a close fit for the concept. Eatwell (2006, p. 205) described cumulative extremism as 'the way in which one form of extremism can feed off and magnify other forms'. In the case of the counter jihad, cumulative extremism has been seen as embedded in its DNA to some extent, for example, The English Defence League, a counter jihad influenced street group, was founded as a response to the activities of the now banned UK group Al-Muhajiroun (Goodwin, 2013). Certainly, cumulative extremism has gained significant academic and policy traction, however

subsequent attempts to apply the concept have raised issues (Bartlett & Birdwell, 2013; Macklin & Busher, 2015), and led to calls for greater specificity in discussions of cumulative extremism (Busher & Macklin, 2015). Busher and Macklin (2015, p. 888) specifically highlighted the need to distinguish between action and rhetoric.

In this instance, however, caution must be exercised in using the term cumulative. The sites analysed here are geographically far removed from any potential provocation. Although, at several points in the past aspects of the counter jihad movement have been close to attempted violent attacks by Islamist extremists, including attacks directed at the counter jihad movement itself in Garland, Texas (Hallman & Leszczynski, 2015), a plot to kill prominent activist Pamela Geller (Sanchez, 2015), and an attempted attack on the EDL in 2012 (Feldman, 2012, p. 11). Despite this, any response is overwhelmingly to mediated events, rather than to direct experiences. Equally, the counter jihad is not organisationally violent meaning that any escalation would be limited to rhetorical escalation only. Also, the counter jihad movement is too organisationally diffuse to establish firm connections between the content produced on websites and events in specific locales, it is difficult to say how this content would influence counter jihad aligned organisations in different contexts, if at all. Furthermore, the extent to which the counter jihad movement influences the opposing side of the argument, or even which specific groups constitute the opposing side, remains largely unknown. Finally, many of the outrages the counter jihad responds to come from groups and individuals that cannot be considered extreme, including the mainstream media and mainstream political figures such as President Obama. So while the counter jihad movement rhetoric is undoubtedly driven to a large extent by the actions of opposing extremists, many of the dynamics associated with Eatwell's cumulative extremism are missing.

There are clear limitations to this study. Content analysis methods of this type can lead to researchers equating frequency with importance. Sites like Gates of Vienna dedicate parts of their site to authors, often those who engage in more in-depth attempts to explain events. Equally, activists such as Spencer and Geller have published books which freely suggest conspiracy (see above). An analysis of these posts and books, as opposed to the daily approach taken here may have yielded different results. Conspiracy explanations do get pride of place in some parts of the counter jihad network, but this is not reflected in the daily output analysed here. Equally, below the line comment sections are also, superficially, fertile grounds for conspiracy theory orientated explanations linked to above the line content. This analysis has considered the counter jihad network in a relatively traditional way, as a hierarchical producer of content. The interactive affordances of the web however can result in allowing readers to further augment stories, offering their own theories to explain events.

A further limitation is the timing of this study. Efforts have been made to include content from an extensive time period, 15 months. However, limiting the study to 2015 and 2016 means that the study takes place in the background of Daesh as well as other active violent Islamist extremist groups such as Al Shabaab and Boko Haram. This means that counter jihad writers arguably have more material to reproduce and so diminishes the importance of developing explanatory theories. A study focused on a broader time period may reveal more about the evolution of conspiracy theory in the counter jihad but at the expense of current relevance. Additionally, the sample is limited to English-language sites. Although the counter jihad is international in outlook,

this analysis has not been able to consider content being published in languages other than English. Finally, all of the sites included here are US-based. Frequently updated counter jihad sites in the UK are scarce and prominent UK activists as well as other Europeans such as Fjordman seem to rely heavily on US-based sites for distribution.

Conclusion: come for the outrage, stay for the conspiracy?

This paper set out with two major goals: a better understanding of the nature of conspiracy theories within the counter jihad movement, and an understanding of how conspiracy theory is deployed within the counter jihad movement on a routine basis. Two conclusions are suggested; firstly, that the Eurabia thesis is not a consistent thread throughout the counter jihad movement, and second that in day-to-day communication, the meat of the counter jihad movement is focused on overt actions, not conspiracy.

While the Eurabia theory has dominated academic debate on the counter jihad movement, it is not common currency within it. While there is broad agreement on the Islamisation of Europe and the US, the actors behind it are often conceptualised differently. Where Eurabia suggests an unholy alliance of EU bureaucrats and Islamists gone wrong, other theorists see variously Obama, leftists and the Muslim Brotherhood to blame. In addition, counter jihad movement writers are under no obligation to commit to one theory and see it through. This chooses your own model of conspiracy theory is probably reflective of the low barriers to entry that characterise the counter jihad movement, allowing any one to remix the various components to develop their own conspiracy narrative. In some cases this has extended to all encompassing super conspiracies featuring a diverse cast of malevolent actors. There exists in the counter jihad movement a broad template for an Islamisation conspiracy of which Eurabia is the only one interpretation.

While conspiracy theory was easy to find in some of the more specialised and dense publications available within the counter jihad movement, on the routine level however, explicit conspiracy theorising was relatively minimal. Analysing content posted by counter jihad news sites revealed that approximately three quarters of posts analysed involved overt actions. Where covert actions were discussed they were usually around individual events rather than elements within a wider grand plan. Instead of conspiracy, the counter jihad focused largely on the open activities of various demonised groups and individuals.

The lack of overt conspiracy theorising in routine counter jihad output can be explained in part by the counter jihad's innate desire to maintain a veneer of respectability; too much reliance on outlandish theories are likely bad for the movement's public image. Equally, the media (and public) appetite for extremism related material means the counter jihad has a great deal of mainstream reporting and comment to incorporate into its narrative. This paper also tentatively suggested that this relationship may constitute a form of cumulative extremism; although the counter jihad is not engaged in the kind of tit-for-tat escalation originally described by Eatwell (2006), it is able to feed of Islamist extremism to some extent. Islamist extremism, most notably Daesh, but in all its guises, seemingly provides a valuable source of content for the counter jihad to justify its beliefs. Rather than having to rely on obscure and hyper detailed conspiracy theorising to support its case, the counter jihad movement can more easily point to the actions (violent and non-violent) and statements of Islamist extremists.

This aspect of the study confirms some previous findings from the study of conspiracy theory in extreme groups. The lack of open conspiracy in routine communication is not unique to the counter jihad movement, and it has been observed in other extreme movements previously (Billig, 1978, p. 170; Copsey, 2007, p. 68). Equally, previous research on the counter jihad movement has also noticed the lack of conspiracy rhetoric in routine communication (Lee, 2015). This finding should not be taken to negate entirely the role of conspiracy theory in the counter jihad. In particular, Billig's (1978, p. 170) analysis of the National Front in the UK identified a 'pyramid' shape to extremist propaganda. Billig highlighted a tiered system of propaganda in which those 'intellectually dissatisfied' (1978, p. 170) with the shorter articles could progress to steadily more ideologically dense material. One can easily envisage a similar progression for the counter jihad, starting with news headlines designed to generate outrage, progressing to shorter ideological tracts hosted in special sections on the same websites, before progressing to denser texts such as Fjordman's extended essay *Defeating Eurabia*. The inclusion of conspiratorial content in specially curated sections of websites and paper publications demonstrates that conspiracy theory still has a privileged place within the counter jihad movement. However, the front ranks of the EDL and PEGIDA are, for the most part, not discussing the intricacies of the Eurabia thesis. There is some evidence to suggest that engaging with the more esoteric literature may award status to individuals in some contexts (Busher, 2016). However, in all likelihood conspiracy theories are only required for those that feel the need to justify their prejudices, for the majority of participants it seems enough to play on vague uneasiness, xenophobia and stereotypes.

The implications of this study for those interested in both the counter jihad and extremism more generally are related to the position of conspiracy theory within narratives. In particular, it is important to place conspiracy explanations in the proper context and not to assume their central place in individual narratives, nor to assume that they share a universal configuration. On a general level, counter jihad audiences may have little or no knowledge of the conspiracy theory explanations for perceived Islamisation; rather they have been sufficiently outraged by continued coverage of Muslim and elite transgressions to commit to the movement without really needing an explanation for why these transgressions have occurred. For those more involved in the counter jihad conspiracy theories may be more important, but these are unlikely to follow a universal Eurabia template where conspiracy theories can be refuted, by no means an easy task (see: Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009, p. 210), the original prejudice that drove an individual to engage will remain. Based on this analysis, outrage comes first, conspiracy comes later.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) under Grant ES/N009614/1.

Notes

1. An important consideration here is the extent to which the 'birther conspiracy' is not defined by the belief that Obama was born outside the US, but by the ensuing cover up.
2. See <http://www.frontpagemag.com/point/259774/media-covers-mississippi-mosque-imams-role-isis-daniel-greenfield>
3. See <http://www.frontpagemag.com/fpm/259764/raymond-ibrahim-why-obama-ignores-christian-frontpagemagcom>
4. See <http://gatesofvienna.net/2015/02/learning-from-islam-means-learning-how-to-win/>
5. The story is available at: <http://www.barenakedislam.com/2016/02/15/dhimmi-pope-says-muslim-freeloaders-rapists-and-jihadists-are-a-miracle-seed-for-a-barren-europe/>

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