

## **The Narrative of Islamic violence in History. Creation, artifice and reality.**

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### **Conspiring to Refute Anti-Muslim Conspiracy Theories**

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Islamophobia is a major issue in the United States and elsewhere. Much of the writing on Islamophobia explores the history of Western attitudes towards Islam and its manifestations in modern America, and engages in media and cultural studies of the American context. This is important documentation that helps those addressing images of Muslim violence in the public realm.

One aspect that has not been addressed is the various ways in which attitudes towards Muslims and fear of Muslims evolve into conspiracy theories. This paper outlines the nature of conspiracy theories and particular strategies to address those that target Muslims in America. While misinformation can be corrected by better information, conspiracy theories are not generally responsive to corrective evidence.

Michael Barkun identifies three kinds of conspiracy theory – event-driven (9/11, JFK assassination), systematic (creeping sharia), and super-conspiracies (New World Order, Elders of Zion). My interest focuses on systematic conspiracy theories, in particular the idea that Muslims plan to impose sharia law on the United States. Such fears have led to numerous anti-sharia laws in states (201 proposed, 14 enacted). Several organizations are dedicated to promoting such laws, chief among them American Laws for American Courts (ALAC).

Such conspiracy theories seldom exist in isolation. They become associated with other schemes, such as the Muslim Brotherhood take-over of the American government and stealth jihadists in Saudi-supported mosques.

Jovan Byford argues that conspiracy theories are “a tradition of explanation characterized by a particular rhetorical style.” They are populist responses to perceived chaos that create coherent explanations for events that otherwise seem inexplicable. Barkun identifies three operative principles: nothing happens by chance; nothing is what it seems; and everything interconnects with everything.

Institutions – governments, corporations and others – are suspect and either act in coordination or are unknowing pawns. Behind it all is some smaller, secretive group that manipulates people and events for its own ends. Public intellectuals, including academics, are complicit in institutional systems.

These theories create communities centered on the collection of evidence and the formulation of theories that link evidence into a reasoned whole. Because such groups are adept at discerning associations, the introduction of contrary evidence is simply proof of the manipulative skill of the secret cabal trying to mislead the public. It requires renewed determination to discern the pattern that lies beneath. It is this characteristic that makes conspiracy theories functionally irrefutable.

For many, especially those not fully invested in conspiracy explanations, evidence-based approaches can be effective. For those more fully caught up in the conspiracy narrative, three approaches are available: to impeach the sources of information, to question the motives of those sources, and to relieve the sense of chaos that gives rise to conspiratorial thinking to begin with.

In pursuit of countering narratives of creeping sharia, Muslim infiltration of government and other related plots, these other tools need to be explored, clarified, honed and deployed.