



Muslim Paranoia Ideology and the Limits of Engagement

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A recurring feature of Western counter-radicalisation discourse is the ‘Muslim paranoia narrative’, a belief that resentment towards Western societies is motivated by a paranoid and conspiracy-riven worldview. This association between radicalisation and paranoia appears repeatedly through official statements and policy documents.

Radicalisation is at the forefront of policy debates as ISIS continues to draw recruits from Western democracies. Recent summits in Washington and Sydney on countering violent extremism have highlighted the importance of undermining extremist narratives, mobilising moderate Muslims who oppose ISIS, and working to address underlying drivers of radicalisation. Yet representatives of Muslim communities have met this approach with considerable scepticism, both in Western states and across the Muslim world. A common complaint is that Muslims are singled out and caricatured as a unique danger, which only increases the level of vilification experienced by Muslims.

The Muslim paranoia narrative

In recent [research](#) published in *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, I explore the underlying ideological conditions that work against engagement with Muslim communities thought vulnerable to radicalisation. I examine what I call the “Muslim paranoia narrative”, a recurring feature of Western counter-radicalisation discourse that helpfully captures these underlying ideological dynamics. In the Muslim paranoia narrative, resentment towards Western

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societies is said to be motivated to some degree by a paranoid and conspiracy-riven worldview, which is thought to thrive in alienated and disempowered communities. Terrorist recruiters exploit distorted outlooks to fuel a sense of injustice about the plight of Muslims abroad. This association between radicalisation and paranoia appears repeatedly through official statements and policy documents, including those associated with ongoing counter-radicalisation strategies like the [US State Department's Digital Outreach Team](#).

The Muslim paranoia narrative is worth examining because it is a clear tension point in contemporary radicalisation strategies that are increasingly focused on engagement and collaboration. The negative connotations associated with paranoia connect palpably with the sense of vilification often highlighted by Muslim critics of these programs. And the paranoia narrative can be connected to a broader ideological imaginary. Tracing the Muslim paranoia narrative from its ideological roots provides a window into the assumptions and priorities informing radicalisation discourse and contextualises the reticence of Muslim communities towards it.

The Muslim paranoia narrative is especially intense in the United States where my research is focused. Richard Hofstadter is widely understood to have established the now commonplace account of political paranoia [in his famous essay](#) “The Paranoid Style in American Politics”, which identified a recurring strain in American politics characterised by a “sense of heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy”. Hofstadter positioned political paranoia on the periphery of pluralistic American democracy as the irrational pathology of angry extremists, and contrasted it with a rational political centre where sensible politics occurred. Although Hofstadter wrote this seminal piece in 1964, it is difficult to overestimate its traction and influence. This is in large

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part due to the fact that Hofstadter deployed many of the most common conceptual features of post-War liberalism, which abhorred populism and focused on the mediation of competing interests through bargain and compromise. America was situated as a moderate democracy, pragmatic, centrist and non-ideological, in contrast to the radical politics sweeping the post-War Europe. Although liberalism has evolved significantly over the intervening years, the basic conceptual features set out by Hofstadter have remained pervasive in contemporary perspectives on political paranoia.

One reason for this is that political extremism is still largely understood through the same centre/periphery framework. This dynamic is at the heart of radicalisation discourse in the US, where the political and religious beliefs of Muslim communities have emerged as a subject of concern. In this context, the Muslim paranoia narrative locates paranoia not just on the fringe of liberal democracies, but also on the periphery of international power and legitimacy from the point of view of political leaders and security experts. Here the pervasive perspective on political paranoia folds together with a long-running orientalist narrative about the supposedly dysfunctional characteristics of Muslim cultures, particularly in the Middle East, which has often framed America's regional encounters.

A problematic narrative

The Muslim paranoia narrative is involved in a powerful process of ideological reproduction that works against engagement and collaboration with Muslim communities. Underlying liberal and orientalist frameworks situate Muslim cultures as dysfunctional and anti-modern, while associating Muslim resentment about Western foreign policies with problematic and potentially pathological modes of thought. Like post-War liberal orthodoxy secured by

contrast with paranoid populism, contemporary liberal modernity is secured by contrast with the paranoia of alienated Muslims.

At the same time, contemporary radicalisation discourse disciplines the wider public against consideration of Muslim grievances and associated criticisms of US policy. For instance, the identification of political paranoia as a subject of concern has the double effect of producing a strong general deterrent against the interrogation of elite power and political controversy, when the personal and professional costs of such engagements are potentially catastrophic. The taint of irrationality can be devastating, even by association – undermining credibility and calling motivations into question.

In this sense, the Muslim paranoia narrative can be understood in terms of powerful ideological scripts in American political culture, rather than as an objective description of an ideational precursor to radicalisation in Muslim communities. The broader point is that potent narratives around extremism and oriental otherness have undermined the approach of successive US administrations to counter-radicalisation. These scripts have worked against a persuasive encounter with Muslims critical of American foreign policy, when such criticisms are framed as the product of a problematic thoughts and dysfunctional culture.

This problem is clear enough in the practical setting of counter-radicalisation programs like the US State Department's Digital Outreach Team (DOT), a group of bloggers tasked with confronting views critical of American policy on foreign language websites, and, more recently, discrediting ISIS affiliated users on social media. For our purposes it is interesting to note that [according to the State Department](#) “the Digital Outreach Team contrasts objective facts with the often emotive, conspiracy-laden arguments of US critics in the hope that online

users will take a fresh at their opinions of the US”. And this frame manifested in the online activities of the DOT [where time was spent](#) “ridiculing myths and conspiracy theories and calling users with extreme views radicals, but claiming to enjoy engaging with users who post objective views.” Perhaps unsurprisingly, a close analysis of DOT work following President Obama’s 2009 Cairo Address found that a large majority of people who expressed a view about the DOT were negative in their comments, [with half openly](#) “ridiculing and condescending”. Although there were no doubt many reasons for the widespread hostility to the DOT, it should be obvious that labelling people paranoid and irrational is highly antagonistic, particularly when considered in the context of the wider set of intimations that have historically been associated with such language.

Indeed, it is critical to acknowledge that although the identities and relations highlighted in my analysis of the Muslim paranoia narrative exist within a specific policy discourse, they bear no necessary relationship to the lived experience of differentiated Muslim people, who often refuse classification in these terms. Moreover, it is critical to acknowledge that there is still no conclusive evidence for a particular terrorist profile; for a common pathway or pattern to radicalisation; or for predicting which holders of radical views will become violent. Without critical awareness of the ideological conditions identified here and a sustained attempt to move beyond them, the crucial work of engagement, partnership and community building will be likely ineffectual.

Image by Saleh M. Sbenaty via [Wikimedia](#).

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