# ACTION BRIEF
## April, 2011

## The Sharīʿah Conspiracy Theory

A recent Pew Research Center poll indicated that 40% of those who responded thought that Islam is more likely than other religions to encourage violence; 42% responded that Islam does not encourage violence more than other religions. Rep. Peter King (R., NY) has held the first of his congressional hearings on the extent of radicalization in the American Muslim community and that community's response.  King has said that 80% of American mosques are run by radical clerics. Two Florida Republican legislators have introduced a bill in the state legislature to ban the use of Sharīʿah[i] or other international legal codes. The American Public Policy Alliance, which provides templates for anti-Sharīʿah laws and considers its purpose to preserve the sovereignty of the US, individual liberties, and freedoms, indicates on its website:

> One of the greatest threats to American values and liberties today comes from foreign laws and foreign legal doctrines which have been infiltrating our court system and the municipal, state and federal levels. This phenomenon is known as "transnationalism" and includes the insinuation of Islamic Shariah law.

The "great threat" that has become known as the Sharīʿah Conspiracy Theory was heard during the Park 51 (Lower Manhattan Islamic Community Center) debate, during the 2010 political campaign, and continues to be promulgated in documentary films, demonstrations against proposed mosques, books, political speeches, and commentaries on cable news channels.  What is this theory, how does it relate to other conspiracy theories, and how can we engage those who foster this theory?

### The Structure of Conspiracy Theories

Before describing the Sharīʿah Conspiracy, it is important to acknowledge that the term conspiracy theory has different meanings depending upon the context and reference. Heins (2007) describes four types of conspiracy theories:

1. Real conspiracies; e.g., financial scams; efforts to discredit a political candidate; attempts to hide corrupt or illegal practices
2. Real conspiracies that become symbolic of larger influences; e.g.,Watergate became a symbol of the need for political renewal
3. Alleged and unproven conspiracies held by only a small fragment of the population; e.g., the government faked the landing on the moon and filmed it at a secret location; there were more than one shooter and many powerful players involved in the Kennedy assassination; doctors deliberately manufactured AIDS; Republican politicians engineered the crash of Democrat Paul Wellstone's plane
4. Alleged and unproven conspiracies that form the basis of robust belief systems and result in mobilization of groups against outsiders

Type 4 conspiracy theories are usually about racial/ethnic or secretive power elite groups that conspire to replace sovereign nation-states in order to eventually rule the world through an authoritarian world government. The groups have an all-encompassing propaganda program that idealizes the establishment of their rule as the culmination of history's progress. They operate through front organizations to orchestrate significant occurrences in politics and finance. Numerous actual historical and current events are seen as steps in an on-going plot to achieve world domination.

Types 3 and 4 conspiracies usually following a common structure:

- Nothing is as it appears
- Society is the product of secret agreements that have to be exposed
- Nothing happens by chance, market forces, or evolutionary processes; and everything is interconnected and intended
- Powerful and unethical figures are deceiving people into doing what they want; they deny that there is any conspiracy as they continue to benefit through a series of seemingly disconnected or random events that are actually part of the conspiracy
- The vast majority of people are ignorant of the group's true nature and gullible to believe otherwise
- Contradictory evidence is part of the conspiracy--the conspirators have planted it in order to prevent people from finding out the "true" state of affairs
- Actual events are often connected more through association than clear cause and effect relation so to prove the reality of the conspiracy

An influential example of the type four conspiracy theories is *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.  Since 1903 The Protocols have influenced anti-Semitic policies and actions in Europe, the US, and many countries in the Middle East. The Protocols are purported to be a secret centennial rabbinical conference whose purpose is to review the past hundred years in order to make plans for the next century.  In order to upset the foundations of the world's present society and its systems and enable Zionism to obtain an authoritarian world government, the elders propose to.

1. Organize great business monopolies in order to amass wealth at the expense of Gentiles and bring about the financial collapse of Gentile society
2. Eliminate nationalities and other religions
3. Strive to increase corruption among the present national regimes in order to encourage their collapse
4. Encourage speculation and demand for luxury yet operate under the guise of serving the working classes
5. Control education, the media, and the press in order to discourage independence of thought and encourage acceptance of the new world government
6. Use gold for stirring up disturbances
7. Force people to accept Zionist rule or be annihilated

Actual events such as the assassination of Czar Alexander II (some Jews played a role in the plot), the Russian Revolution, the economic collapse in Weimar Germany, the creation of the

UN, and the establishment of the state of Israel, were considered to be proof for the existence of this conspiracy.

**The Sharīʿah Conspiracy**

The Sharīʿah Conspiracy is another example of the type four conspiracies where actual events are linked together through association rather than cause and effect logic in order to mobilize people against dangerous outsiders who threaten our society.  Actual events that are brought together to build the Sharīʿah conspiracy include numerous terrorist attacks, hate speeches of some imams, and the Muslim Brotherhood's statements about seeking to Islamize society in Egypt, Jordon, Palestinian territories, and Syria—one branch through grass-roots education and mainstream politics and another through violent means.

Sarah Posner, Associate Editor of *Religion Dispatches*, captures how the Sharīʿah conspiracy inflates the power of the Brotherhood and follows the common content and structure of type 4 conspiracy theories:

> A cottage industry has cultivated a wide-ranging conspiracy theory that totalitarian Islamic radicals are bent on infiltrating America, displacing the Constitution, and subverting Western-style democracy in the US and around the globe…If one untangles what that cottage industry is saying, one can detect five claims of the shari'ah conspiracy theory: that the goal of Islam is totalitarianism; that the mastermind of bringing this totalitarianism to the world is the Muslim Brotherhood, the grandfather of all Islamic groups from Hamas to the Islamic Society of North America; that these organizations within the United States are traitors in league with the American left and are bent on acts of sedition against America; that the majority of mosques in the United States are run by imams who promote such sedition; and that through this fifth column, shari'ah law has already infiltrated the United States and could result in a complete takeover if not stopped.

**Some of the key players in the Sharīʿah cottage industry are Frank Gaffney (President of the Center for Security Policy that produced the Team BII report), Daniel Pipes (Middle East Forum), David Horowitz (Freedom Center; also the organizer of Islamofacism Awareness Week events on college campuses), Clarion Production Service (has produced Islamic conspiracy films such as *Obsession* and *The Third Jihad*), Peter Hammond (author of *Slavery, Terrorism and Islam: The Historical Roots and Contemporary Threat*), The Oak Initiative, and Brigitte Gabriel (ACT! and Stop Shariah Now).**

Sponsored by the Center for Security Policy, Team BII report's key findings offer the most comprehensive description of the Sharīʿah **Conspiracy.**  The findings include that Muslims supported by the Muslim Brotherhood are upsetting the foundations of the US society and its systems; are insinuating Sharīʿah into the US legal system and attempting to supplant the Constitution; want to eliminating other religions; are engaged in a war of information; and have penetrated top levels of education, law, media, the military, and government in order to control the message about their intentions:

- The United States is under attack by foes that are openly animated by what is known in Islam as shariah (Islamic law). According to shariah, every faithful Muslim is obligated to wage jihad (whether violent or not) against those who do not adhere to this comprehensive, totalitarian, political-military code. The enemy's explicit goal is to establish a global Islamic state, known as the caliphate, governed by shariah.
- Shariah is based on the Quran (held by all Muslims to be the "uncreated" word of Allah as dictated to Mohammed), hadiths (sayings of Mohammed) and agreed interpretations. It commands Muslims to carry out jihad (holy war) indefinitely until all of the *Dar al-Harb* (i.e., the House of War, where shariah is not enforced) is brought under the domination of *Dar al-Islam* (the House of Islam – or literally the House of Submission, where shariah *is* enforced).
- Shariah dictates that non-Muslims be given three choices: convert to Islam and conform to shariah; submit as second-class citizens (dhimmis); or be killed. Not all classes are given the second option.
- Both Islamic terrorism and pre-violent, "civilization jihad" (popularly referred to as "stealth jihad") are commanded by shariah. That is not only the view of "extremists" and "fringe" elements "hijacking the religion," but of many authorities of Islam widely recognized as mainstream and drawing upon orthodox texts, interpretations and practices of the faith.
- The Muslim Brotherhood is the font of modern Islamic jihad. It is dedicated to the same global supremacist objectives as those (like al Qaeda and the Taliban) who share its adherence to shariah but who believe that violent jihad is more likely to more quickly produce the common goal of a global caliphate.
- The Brotherhood's internal documents make clear that civilization jihad is subversion waged by stealth instead of violence only until such time as Muslims are powerful enough to progress to violent jihad for the final conquest.
- Those who work to insinuate shariah into the United States intend to subvert and replace the Constitution (itself a violation of Article VI) because, according to shariah, freedom of religion, other civil liberties enshrined in the Constitution, and the rule of man-made law are incompatible with Islam (which means "submission").
- The shariah-adherent enemy prioritizes Information Warfare, manifested in American society as political warfare, psychological warfare, influence operations and subversion of our foundational institutions. Our government structure fails to recognize this strategy because it is focused so exclusively on kinetic attacks. As a result, the United States remains crippled in its inability to engage this enemy effectively *on his primary battlefield*.
- The Brotherhood exploits the atmosphere of intimidation created by Islamic terrorists, thus inculcating in the West a perceived need for "outreach" to the "Muslim community" which, in turn, opens up opportunities to pursue a campaign of stealthy infiltration into American and other Western societies. The combined effect of such "civilization jihad" and jihadism of the violent kind may prove to be considerably more dangerous for this country and other Western societies than violent jihad alone.
- The Brotherhood has succeeded in penetrating our educational, legal and political systems, as well as top levels of government, intelligence, the media, and U.S. military, virtually paralyzing our ability to respond effectively.

- Muslim Brotherhood organizations conduct outreach to the government, law enforcement, media, religious community, and others for one reason: to *subvert* them in furtherance of their objective, which is implementation of Islamic Law. (2010, pp. 23 – 25)

Using the technique of portraying criticism of the Sharīʿah Conspiracy as the work of the Islamic conspirators, Frank Gaffney said about the King hearings,

> For his efforts, the Homeland Security Committee's chairman [has] established that there is, indeed, a problem of "extremism" within the American Muslim community. One manifestation of that problem was the determined effort made by the so-called "leadership" of the Muslim population in this country, not only to impugn the chairman and several of his witnesses but to suppress these hearings altogether. For example, groups such as the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR), the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) and the Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC) lined up 55 House Democrats to insist that Mr. King "reconsider the scope of these hearings and instead examine all forms of violence motivated by extremist beliefs, rather than unfairly focusing on just one religious group."

> One of the reasons for this demand became clear as witnesses shed light on the true nature of such self-appointed Muslim leaders: They do not speak for American Muslims and are either directly tied to the Muslim Brotherhood - an organization whose mission is to "destroy Western civilization from within" - or sympathetic to its goal of bringing Shariah to the United States. (2011, March 15)

Brigitte Gabriel has claimed that al Qaeda, Hamas, Hezbollah, and other terrorist organizations supported Obama for president because he is Muslim. Her Stop Shariah website has also promoted the theory that Obama has "quietly" appointed people with Brotherhood ties to top positions in his administration in order to orchestrate uprisings in the Muslim world (Posner, 2011).

Newt Gingrich has embraced the conspiracy and says in a promotion piece for his new documentary, *America at Risk,*

> Radical Islamists are people who want to impose Sharia (or Islamic law) on the entire world. In *America at Risk*, expert after expert describes the Radical Islamists' determination to impose an extraordinarily different system on us. These Radical Islamists are profoundly different from moderate Muslims who want to live under the rule of Constitutional Law and have the same freedoms the rest of us cherish. In *America at Risk*, Dr. Zuhdi Jasser, a courageous moderate Muslim, draws a sharp distinction between Muslims who want to live in America as a free country, and Radical Islamists who seek to destroy America.

Gingrich is careful to say it is radical Islamists who want to impose Sharīʿah and he includes different Muslim voices in the film, but the impact of the video through its many scenes of

terrorist attacks and images of calls for "death to America" is to arouse fear about Islam's taking over the world.

Holland and Soifer of the conservative Lexington Institute argue, through association, that the reaches of the conspiracy into the educational system is demonstrated by the spread of multi-culturalism.

> Many well-meaning people still think that multiculturalism is synonymous with pluralism, or a healthy respect for diverse cultures and languages. Unfortunately, multiculturalism is too often used as a derisive ideology seeking to replace Western values and institutions and to transform society on terms dictated by immigrant cultures and belief systems. Much of liberal academe encourages or even actively promotes that brand of multiculturalism. Islamic extremists have made abundantly clear how destructive separatism can be in inciting clashes of civilizations, as hearings in the Homeland Security Committee will seek to document. Of course, it is wrong to ascribe hateful motives to most Muslims, who are themselves diverse in their nationalities and interpretations of Islamic law. But it could be dangerous to Western society to ignore the threat posed by radical strains of multiculturalism. In declaring recently that "multiculturalism has failed," British Prime Minister David Cameron took a perfectly reasonable first step toward defunding separatist groups that are avowed enemies of the state. (2011, March 9)

## Counter Arguments to the Conspiracy

Arguments that offer other actual events and research results are being used to counter the Sharīʿah conspiracy. Muslim American, Rep. Keith Ellison's testimony at Rep. King's hearings was an example with comments like:

> However, demanding a "community response" (as the title of this hearing suggests) asserts that the entire community bears responsibility for the violent acts of individuals. Targeting the Muslim American community for the actions of a few is unjust. Actually all of us—all communities—are responsible for combating violent extremism. Singling out one community focuses our analysis in the wrong direction.

> Let's talk about facts rather than stereotypes. In fact, the Muslim American community rejects violent ideology. The RAND Corporation, a highly respected research organization, released a report last year that states the following:

>> given the low rate of would-be violent extremists, only 100 amongst an estimated 3 million American Muslims, "…suggest[s] an American Muslim population that remains hostile to jihadist ideology and its exhortations to violence."

> The RAND report concludes that a mistrust of Muslim Americans by other Americans is misplaced.

The Muslim American community across this country actively works with law enforcement officials—from dialogues with Attorney General Eric Holder to community meetings with local police officers in Minneapolis. Recently, tips from the Muslim American community foiled two domestic terror plots including the case of the Times Square Bomber and the Northern Virginia Five. Law enforcement officials depend upon these relationships.

A recent report from the Muslim Public Affairs Council stated that information provided by Muslim Americans has helped foil seven of the last 11 domestic terror plots and 40 percent of all plots since 9/11. A 2011 study from the Duke University Triangle Center on Terrorism reiterated that 40 percent of domestic terror plots have been prevented with the aid of the Muslim American community.

Akbar Ahmed, a professor of Islamic studies at American University, says,

> The Muslim community in America is not a monolith. Very broadly, it comprises three groups: African-Americans (many of them converts), immigrants (largely from the Middle East and South Asia) and white converts. And Muslims from every part of the world study and work in the United States.

> Yet the diversity of the Muslim community is frequently obscured by ignorance and mistrust. We were often asked by non-Muslims whether Muslims could be "good" Americans. The frequency with which this question was asked indicated the doubts that many harbored. Too many Americans acknowledged that they knew virtually nothing about Islam and said they had never met a Muslim.

As a counter to the association of the Muslim Brotherhood with Muslim organizations in the US, Sarah Posner argues that the single document that was introduced in the terrorism financing prosecution of the Holy Land Foundation as proof of the supposed Sharīʿah plot in the US has limited validity:

> The document, "An Explanatory Memorandum on the General Strategic Goal for the Group in North America", was written by a lone member of the Muslim Brotherhood in the early 1990s, and identifies more than 200 groups by name as possible allies. But "nobody has ever produced any evidence that the document was more than something produced by the daydream of one enthusiast", says Nathan Brown, a professor at The George Washington University and an expert on the Muslim Brotherhood. That hasn't stopped the sharia conspiracists: the document is widely cited as proof that the Muslim Brotherhood has plotted this sharia takeover with the approval and assistance of virtually every Muslim organization in America. Gaffney said recently: "It is now public knowledge that nearly every major Muslim organization in the United States is actually controlled by the MB or a derivative organization. Consequently, most of the Muslim-American groups of any prominence in America are now known to be, as a matter of fact, hostile to the United States and its constitution." (2011)

Sanati, a graduate fellow in the Middle East Studies Center at Florida International University, argues that Political Islam is not hostile to Western governments but to their policies:

Many Westerners assume that Muslims "hate our freedoms," but reliable surveys paint a different picture. Drawing sweeping inferences from sound bites or selective "alarming" data isn't valid, because political Islam is less a monolithic ideology than an outgrowth of each nation's society. Years of regular polling in the Islamic world suggest that the majority of Muslims hold in high regard core American values such as religious tolerance, meritocracy, individual liberty, freedom of the press, and economic vitality.

For instance, the 2008 World Public Opinion poll showed that majority-Islamic societies not only were willing to engage in globalization and trade, but also viewed the "increasing connections of our economy with others around the world" as positive forces for their own lives. Moreover, the 2010 Arab Public Opinion Poll shows that, when asked which country they would prefer a family member to study in, the overwhelming majority cited Western states. At the same time, surveys show deep antipathy for Western policies in their region. Particularly grievous are Western support for dictatorship in their host countries (in spite of US promotion of democracy), regional wars of aggression, and unbridled support for Israel against Palestinian self-determination.

Political Islam does not mean sharia law or global caliphate. When Westerners hear the word sharia, they think of Taliban-style repression. For most Muslims, however, sharia is simply a vague notion of social justice and order rooted in Islam. Such context is crucial when interpreting data about Muslim sentiment.

For instance, a 2010 Pew survey showed that while 90 percent of Egyptians favor freedom of religion, 84 percent favor the death penalty for apostates. This apparent contradiction reveals less about political Islam than it does about the conflicting attitudes of a population that's long lived under dictatorial rule. In Turkey, where political Islam (in concrete terms) plays a larger role than it does in Egypt, only 5 percent support the death penalty for those who leave Islam. (2011, February 9)

**However, Counter Arguments have limited effect**

Counter arguments, however, are too often interpreted as part of the conspiracy--the conspirators have planted it or are offering contradictory evidence in order to prevent people from finding out the "true" state of affairs. As Locke (2009) recounts,

> An example of the stubbornness of conspiracy theories is exemplified by "the case of a hoax television programme broadcast on British television in 1978, called *Alternative 3* (Austin, 1999).This claimed to be an exposé of a global level conspiracy to transport a select group of people to other planets because the earth was facing environmental Armageddon. The screenplay was adapted into book-form by Leslie Watkins adding a character he called Brian Pendlebury. Watkins later recounted receiving a phone call from a man, who, convinced the conspiracy was true, had tried to locate Pendlebury. Watkins told him Pendlebury was invented, to which the man replied that he now knew for sure Watkins was lying as he had spoken to Brian's father, Dennis, who was himself so frightened of the conspirators that he denied even having a son called Brian." (p. 570)

**How Can We Engage Type Four Conspiracy Theories**

Heins (2007), Sunstein and Vermeule (2008), Locke (2009), and Swami and Coles (2010) offer various psychological explanations for the attraction of conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories provide a way to compensate for experiences of meaninglessness and powerlessness; the individual now has an answer and is part of the group in the "know." Conspiracy theories provide emotional intensity and excitement. They assuage fear by pinpointing an "enemy" and source of blame. Conspiracy theories can also be seen as a manifestation of attribution bias: one's own behavior is attributed to external situational factors; the behavior of others is caused by personality, attitudes, character, or disposition. This leads to attributing blame to the innate nefarious intentions of a conspiratorial network when something goes wrong. From this perspective conspiracy can be countered by gaining an understanding of how interpretations of actual events are influenced by these internal psychological dynamics.

Locke makes a case for disenchantment, which core characteristic is that the world is knowable and not controlled by "magical kinds of belief that attribute material phenomena to the actions of gods, spirits, or other supernatural entities, or even to mysterious, impersonal forces" (2009, p. 573). Anomalies and competing versions of events must be explained through accounting for error or proposing alternative explanations. When there is suffering we want to find someone to blame, preferably a collective other:

> Much better—far, far more rational—is the option of blaming a collective other. Who then to blame? No one and all; or better still, a small shadowy group, forever hidden just out of sight and one step ahead. They may get you in the end, but if you keep watching your back and the skies, maybe you can outfox them long enough to defer ever having to be called to account. (2009, p.583)

To counter a conspiracy means to examine our own accountability in what has caused suffering and to acknowledge our demonizing of others.

Sunstein and Vermeule (2008), in their analysis of why conspiracy theories arise and spread, identify the effects of limited access to information, how what information people get feeds the conspiracy theory, and the cascading effect when people do not trust their own contrary information, the speakers spreading the conspiracy are held in high regard, and the conspiracy information is repeated in many contexts. They argue for challenging conspiracy theories by cognitive infiltration of the groups that produce conspiracy theories. This is done through repeated counter-speech by credible parties that discredit the conspiracy, plant doubts, and introduce a diversity of opinion.

All of the above explanations and ways to deal with conspiracy theories assume that once people understand the sociopsychological basis of their belief or begin to have doubts about the conspiracy they will be willing to consider different perspectives on events other than a proof of a conspiracy. One of the downsides of these tactics is that they could be interpreted as a manifestation of the conspirators' efforts to hide the "truth."

It is also helpful to look at conspiracy theories as part of the current emphasis on Social Identity Conflicts as a way of solidifying a political base. As recounted in a previous Action Brief (October, 2010), Social Identity Conflicts are formed and fostered by dis-identifying with other groups and forming identity fostering narratives. In social identity conflicts, the objective of interactions with other groups is not only to convince them of the "rightness" of one's own group's beliefs, values, perspective, etc. but to identify an "us" who are different from a feared, discomforting "other," and to pose an either/or choice for people to claim or not their membership in this "us."

The narratives used are not open to be proven accurate or inaccurate because they are more about asserting the values, beliefs, and understanding of self that establish we are the ones who stand for patriotism and defense of "our" way of life and they, Muslims, are the threat to all of this; and the defenders of Islam are elitist, secular rationalists, and cowards in the face of the obvious threats posed by Islam. The Sharīʿah Conspiracy theory helps to distinguish one from the rest of society as one in the know and as a member of a special group dedicated to defending the "American way of life." We know the "truth" and if you do not want to become a powerless victim of the conspiracy, stand with us. In the political realm this often translates into successful ways of supporting certain candidates or parties. Gingrich is considering running for president; he wants to seem aligned with patriotic groups, and, thereby, attract others who also consider themselves aligned or want to be aligned with this social identity.

This means that efforts to directly confront the conspiracy with counter information or to engage in a conversation about the sociopsychological basis is not enough, could easily be rejected, and could contribute to solidifying the identity and cohesiveness of the group in the know vs. those who are willing to be fooled. And that goes both ways. Those who question the conspiracy can approach other groups from a "knowing" position and interpret the failed outcome of the conversation as an affirmation of the "otherness" and "closed mindedness" of the conspiracy believers.

In order to move on from this circular affirmation of each other's social identity through dis-identifying with each other, we can:

- Recognize that both the conspiracy theory and the counter argument perform an important function: assuage fear, give answers for what causes events, give meaning to suffering or disasters, provide a group identity of "those in the know," work to further a political campaign, etc.
- Identify what does harm: e.g., actual events.
- Identify what serves to incite further harm: e.g., suppositions about the cause of harm, "blame speech," demonizing others.
- Negotiate how to diminish harm.
- Agree how to hold each other accountable for diminishing harm.
- Agree to further conversation that could construct a different "truth" for both groups.

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[i] There are various spellings of **Sharīʿah.** Each author's spelling is retained.