

How the largest American Muslim foundation was falsely demonised by white supremacists

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The escalating spate of mass shootings from Christchurch to El Paso has been enabled by the fact that millions of ordinary people now believe in the existence of an Islamist conspiracy to ‘replace’ white people through mass immigration and birth rates, writes Saeed Khan.



Photo credit: Press Association

Two in five Americans believe Islam is “incompatible” with US values, one in five would deny American Muslims the right to vote, and the vast majority see them as “insufficiently” American.

Some 44 percent of Britons believe that Islam is a serious threat to Western civilisation and two thirds would not support the idea that Islam is compatible with the British way of life.

While such racist myths were weaponised in the Brexit and Trump elections, they have a far longer currency.

Since 9/11, Islamist terrorism has allowed far-right groups to rehabilitate themselves as 'non-racists' concerned about the threat of Muslims and Islam.

That is how the same far-right think tanks that have given succour to the 'great replacement' myth planted the seeds of this very ideology after 9/11 by hyping up the idea of a 'Muslim invasion'.

Groups like the Center for Security Policy run by Frank Gaffney, Robert Spencer's Jihad Watch, and Daniel Pipes' Middle East Forum, are key nodes in a far-right network which portrays ordinary American Muslim civil society organisations as nefarious fronts for the Muslim Brotherhood (al-Ikhwan al-Muslimeen).

In this narrative, Muslim citizens are seen as sleeper agents in a Brotherhood conspiracy to infiltrate all areas of Western society, impose Shari'ah Law, and conquer the West by stealth.

Western Muslims are depicted as sleeper agents for terror, mosques are secret training and propaganda centres; and attempts by Muslims to integrate are viewed suspiciously as Trojan Horse infiltration operations.

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Among the numerous American Muslim institutions wrongly demonised is the International Institute for Islamic Thought (IIIT), America's largest Muslim charitable foundation, which supports research and education to build the next generation of American Muslim leaders.

Far-right myths about IIIT trace back to misinterpreted Muslim Brotherhood documents that came to light in the wake of Operation Green Quest, a US government counter-terrorism investigation launched after 9/11 which probed dozens of American Muslim charities.

Gaffney, Spencer, Pipes and their ilk point to one 1991 document as 'proof' that American Muslim organisations were conspiratorially planted by the Brotherhood as part of a spider-web of controlled front groups, waging 'civilization jihad' on the West.

In reality, not a single one of IIIT's founders was ever a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, nor had any of the founders ever agreed with or endorsed the movement's ideology, goals and tactics.

The actual document, for instance, identifies IIIT among a number of US-based Muslim organisations on "A list of our organisations and the organisations of our friends".

Islamophobes say the list proves these groups' complicity in a Brotherhood plan - but the very same document then confirms that the Brotherhood does not actually control any of these groups by stating: "Imagine if t they [sic] all march according to one plan."

In other words, the document shows that far from marching according to the Brotherhood's plan, this was merely an "imagined" fantasy rather than an active reality.

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Another set of documents quoted by the far right says that another American Muslim group, the

Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), was envisaged by the Brotherhood as “a nucleus for the Islamic Movement in North America.”

But the same document acknowledges that “the Ikhwan’s leadership and direction of it [ISNA] started to gradually decrease due to their scarce presence in it.”

In other words, the very documents supposedly proving a successful Islamist conspiracy confirm that the Muslim Brotherhood’s alleged presence in various American Muslim civil society networks was dramatically declining.

No wonder that Operation Green Quest completely cleared IIIT of any involvement in terrorism and gave it a clean bill of health.

But this is how effective propaganda works. The best lie is told by couching it in half-truths.

By cherry-picking real documents, unsuspecting citizens who are understandably concerned about Islamist terrorism, but who lack the time to rigorously fact-check such claims by perusing original sources, are misled into believing that their Muslim neighbours are out to get them.

Meanwhile, the essential work of groups like IIIT in promoting moderate visions for American Islam, combating extremism, and bringing Muslims and non-Muslims together is ignored – and Muslim contributions to society are viewed suspiciously as mere tentacles of the ‘Brotherhood’.

Such lies about Islam and Muslims have been instrumental in the spread of wider racist narratives claiming that foreigners are ‘replacing’ white populations.

Yet this pernicious belief is not just being promoted by the far-right, but is influencing mainstream centre-right parties.

Unless policymakers stop tolerating the spread of this toxic extremism, we can only expect more El Pasos, not just in the US, but across Western cities.

About the author

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