

# BACKGROUND

## The anti-Muslim agitators targeting Muslim American civil society

*From the Center for New Community*

### **A wild conspiracy theory holds that the Muslim Brotherhood is plotting to overthrow the U.S. government with help from prominent Muslim American organizations.**

---

The Trump Administration is publicly considering an executive order to designate the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization, against all expert advice. This policy comes straight from the wish list of some of the most extreme figures promoting virulent xenophobia and anti-Muslim conspiracy theories.

These figures work tirelessly to foment suspicion of all Muslim communities, with the goal of severely limiting their cultural and political influence. This is akin to other contemporary racist movements seeking to increase white cultural and political power and maintain a white demographic majority.

Esoteric on its face, the proposal to designate the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization grows out of a conspiracy theory regularly promoted by anti-Muslim figures: that the Muslim Brotherhood is secretly infiltrating the U.S. government and plotting to overthrow it from within. A corollary to this fear mongering falsehood is that a large number of Muslim civil society organizations, student groups, and community leaders are fronts for the Muslim Brotherhood and are working in service of a global Islamic conquest.

The signing of such an executive order would surely be used by these very same figures to vilify Muslim civil rights leaders and those connected to them, sparking a McCarthyite witch hunt. This backgrounder traces the origins of this dangerous policy proposal in the anti-Muslim movement, identifies the key figures involved, and exposes their overtly bigoted intentions.

### **Anti-Muslim conspiracists tied to Trump**

A cadre of far-right anti-Muslim groups have spread this conspiracy theory for years, openly accusing Muslims of being a fifth column in the U.S. and arguing that Islam poses a cultural and existential threat to the nation.

[Frank Gaffney](#), one of the most prolific anti-Muslim conspiracy theorists, has been promoting this dangerous falsehood for over a decade. Gaffney has claimed the Brotherhood and its alleged front groups have infiltrated the U.S. government and other cultural institutions and are working to subvert them from within. He and his allies call this fictional tactic “civilization” or “stealth” jihad. Gaffney and his think tank, the Center for Security Policy, have published countless paranoid reports, radio interviews, and dossiers trying to string together evidence of a Brotherhood plot to overthrow the government and usher in an Islamic caliphate.

Thus, it’s no surprise Gaffney and his colleagues have welcomed a potential executive branch-led witch hunt of the Brotherhood in the U.S. In a February 2017 [interview](#) with far-right media outlet Breitbart News, Gaffney called Trump’s plan for the Brotherhood an “incredibly important step.”

He added, “I hope he’ll do it, and I hope he’ll do it soon.”

Gaffney, who originally supported Ted Cruz during the campaign, [said](#) Trump’s election means “stopping, designating, rolling up the Muslim Brotherhood in America as the terrorist organization it is.”

Indeed, Trump’s embrace of anti-Muslim players and their policy priorities is presumably spurring Gaffney’s enthusiasm. [Clare Lopez](#), vice-president for research and analysis at Frank Gaffney’s anti-Muslim think tank, was [reportedly](#) on Trump’s transition team. Lopez has also been known to spread anti-Muslim conspiracy theories, most [notably](#) from the mainstage of the 2017 Conservative Political Action Conference.

While on the campaign trail, Trump met with Gaffney’s staff while in Iowa for an hour-long briefing on Shariah law. Gaffney later told [Bloomberg View](#) that Trump “has put around him people who are members of that team” who conducted the briefing. Though Gaffney is not serving as an official adviser to Trump (despite being reported as such), he has said he is “hopeful that [his] ideas and policies will influence the Trump administration.”

While Gaffney is one of the more prolific Brotherhood conspiracists, he is not the only one with ties to the White House. Trump’s own chief strategist and senior advisor Stephen K. Bannon, the former CEO of Breitbart News, [used](#) his media platform to amplify conspiracy theories of Muslim Brotherhood infiltration. Gaffney was a regular on his radio program. Bannon also shares delusional fears of a Muslim takeover, as a recent film script [unearthed](#) by *The Washington Post* shows.

[Stephen Miller](#), senior policy advisor to Trump, similarly has ties to anti-Muslim figures known for spreading Brotherhood conspiracy theories. It has been widely reported that anti-Muslim demagogue David Horowitz served as Miller’s mentor. Horowitz has previously [stated](#), “The Muslim Brotherhood has been wildly successful in its plan to become part of America’s civil culture and to infiltrate the institutions of America’s civil government, including the White House and both political parties, and the conservative movement as well.”

His organization, the David Horowitz Freedom Center, has bankrolled works by [Gaffney](#) and [Robert Spencer](#) alleging the Brotherhood's infiltration of America.

Trump's former national security adviser, [Michael Flynn](#), shared an unhealthy obsession with the Brotherhood and Islam. [Reuters](#) reported that during his time with the administration Flynn led a faction of advisors agitating to "add the Brotherhood to the State Department and U.S. Treasury lists of foreign terrorist organizations."

Flynn serves as an advisory board member to ACT for America, the largest anti-Muslim grassroots group in the nation. For years, ACT has lobbied to pass legislation designating the Brotherhood a terrorist group.

## Not a new policy proposal

In 2014, just before she retired, Rep. Michele Bachmann introduced a bill to label the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization and impose sanctions on anyone in the U.S. who provides material support to the group. The bill was the first formal iteration of this policy proposal, and it came directly from the organized anti-immigrant movement.

To [draft](#) the bill, Rep. Bachmann enlisted the help of disgraced former FBI turned anti-Muslim conspiracist John Guandolo, a well-known figure within the organized Islamophobia movement. This initial version of the policy did not attempt to conceal the conspiracy theory that inspired it, or its end goal of destroying Muslim community and civil rights groups.

In fact, the bill specifically [named](#) Muslim civil rights and religious groups like the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), and the North American Islamic Trust (NAIT). Not surprisingly, Guandolo regularly slanders these groups as Muslim Brotherhood front groups. He has [called](#) members of the groups "suit-wearing jihadis" who "are no less dangerous than ISIS soldiers on the battlefield."

Guandolo has [accused](#) the Muslim Student Association, a student group on college campuses, of being a Brotherhood front group that only serves to "recruit jihadis," and has similarly sought to incriminate other Islamic institutions and houses of worship.

"It is a matter of fact," Guandolo has [written](#), that MSAs, "are a part of the Muslim Brotherhood's Movement in the United States with the mission of waging 'civilization jihad' to destroy western civilization and replace our government with an Islamic government."

In a 2016 [interview](#) with WorldNetDaily, Guandolo argued that the U.S. should arrest "all of the Muslim Brotherhood leaders in the U.S., shutting down their organizations and all Muslim Brotherhood mosques, which is 80% of them."

Bachmann's 2014 bill gained 19 cosponsors and was never formally considered by Congress, but its idea was far from dead. While pushing Trump to designate the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization by executive order, the anti-Muslim movement is continuing to pursue a legislative route to demonizing Muslim civil society organizations.

Sen. Ted Cruz (R-TX) and Rep. Mario Diaz-Balart (R-FL) have co-introduced the latest iteration of Bachmann's bill: S. 68 and H.R. 377, respectively. Cruz also has ties to ACT for America and has [attended](#) the group's national conference.

In a February 27 email to supporters, ACT's founder and president Brigitte Gabriel wrote, "We are now working with members of the 115<sup>th</sup> U.S. Congress on important national security bills such as efforts to designate the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization."

Gabriel has also touted having "a direct line" to Trump through two other administration officials associated with her group, [Walid Phares](#) and CIA director [Mike Pompeo](#). In the same email, ACT [listed](#) "Classify the Muslim Brotherhood and its affiliates in the US as terrorist organizations" as a priority in 2017.

ACT is not the only anti-Muslim entity with which Ted Cruz associates. He has ties to [Frank Gaffney](#) and [Clare Lopez](#), both of whom served on his national security team during his 2016 presidential run. Cruz's House colleague, Diaz-Balart, has also [appeared](#) on Gaffney's "Secure Freedom Radio" program to promote his anti-Brotherhood bill.

## Origins of the conspiracy theory

The anti-Muslim movement's obsessive fear mongering about the Muslim Brotherhood hinges on a single, dangerously misinterpreted memo.

Anti-Muslim antagonists argue that the memo outlines the Brotherhood's goals to subvert the U.S. from within and usher in an Islamic caliphate. They claim the group is engaging in "civilizational jihad" and using the U.S.'s own institutions of democracy against it.

Authorities consistently hold that there is little merit behind the "civilizational jihad" interpretation of this document, yet that does not influence the regularity with which it is cited by those intent on spreading Islamophobia. The document was unearthed in 2004 and submitted to a court during the 2007 Holy Land Foundation trial, which charged a charity with funneling money to a foreign terrorist outfit.

Pulitzer Prize-winning author David Shipler [wrote](#) of the memo, "Examined closely, it does not stand up as an authoritative prescription for action. Rather, it appears to have been written as a plea to the Muslim Brotherhood leadership for action, by an author we know little about." He argues that the memo is revealed as "a mere proposal, now twenty-four years old," by an author who "writes in the tone of an underling." Similarly, the Bridge Initiative at Georgetown University [notes](#) that the document "should not be taken seriously."

Experts also minimize the influence and reach of the Brotherhood. Eric Trager, who authored a book about the Muslim Brotherhood titled *Arab Fall*, [told](#) BuzzFeed in 2016, "a group that could not even achieve this goal [of consolidating power] in Egypt, where it is from, poses very little risk to a country like the United States."