

QANON CONSPIRACY THEORY

IMPACT: QAnon Conspiracy theory claims there is a “deep state” and that “the world is run by a cabal of Satan-worshipping pedophiles who are plotting against Mr. Trump while operating a global child sex-trafficking ring.” It has been described as a “virtual cult” and is largely an umbrella term for multiple conspiracy theories. The conspiracy theory has been elevated by the President of the United States as well as a number of candidates who ran for public office in 2020.

- The **QAnon conspiracy originated in October 2017** anonymous posts from someone calling themselves “Q” on an online message board called 4chan. The post was titled “Calm Before the Storm,” assumed to refer to a quote by US President Donald Trump. The anonymous poster claimed to be a high-level government official with Q level clearance who was tasked with revealing intelligence details, described as “crumbs.” The **anonymous poster has since made claims about a “deep state” and alleges that the “the world is run by a cabal of Satan-worshipping pedophiles who are plotting against Mr. Trump while operating a global child sex-trafficking ring.”**
- A September 2020 *ABC* article found that the **“two Americans most clearly associated with the author of thousands of ‘Q drops’” are James Arthur Watkins**, who gained control in 2015 of anonymous message board 8chan, **and his son, Ronald Watkins**, “former 8chan administrator and current administrator of its successor, the Watkins-owned 8kun.”
- Followers of QAnon believe that US President Donald Trump was “recruited by top military generals to run for president in 2016 in order to break up this criminal conspiracy, end its control of politics and the media, and bring its members to justice.” Thus, **President Trump serves as a “central and heroic” figure among QAnon followers—“chosen to save America from the global cabal.”**
- A July 2020 *CNN* article noted that **while “QAnon began as a single conspiracy theory... its followers now act more like a virtual cult...believing whatever disinformation the conspiracy community spins up.”** QAnon now largely serves as an umbrella term for multiple conspiracy theories; followers have also “falsely claimed that 5G cellular networks are spreading the coronavirus,” and promoted the 9/11 “truther” movement. An October 2020 article in the *New York Times* noted that supporters were “flooding social media with false information” about the Black Lives Matter protests and the 2020 election, while also attaching “themselves to other activist causes, such as the anti-vaccine and anti-child-trafficking movements, in an effort to expand their ranks.” A June 2020 article in *The Atlantic* described the QAnon phenomenon as the “the birth of a new religion.”
- **Following the 2020 US presidential election, adherents of the conspiracy theory made “constant false claims about voter fraud connected to a company that makes voting machines.”** This eventually caught the eye of President Trump, who lost the election but has continued to make baseless allegations of “voter fraud.” He supported the claims of QAnon followers by tweeting that “Dominion Voting Systems, a company that makes voting machines, ‘deleted’ millions of Trump votes, citing a report on the far-right cable news outlet One America News Network.” **Not only has President Trump failed to denounce the conspiracy theory, he has repeatedly given the allegations airtime.**

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- Followers of the conspiracy theory [call](#) posts made by Q “drops” and there have been “nearly 5,000 of them so far, and most take the form of a cryptic coded message.” An October 2020 article in the *New York Times* [found](#) that “followers use ‘Q Drop’ apps that collect all of Q’s posts in one place, and alert them every time a new post arrives.” The group’s followers, who [call](#) themselves “believers,” [claim](#) a network of politicians and celebrities are working alongside “governments around the globe to engage in child sex abuse.” The **conspiracy theory names high-level Democrats, including Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, Huma Abedin, in addition to billionaire philanthropist, George Soros, as leaders of a sex trafficking ring.** In early 2020, Oprah and Tom Hanks became [targets](#) of the conspiracy theory as followers alleged that a house in Florida owned by Oprah had been seized by the police in a child sex trafficking sting and that Tom Hanks had been arrested for pedophilia.
- [QAnon](#) is a “big tent conspiracy theory” that is [decentralized](#) and lacks a clear objective. **Anyone can create a conspiracy theory and then use the QAnon hashtag to spread the claims online.** Its popular slogan is “Question everything” and it has gained a following on social media, including Twitter, Facebook, Youtube, and Reddit. The conspiracy theories have been elevated by individuals with large platforms such as actress [Roseanne Barr](#), US President [Donald Trump](#), and many members of the Republican party including a US representative-elect from Georgia, [Marjorie Taylor Greene](#).
- The fringe movement has gained a foothold in US mainstream politics. A September 2020 [article](#) in *New York Magazine* found **twenty-four followers of the theory were running for Congress in the November 2020 elections.** A 2020 piece by **Media Matters for America** [found](#) that **ninety-seven congressional candidates had embraced the conspiracy theory during the 2020 election cycle.** Following the elections, **two Republican candidates who “endorsed or [had] given credence to QAnon” won their elections for a seat in Congress.**
- During the **April 2020 Republican National Convention (RNC), there were a number of scheduled speakers who had supported QAnon conspiracy theories.** An *NBC News* [article](#) in April 2020 found that Burgess Owens, a Republican congressional candidate in Utah, had “appeared on a YouTube show affiliated with the movement this year.” Another [billed](#) speaker was conservative civil rights activist Clarence Henderson, who had appeared on a “well-known QAnon podcast” in 2019, where he made “anti-Muslim and anti-transgender comments.”
- Given its popularity on the internet, with politicians, and even in some [Christian churches](#), a September 2020 [piece](#) in *Open Democracy* noted that some argue it is “no longer a conspiracy theory but a full-blown cult.”
- QAnon believers also engage in Islamophobia. **Following the Covid-19 pandemic, QAnon adherents [claimed](#) there was a “secret plan orchestrated by Muslims to bring Sharia law to the United States by way of coronavirus restrictions.”** Images circulated on social media by QAnon followers claiming that medical expert advice to wear masks to stop the spread of the virus was a plot to enforce the wearing of niqabs.
- In a July 2020 interview, Jason Blazakis, former director of the State Department's Counterterrorism Finance and Designations Office, [told](#) *Middle East Eye* that there is an “an element of anti-Islam that runs through QAnon conspiracies.” For QAnon followers, “vilifying

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Muslims” is seen as “fair game” because of [President Trump's](#) numerous discriminatory and racist statements against Islam and Muslims.

- QAnon’s popularity is not limited to the United States. Due to QAnon’s prevalence on the internet, it has followers around the globe. An August 2020 report by Parjanya Christian Holtz for the *Washington Post* [revealed](#) that the **gunman who killed nine individuals in the February 2020 shooting in Hanau, Germany had posted a statement which included “xenophobic ideologies and QAnon conspiracy theories.”**
- In **May 2019, the FBI [classified](#) QAnon as a potential “domestic terrorism threat” in an internal memo**, which also listed a number of incidents involving QAnon believers. The memo warned that “fringe conspiracy theories very likely motivate some domestic extremists, wholly or in part, to commit criminal and sometimes violent activity.”
- An October 2020 *New York Times* [article](#) noted that **some QAnon believers had been “charged with violent crimes” as the conspiracy theory has “seeped into the offline world.”** In 2019, Anthony Comello, [described](#) by his lawyer as “deluded by internet conspiracy theories,” allegedly shot and killed Francesco Cali. Comello believed Cali was a “prominent member of the deep state, and, accordingly, an appropriate target for a citizen’s arrest.” His lawyer also [stated](#) that Comello was “certain that he was enjoying the protection” and “support” of President Trump.
- In April 2019, another QAnon follower, Jessica Prim, was [accused](#) of threatening to kill then-Democratic presidential nominee, Joe Biden. Prim had traveled to New York City with more than a “dozen illegal knives” and [revealed](#) in a livestream shortly before her arrest that “Hillary Clinton and her assistant, Joe Biden and Tony Podesta need to be taken out.”
- The **2020 Covid-19 pandemic resulted in a massive increase in QAnon-related content online around the globe, “growing nearly 175% on Facebook and nearly 63% on Twitter” between March and June.** An August 2020 [article](#) in the *Wall Street Journal* found that membership in ten large Facebook groups dedicated to QAnon had grown by over 600 percent since the Covid-19 lockdowns began.
- In August 2020, an *NBC News* [piece](#) reported that an internal Facebook study had found “thousands of QAnon groups operating on the social network, with millions of members between them.” In **October 2020, the [social media giant](#) and [Youtube](#) announced new policies, removing “thousands of accounts, pages, and channels from their platforms.”** The *New York Times* [reported](#) that Twitter had also “banned thousands of QAnon accounts for engaging in coordinated harassment.