Research Square

Preprints are preliminary reports that have not undergone peer review.
They should not be considered conclusive, used to inform clinical practice,
or referenced by the media as validated information.

Mirrored Suspicion: Conspiracy, Securitization, and the Opposition to Jewish–Muslim Engagement in the United States since 9/11

Iqbal Akhtar

iakhtar@fiu.edu

Florida International University

Research Article

Keywords: Jewish–Muslim relations, conspiracy theory, securitization, interfaith dialogue, antisemitism, Islamophobia, digital religion, covenantal pluralism

Posted Date: November 20th, 2026

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-11348241/v1

License: This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.
Read Full License

Additional Declarations: No competing interests reported.

Mirrored Suspicion: Conspiracy, Securitization, and the Opposition to Jewish–Muslim Engagement in the United States since 9/11

ABSTRACT

Since September 11, 2001, efforts to build durable relationships between American Jewish and American Muslim communities have met organized opposition from within both communities. This article argues that the opposition follows a logic of mirrored suspicion: opponents of engagement in each community read the other's outreach as a surface concealing hostile intent. The form that suspicion takes, however, tracks each community's position relative to the American security state. Among American Muslims, opposition tends toward a conspiratorial register in which interfaith programs, particularly those connected to Zionist institutions, are read as covert normalization, surveillance, or co-optation. Among American Jews, opposition tends toward a securitizing register in which Muslim partners are read as fronts for Islamist networks or for a "red-green" convergence of Islamism and the radical left. Drawing on peer-reviewed research in social psychology, the sociology of religion, security studies, and digital religion, and on five episodes from 2001 to 2024, the article shows that the two registers share a narrative grammar of concealment and exposure, that both are concentrated in organizational and online arenas rather than in lay opinion, and that digital platforms reward them. It proposes symmetrical criteria for distinguishing principled dissent from suspicion and outlines a research design for testing the argument. Mirrored suspicion, the article concludes, is a structural obstacle to pluralism that neither community can dismantle alone.

Keywords: Jewish–Muslim relations; conspiracy theory; securitization; interfaith dialogue; antisemitism; Islamophobia; digital religion; covenantal pluralism

INTRODUCTION

In the quarter century since September 11, 2001, American Jews and American Muslims have built more formal relationships with one another than at any earlier point in the history of the United States. Congregations have twinned, campus chaplaincies have co-sponsored programs, clergy have joined fellowships, legal advocates have filed joint briefs on religious liberty, and community organizations have stood together against hate crimes. Over the same period, those relationships have generated organized and often bitter opposition from inside each community. To a vocal set of Muslim critics, Jewish-sponsored dialogue is a soft instrument of Zionist influence, a means of purchasing Muslim silence on Palestine. To a vocal set of Jewish critics, Muslim dialogue partners are fronts for the Muslim Brotherhood or participants in a "red-green alliance" between Islamists and the radical left. Each side treats the other's friendliness as the most dangerous thing about it.

This article asks why opposition to Jewish–Muslim engagement takes these particular forms, and what the two forms have to do with each other. The answer most often offered by partisans is that the other community's opponents are simply prejudiced: Muslim suspicion of Jewish outreach is antisemitism by another name, and Jewish suspicion of Muslim outreach is Islamophobia by another name. There is truth in both charges, and the article dismisses neither. The charge of prejudice does not, however, explain why the two oppositions are so differently styled, why one speaks the language of hidden hands and the other the language of threat assessment, or why the two seem to feed on each other.

My argument is that opposition to Jewish–Muslim engagement in post-9/11 America follows a logic of *mirrored suspicion*. Opponents in each community read the other's outreach as a surface concealing hostile intent, and each reading is structured by the same narrative grammar

of concealment and exposure. The register in which that suspicion is voiced differs systematically, however, and the difference tracks each community's position relative to the American security state. Among American Muslims, who have spent two decades as objects of counterterrorism policing, suspicion tends toward a *conspiratorial* register in which power is hidden, unaccountable, and in need of unmasking. Among American Jews, whose communal institutions maintain deep ties to policy makers, philanthropy, and security agencies, suspicion tends toward a *securitizing* register in which the other is a threat to be identified, documented, and managed. The distinction between the two registers is less epistemic than positional. Both make claims about concealed intent that are difficult to falsify. What differs is whether the claim is voiced from outside or from inside the institutions that authorize claims about danger.

Three clarifications frame what follows. First, the argument concerns communal organizations, clergy who address their communities through online video, and online publics. It does not describe the views of American Jews or American Muslims as populations, and, as shown below, the best recent survey evidence suggests that lay attitudes in both communities are considerably warmer than the discourse of their most vocal opponents of engagement. Second, the argument does not equate the two forms of suspicion in their moral character or their consequences. Securitizing suspicion, because it is authorized, can be converted into surveillance, prosecution, and exclusion in ways that conspiratorial suspicion usually cannot. Conspiratorial suspicion, because it draws on the oldest antisemitic tropes, can be converted into hostility and violence against Jews in ways that must not be minimized. Third, the article distinguishes suspicion from dissent. Many Muslims who oppose particular interfaith programs do so on principled anti-normalization grounds, and many Jews who scrutinize particular Muslim organizations do so on

the basis of documented conduct. A central task of the article is to specify where principled dissent ends and suspicion begins.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section reviews research on Jewish–Muslim relations and identifies an asymmetry of description that has made mutual suspicion difficult to study. The third section builds a theoretical framework from three bodies of peer-reviewed research: the social psychology of conspiracy belief, securitization theory, and the study of anti-Muslim conspiracism. The fourth describes the article's approach, and the fifth traces five episodes between 2001 and 2024. The sixth and seventh sections analyze the two registers in turn, and the eighth examines how digital platforms bind them into a feedback loop. The ninth proposes criteria for distinguishing dissent from suspicion. The final sections consider implications for pluralism, outline a research agenda, and conclude.

THE ASYMMETRY OF DESCRIPTION

Scholarship on Jewish–Muslim relations in Western societies has moved over the past two decades from parallel literatures on antisemitism and Islamophobia toward relational analysis. Matti Bunzl's early comparison of the two prejudices in Europe argued that they had different genealogies and served different political functions, the former bound up with the project of the ethnically homogeneous nation-state and the latter with the boundaries of a supranational European civilization.[1] More recent ethnographic work examines how Jews and Muslims actually encounter one another. Ben Gidley and colleagues show that urban Jewish–Muslim interactions in Europe differ sharply depending on whether they are staged for public audiences or take place

[1]Matti Bunzl, "Between Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia: Some Thoughts on the New Europe," *American Ethnologist* 32, no. 4 (2005): 499–508.

offstage in everyday life,[2] and Arndt Emmerich's study of Jewish–Muslim friendship networks in Germany traces how boundaries are negotiated and renegotiated across generations.[3] This literature establishes that the relationship is plural and situational rather than fixed.

In the American setting, the most systematic recent evidence comes from survey research. Using a 2024 national probability sample with oversamples of Jews and Muslims, Elaine Howard Ecklund, Kerby Goff, and Eduard van der Merwe find that Jewish respondents rated Muslims warmly on a feeling thermometer, more warmly than they rated evangelicals or atheists, even as they rated Palestinians and Hamas coolly.[4] Muslim respondents rated Jews above the scale's midpoint while rating Israelis and the Israeli government coolly. The authors interpret the pattern as evidence that religious identities elicit more sympathy than national and political ones. The same study documents a reversal: after October 7, 2023, Jewish respondents became the group most likely to report experiencing religious bias and fearing future bias, followed by Muslims, inverting the ordering found in earlier research.[5] For present purposes the significance of these data is that the mutual hostility that dominates organizational and online discourse is not a straightforward expression of lay opinion. Something in the institutions and media through which the two communities speak about each other amplifies suspicion beyond its base in the population.

A second body of research complicates any purely symmetrical account. Studies of antisemitism consistently find that belief in malevolent global conspiracies is among its strongest

[2]Ben Gidley et al., "Off and On Stage Interactions: Muslim–Jewish Encounter in Urban Europe," *Ethnicities* 25 (2025): 235–54.

[3]Arndt Emmerich, "Jewish–Muslim Friendship Networks: A Study of Intergenerational Boundary Work in Postwar Germany," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 67, no. 1 (2025): 33–61.

[4]Elaine Howard Ecklund, Kerby Goff, and Eduard van der Merwe, "Religious Discrimination and Othering in the U.S. After October 7th: A Data Overview," *Religions* 16, no. 12 (2025): 1552, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16121552.

[5]Ecklund, Goff, and van der Merwe, "Religious Discrimination and Othering"; Christopher P. Scheitle et al., "Fear of Religious Hate Crime Victimization and the Residual Effects of Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia," *Social Forces* 101, no. 4 (2023): 2059–86.

predictors. Daniel Allington, David Hirsh, and Louise Katz report that conspiracy belief predicted both older Judeophobic and newer anti-Zionist forms of antisemitism in two British samples.[6] In a preregistered longitudinal design with American respondents, Kent Harber and colleagues find that conspiracy beliefs about Israel and about pro-Israel Jews mediated the relationship between classical antisemitism and later anti-Israel attitudes, whereas conspiracy beliefs about Jews unrelated to Israel did not.[7] Neither study samples American Muslims specifically, and their findings cannot be transferred to Muslim communities without further research. They do establish that the conspiratorial register has a well-documented pathway into antisemitism, which is why any analysis of Muslim suspicion toward Jewish outreach must take that pathway seriously rather than treat it as a misunderstanding.

A third body of research documents the American anti-Muslim movement. Christopher Bail's study of civil society organizations after 9/11 shows how a small number of fringe groups with emotionally charged messages came to dominate media discourse about Islam, crowding out mainstream Muslim organizations.[8] Benjamin Lee's survey of the counter-jihad movement and Ed Pertwee's analysis of its organizational infrastructure trace how a transnational network of bloggers, think tanks, and activists built a narrative of civilizational war in which Western Muslims function as a fifth column.[9] S. Jonathon O'Donnell's study of the Center for Security Policy shows

[6]Daniel Allington, David Hirsh, and Louise Katz, "Antisemitism Is Predicted by Anti-Hierarchical Aggression, Totalitarianism, and Belief in Malevolent Global Conspiracies," *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 10 (2023): 155, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-023-01624-y.

[7]Kent D. Harber et al., "Antisemitism, Conspiracy Beliefs, and Anti-Israel Attitudes," *American Psychologist* 81, no. 4 (2026): 463–77, https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0001635.

[8]Christopher A. Bail, "The Fringe Effect: Civil Society Organizations and the Evolution of Media Discourse about Islam since the September 11th Attacks," *American Sociological Review* 77, no. 6 (2012): 855–79.

[9]Benjamin Lee, "Why We Fight: Understanding the Counter-Jihad Movement," *Religion Compass* 10, no. 10 (2016): 257–65; Ed Pertwee, "Donald Trump, the Anti-Muslim Far Right and the New Conservative Revolution," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 43, no. 16 (2020): 211–30.

that this narrative is itself conspiratorial, positing a Brotherhood campaign to capture American legislative and judicial institutions through what its proponents call "civilization jihad."[10] These studies rarely focus on Jewish communal actors, but they establish that the securitizing register directed at American Muslims shares a lineage with an explicitly conspiratorial movement.

These literatures have developed largely in isolation from one another. Research on antisemitism tends to treat Muslim suspicion of Jews as prejudice to be explained, and research on Islamophobia tends to treat suspicion of Muslims, Jewish or otherwise, as prejudice to be explained. Each literature, read alone, produces an asymmetric description in which one community's suspicion appears as a cognitive or moral failing and the other's is either invisible or understandable. A relational account must explain both forms of suspicion with the same conceptual tools.

THEORIZING SUSPICION AND POSITION

Suspicion between groups in conflict often takes a mirrored form. Urie Bronfenbrenner, writing during the Cold War, observed that Soviet and American citizens described each other in strikingly similar terms, each attributing aggression and deceit to the other's government while regarding its own as defensive.[11] The mirror-image hypothesis captures the symmetry of mutual suspicion. It does not explain why suspicion might take different forms on each side of a relationship. For that, theories are needed that link the form of suspicion to the social position of those who hold it. Three bodies of research supply them.

[10]S. Jonathon O'Donnell, "Islamophobic Conspiracism and Neoliberal Subjectivity: The Inassimilable Society," *Patterns of Prejudice* 52, no. 1 (2018): 1–23.

[11]Urie Bronfenbrenner, "The Mirror Image in Soviet-American Relations: A Social Psychologist's Report," *Journal of Social Issues* 17, no. 3 (1961): 45–56.

The first is the social psychology of conspiracy belief. Karen Douglas, Robbie Sutton, and Aleksandra Cichocka argue that conspiracy theories appeal to people whose epistemic, existential, and social needs are frustrated: the need to understand events, the need to feel safe and in control, and the need to maintain a positive image of the self and the group.[12] Several findings bear directly on minority communities. Roland Imhoff and Martin Bruder conceptualize "conspiracy mentality" as a generalized political attitude directed against powerful groups and associated with perceived powerlessness.[13] A twenty-six-country study led by Imhoff finds that conspiracy mentality is elevated at the political extremes and among those whose preferred parties are out of power.[14] Mirosław Kofta, Wiktor Soral, and Michał Bilewicz show that a sense of political uncontrollability increases belief in Jewish conspiracy.[15] In a study of particular relevance to American minorities, Jennifer Crocker and colleagues found that Black college students' belief in government conspiracies against Black Americans was associated with system blame, the attribution of group disadvantage to structural injustice.[16] Taken together, this research suggests that conspiracy belief is in part a psycho-political response to relative powerlessness, and that it can coexist with accurate perceptions of real injustice.

The second is securitization theory. Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde define securitization as a move through which an actor presents an issue as an existential threat that

---

[12]Karen M. Douglas, Robbie M. Sutton, and Aleksandra Cichocka, "The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 26, no. 6 (2017): 538–42.

[13]Roland Imhoff and Martin Bruder, "Speaking (Un-)Truth to Power: Conspiracy Mentality as a Generalised Political Attitude," *European Journal of Personality* 28, no. 1 (2014): 25–43.

[14]Roland Imhoff et al., "Conspiracy Mentality and Political Orientation across 26 Countries," *Nature Human Behaviour* 6, no. 3 (2022): 392–403.

[15]Mirosław Kofta, Wiktor Soral, and Michał Bilewicz, "What Breeds Conspiracy Antisemitism? The Role of Political Uncontrollability and Uncertainty in the Belief in Jewish Conspiracy," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 118, no. 5 (2020): 900–918.

[16]Jennifer Crocker et al., "Belief in U.S. Government Conspiracies against Blacks among Black and White College Students: Powerlessness or System Blame?," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 25, no. 8 (1999): 941–53.

justifies measures beyond the ordinary rules of politics, a move that succeeds when a relevant audience accepts it.[17] Thierry Balzacq emphasizes that securitization is not a single utterance but a pragmatic process that depends on the speaker's authority, the audience's dispositions, and the surrounding context.[18] Securitization, in other words, is a mode of suspicion available to actors who possess institutional authority or can borrow it. Luca Mavelli shows that the securitization of Islam in Europe has been bound up with the construction of a secular norm against which visible Muslim religiosity appears as a potential danger.[19] In the United States, Saher Selod and Louise Cainkar document how post-9/11 surveillance racialized Muslim identity, so that Muslim religiosity became a marker of potential threat in airports, workplaces, and policing.[20]

The third is the study of anti-Muslim conspiracism. O'Donnell's analysis is crucial here, because it shows that the securitizing register directed at Muslims frequently depends on conspiratorial claims of its own.[21] The "civilization jihad" narrative posits a concealed, coordinated, and nearly unfalsifiable plot. It differs from the conspiracy theories that circulate among minorities chiefly in its relation to authority: it has been voiced in legislative testimony, in law-enforcement trainings, and by candidates for national office.[22] What distinguishes the two registers, then, is not that one is conspiratorial and the other rational. It is that one speaks from

[17]Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1998).

[18]Thierry Balzacq, "The Three Faces of Securitization: Political Agency, Audience and Context," *European Journal of International Relations* 11, no. 2 (2005): 171–201.

[19]Luca Mavelli, "Between Normalisation and Exception: The Securitisation of Islam and the Construction of the Secular Subject," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 41, no. 2 (2013): 159–81.

[20]Saher Selod, "Citizenship Denied: The Racialization of Muslim American Men and Women Post-9/11," *Critical Sociology* 41, no. 1 (2015): 77–95; Louise Cainkar and Saher Selod, "Review of Race Scholarship and the War on Terror," *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 4, no. 2 (2018): 165–77; Louise Cainkar, "Racial Control under the Guise of Terror Threat: Policing of US Muslim, Arab, and SWANA Communities," *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 16, no. 1 (2023): 152–75.

[21]O'Donnell, "Islamophobic Conspiracism."

[22]Pertwee, "Donald Trump, the Anti-Muslim Far Right"; Lee, "Why We Fight."

outside the institutions that certify claims about danger, and the other speaks from within them or aspires to.

Combining these strands yields the article's central conceptual claim. Suspicion of the other community's outreach has a common narrative grammar with four elements: an outward face of friendship, a hidden agenda behind it, an agent who directs that agenda, and an act of exposure that reveals it. What varies is the register. In the *conspiratorial register*, the hidden agent is an unaccountable power, the evidence consists of pattern and coincidence, and exposure is addressed to the in-group as a warning. In the *securitizing register*, the hidden agent is a designated network, the evidence takes the form of dossiers, affiliations, and documents, and exposure is addressed to authorities and donors as a demand for action. Which register a community's opponents of engagement adopt depends substantially, though not exclusively, on that community's position relative to the institutions of security and power.

APPROACH

This article is an analytic essay rather than a report of original coding. It synthesizes peer-reviewed research and the public record across three arenas: national and regional communal organizations, clergy who address their communities through online video, and online publics on social media and community platforms. It reads these arenas through five episodes, each chosen because it generated sustained public argument within both communities about whether and how to engage the other: the post-9/11 surveillance regime and the 2008 Holy Land Foundation trial; the 2010 controversy over the Park51 community center in Lower Manhattan; the dispute over the Muslim Leadership Initiative beginning in 2013; the 2017 executive order restricting travel from several Muslim-majority countries; and the period following October 7, 2023. The episodes are

illustrative rather than exhaustive. The argument is offered as a framework whose claims can be tested, and the article closes with a research design for doing so.

FIVE EPISODES, 2001–2024

Surveillance and the Holy Land Foundation Trial

The first decade after 9/11 established the structural conditions for both registers. Federal and local counterterrorism programs placed mosques, Muslim student associations, and charities under surveillance, and the closure of several Muslim charities on terrorism-financing grounds turned ordinary religious giving into a source of legal exposure.[23] The 2008 conviction of leaders of the Holy Land Foundation for providing material support to Hamas was a pivotal event. Before trial, prosecutors filed a list of unindicted co-conspirators and joint venturers that included several of the largest national Muslim organizations, a list that a federal judge later concluded should not have been made public. Among the trial exhibits was a 1991 memorandum by a Brotherhood-affiliated activist describing an aspiration to transform American society from within. That document became a founding text of the "civilization jihad" narrative analyzed by O'Donnell, and the co-conspirator list became the evidentiary anchor for two decades of claims that mainstream Muslim organizations are Brotherhood fronts.[24] The episode supplied the securitizing register with its archive. It supplied the conspiratorial register with its grievance: for many American Muslims, the public naming of national organizations that were never charged confirmed that the state, and the advocacy groups that briefed it, treated Muslim civic life itself as suspect.

[23]Cainkar and Selod, "Review of Race Scholarship"; Lori Peek, *Behind the Backlash: Muslim Americans after 9/11* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011); Saher Selod, *Forever Suspect: Racialized Surveillance of Muslim Americans in the War on Terror* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2018).

[24]O'Donnell, "Islamophobic Conspiracism."

Park51

The 2010 controversy over a proposed Islamic community center two blocks from the World Trade Center site brought the counter-jihad narrative into the mainstream. Bail's analysis shows how fringe organizations using emotionally resonant messages captured a disproportionate share of media coverage in this period.[25] The episode also exposed divisions within Jewish communal life: some national Jewish organizations opposed the location, while many rabbis and other Jewish leaders publicly defended the project as a test of religious freedom. Muslim observers frequently interpreted Jewish opposition through the conspiratorial register, as evidence that Jewish institutional power was aligned with the anti-Muslim movement. Jewish opponents, for their part, subjected the project's leadership and funding to securitizing scrutiny. Each side's reading of the other drew strength from the visibility of the other side's opponents, while the Jewish defenders of the project received comparatively little attention in Muslim community discourse.

The Muslim Leadership Initiative

In 2013 the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem launched the Muslim Leadership Initiative, a fellowship co-directed by a Muslim chaplain and an Israeli Jewish writer that brought North American Muslim leaders to study Judaism, Jewish peoplehood, and Zionism. The program became the most contested interfaith initiative of the period. Its Muslim critics, many aligned with the movement for boycott, divestment, and sanctions, argued that it violated the Palestinian call to refuse normalization with Israeli institutions, that some of its funders also supported organizations hostile to Muslims, and that it sought to cultivate a cohort of Muslim leaders who would soften American Muslim opposition to Israeli policy. Some of these arguments were principled and

[25]Bail, "The Fringe Effect."

specific. Others slid into claims that participants had been bought or brainwashed. The program's defenders, Muslim and Jewish, argued that understanding the place of Zionism in contemporary Jewish identity was a precondition for honest relationship rather than an endorsement of Israeli policy. The dispute is analytically valuable because it displays, within a single controversy, both the principled anti-normalization position and its conspiratorial extension, and because it shows the conspiratorial register directed not only at Jews but also at Muslims who engaged with them.

The Travel Ban

The 2017 executive order restricting entry from several Muslim-majority countries is a counter-case. Many Jewish organizations, including refugee agencies and the major religious movements, opposed the order publicly, and Jewish participation in airport protests and legal challenges was visible and widely noted in Muslim community media. For a period, both registers lost salience in mainstream communal discourse. The episode suggests that mirrored suspicion is not a fixed property of the relationship. When the threat came from the state itself, and when Jewish institutions used their access to oppose rather than advance the securitization of Muslims, the conditions that sustain the conspiratorial register weakened, and joint action reduced the plausibility of the securitizing one.

October 7 and After

The Hamas-led attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, and the war in Gaza that followed reactivated both registers with unprecedented intensity. Ecklund, Goff, and van der Merwe document violence against members of both communities in the United States during the war, from the killing of a six-year-old Palestinian American boy in Illinois in October 2023 to an incendiary attack on a gathering in support of Israeli hostages in Colorado in 2025, and they find that Jewish and Muslim respondents were the groups most likely to report that the war had harmed their mental

health.[26] Hope LaFreniere Tamez, Natalie Anastasio, and Arie Perliger show that escalations in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict are associated with increases in antisemitic incidents in the United States.[27] In this setting, dialogue programs that had survived earlier crises came under pressure from both sides at once. Muslim participants faced accusations of complicity, and Jewish participants faced accusations of naïveté about partners whose public statements on the war were read as evidence of hidden sympathies.

THE CONSPIRATORIAL REGISTER

The conspiratorial register in Muslim opposition to Jewish engagement has four recurring features. The first is the *attribution of hidden direction*: interfaith programs are read as instruments of an unseen strategy, often attributed to Israeli state agencies, pro-Israel donors, or a generalized "Zionist lobby," rather than as initiatives of the individuals and congregations who conduct them. The second is *inference from funding*: the identity of a program's funders is taken as sufficient evidence of its purpose, so that overlapping donor networks become proof of shared intent. The third is the *treatment of participants as compromised*: Muslims who engage are described as co-opted, purchased, or naïve, so that the register polices the in-group as much as it accuses the out-group. The fourth is *resistance to disconfirmation*: evidence that a program permitted sharp criticism of Israel, or produced joint Muslim–Jewish action against Islamophobia, is reinterpreted as a more sophisticated technique of co-optation.

The psychological research reviewed above helps explain the register's appeal without reducing it to individual pathology. American Muslims have experienced two decades of

[26]Ecklund, Goff, and van der Merwe, "Religious Discrimination and Othering."

[27]Hope D. LaFreniere Tamez, Natalie Anastasio, and Arie Perliger, "Explaining the Rise of Antisemitism in the United States," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2024), https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2023.2297317.

documented surveillance, informant programs, and public campaigns questioning their loyalty.[28] Some of the actors who conducted those campaigns had, as Bail and Pertwee show, real organizational and financial networks.[29] Under such conditions the hypothesis that dialogue is surveillance by other means is not irrational on its face. Crocker and colleagues' finding that minority conspiracy belief can express system blame is instructive here.[30] The conspiratorial register often begins from accurate perceptions of real asymmetries of power. Its error lies in the inference from asymmetry to coordinated intent, and in the extension of that inference to Jews as a collective.

That extension is where the register becomes dangerous. The research of Allington and colleagues and of Harber and colleagues shows that beliefs about concealed Jewish or Zionist power form a bridge between anti-Israel attitudes and antisemitism.[31] Matthew Gray's analysis of conspiracy theories in Arab political discourse cautions against treating such beliefs as a cultural trait, locating their sources instead in histories of external domination and state manipulation of information.[32] Both points must be held together. The conspiratorial register in American Muslim discourse is a product of position rather than of Islam, and it is also a vector through which the oldest antisemitic tropes, of Jews as hidden masters of states, finance, and media, can enter communities whose members would reject those tropes if they were presented directly.

---

[28]Selod, *Forever Suspect*; Cainkar, "Racial Control under the Guise of Terror Threat."

[29]Bail, "The Fringe Effect"; Pertwee, "Donald Trump, the Anti-Muslim Far Right."

[30]Crocker et al., "Belief in U.S. Government Conspiracies."

[31]Allington, Hirsh, and Katz, "Antisemitism Is Predicted"; Harber et al., "Antisemitism, Conspiracy Beliefs, and Anti-Israel Attitudes."

[32]Matthew Gray, "Explaining Conspiracy Theories in Modern Arab Middle Eastern Political Discourse: Some Problems and Limitations of the Literature," *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 17, no. 2 (2008): 155–74.

Online religious authority intensifies these dynamics. Research on digital Islam documents a shift from institutionally certified scholars toward hybrid figures whose authority rests on visibility, affect, and audience engagement as much as on formal training.[33] In this environment a sermon or lecture recorded for a single congregation can circulate to hundreds of thousands of viewers, and the clips that travel furthest tend to be those that name enemies. Clergy who would speak with nuance to a local audience may find that the version of their argument that reaches the wider public is the one stripped of qualification.

THE SECURITIZING REGISTER

The securitizing register in Jewish opposition to Muslim engagement also has four recurring features. The first is *designation by affiliation*: Muslim organizations and individuals are assessed through past or alleged ties to the Muslim Brotherhood, to Hamas-linked charities, or to entities named in the Holy Land Foundation proceedings, so that affiliation stands in for conduct. The second is the *dossier form*: claims are presented as documentation, compiled lists of statements, donations, and associations, which lends them the appearance of evidence even when the inference from association to intent is weak. The third is the *frame of convergence*: Muslim political activity, particularly on Palestine, is read as part of a broader alliance between Islamism and the radical left. The fourth is the *address to authority*: exposure is directed at government officials, university administrators, funders, and interfaith partners, with a demand that they withdraw legitimacy or resources.

[33]Bryan S. Turner, "Religious Authority and the New Media," *Theory, Culture & Society* 24, no. 2 (2007): 117–34; Nabil Echchaibi, "From Audio Tapes to Video Blogs: The Delocalisation of Authority in Islam," *Nations and Nationalism* 17, no. 1 (2011): 25–44; Soleh Hasan Wahid and Syahid Abdulloh, "Digital Islamic Authority: A Revolutionary Shift or Mere Hype? A Systematic Review," *SN Social Sciences* 6 (2026): 62, https://doi.org/10.1007/s43545-026-01328-5.

The "red-green alliance" frame illustrates the register's double character. In the scholarly literature, Emmanuel Karagiannis and Clark McCauley use framing theory to describe convergences between Islamist and radical left movements around shared anti-imperialist and anti-globalization frames, with attention primarily to state actors and to European and Latin American cases.[34] In popular and advocacy discourse, the same phrase names a far broader and more coordinated phenomenon that extends to American Muslim civil rights organizations, student groups, and progressive coalitions. The movement from an analytic description of tactical alignments to a claim of coordinated design is precisely the movement from analysis to suspicion. The genealogy of the popular frame runs through the European "Eurabia" literature and the American counter-jihad movement, both of which scholars have identified as conspiratorial.[35]

The securitizing register draws its force from institutional position. Jewish communal organizations in the United States maintain professional security operations, government relations offices, and close working relationships with law enforcement, built in large part in response to real and rising violence against Jews. Those capacities are legitimate, and after the attacks of recent years they are indispensable. The same capacities, however, make it possible for suspicion of Muslim partners to be converted into institutional action: the cancellation of partnerships, the withdrawal of invitations, the transmission of concerns to officials and donors. This is what makes the securitizing register consequential in ways the conspiratorial register usually is not. The 2024 survey data underscore the gap between this register and lay opinion. Jewish respondents' warmth toward Muslims, and their recognition of anti-Muslim bias at rates comparable to their recognition

[34]Emmanuel Karagiannis and Clark McCauley, "The Emerging Red-Green Alliance: Where Political Islam Meets the Radical Left," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 25, no. 2 (2013): 167–82.

[35]Matt Carr, "You Are Now Entering Eurabia," *Race & Class* 48, no. 1 (2006): 1–22; Lee, "Why We Fight"; O'Donnell, "Islamophobic Conspiracism."

of antisemitism, suggest that the securitizing register is concentrated in particular organizational and ideological sectors rather than expressing a communal consensus.[36]

The fear that drives the register is not imaginary. Jewish respondents' reports of rising bias and fear after October 7 are well documented,[37] and some Muslim public figures have made statements that reasonable observers regard as antisemitic. The securitizing register's error parallels that of the conspiratorial register. It begins from a real danger and real incidents, infers from them a coordinated design that extends to Muslim institutions and individuals who have given no evidence of hostile intent, and resists disconfirmation by treating moderation as camouflage.

THE FEEDBACK LOOP

The two registers are not merely parallel; they are co-constitutive, because each supplies the other with evidence. When Jewish advocacy organizations publish dossiers on Muslim dialogue partners, Muslim critics of engagement cite them as proof that dialogue is surveillance. When Muslim critics describe Jewish dialogue partners as agents of a hidden Zionist strategy, Jewish critics of engagement cite them as proof that Muslim partners harbor antisemitic hostility. The individuals who do the work of engagement are caught between the two, accused by one side of having been co-opted and by the other of having been deceived.

Digital platforms accelerate the loop. Heidi Campbell's early work on religious authority online observed that the internet can both challenge and reinforce existing religious hierarchies,[38] and more recent research describes online religious authority as negotiated through an interplay of

[36]Ecklund, Goff, and van der Merwe, "Religious Discrimination and Othering."

[37]Ecklund, Goff, and van der Merwe, "Religious Discrimination and Othering"; Scheitle et al., "Fear of Religious Hate Crime Victimization."

[38]Heidi Campbell, "Who's Got the Power? Religious Authority and the Internet," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 12, no. 3 (2007): 1043–62.

text, affect, and algorithm.[39] The genre that thrives in both registers is the exposure: the clip, thread, or dossier that reveals what the other side "really" believes. Exposure content is cheap to produce, emotionally rewarding to consume, and difficult to refute, because any refutation can be absorbed as further evidence of concealment. Clergy and organizational leaders who wish to defend engagement must compete in an attention economy that structurally favors their critics.

The loop also operates through each community's internal divisions. Within each community, the register of suspicion serves as a boundary mechanism that separates the loyal from those who have strayed. Muslim participants in dialogue are disciplined by the charge of normalization, and Jewish participants by the charge of naïveté. The two registers thus regulate membership within each community as much as they describe the other. This helps explain their persistence despite the warmer lay attitudes found in survey data. Suspicion is useful to the actors who deploy it, because it mobilizes audiences and consolidates internal authority.

DISSENT AND SUSPICION

A framework that identifies mirrored suspicion risks being used to delegitimize legitimate criticism. Muslims who decline to participate in programs tied to Israeli state institutions are exercising a recognizable form of political conscience, and Jews who ask questions about the conduct of particular organizations are exercising ordinary due diligence. The analytic task is to distinguish these positions from the suspicion described above. Four criteria, applied symmetrically, make that distinction tractable.

The first is *specificity of attribution*. Dissent attributes positions and acts to identifiable actors, whereas suspicion attributes hidden intent to collectives or to networks defined by

[39]Wahid and Abdulloh, "Digital Islamic Authority."

association. Objecting that a named program is funded by a named foundation whose grants also support anti-Muslim groups is dissent; claiming that Jewish dialogue as such is a Zionist operation is suspicion. Documenting that a named official made a named statement is dissent; claiming that Muslim civil rights organizations as such are Brotherhood fronts is suspicion.

The second is *falsifiability*. Dissent specifies what evidence would change its judgment, whereas suspicion treats contrary evidence as confirmation. A critic who would accept a program's independence if it demonstrated certain practices is dissenting. A critic for whom every demonstration of independence is a cleverer disguise has moved into suspicion. The third is the *distinction between conduct and identity*. Dissent objects to what people do, while suspicion objects to who they are or with whom they have been associated. The fourth is the *treatment of in-group participants*. Dissent can disagree with fellow community members who choose to engage while recognizing their good faith, whereas suspicion characterizes them as purchased, brainwashed, or deceived.

These criteria do not resolve every hard case, but they make disagreement about hard cases possible. They also show that the boundary between dissent and suspicion runs through each community rather than between them. Each community contains principled critics of engagement as well as purveyors of suspicion, and the difference between them is often clearer to insiders than to outsiders.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PLURALISM

The argument has implications for how pluralism is understood and practiced. Much interfaith work rests on a model of tolerance in which communities coexist by bracketing their deepest disagreements. Mirrored suspicion exposes the limits of that model. Where the disagreement concerns Israel and Palestine, bracketing is impossible for many participants, and

the attempt to bracket is itself read as evidence of a hidden agenda. In *Covenantal Pluralism*, I argue that durable pluralism requires something more demanding than tolerance: publicly undertaken mutual commitments that allow communities to disagree deeply while recognizing one another's equal standing and dignity.[40] A covenantal relationship answers suspicion directly, because it makes obligations explicit and therefore makes violations visible. It does not ask partners to trust each other's hidden intentions. It asks them to make their commitments public and to hold one another accountable to them.

Three practical implications follow. For communal organizations, the most effective response to suspicion is transparency about funding, goals, and the boundaries of permissible disagreement, since opacity is the raw material of both registers. For funders, the overlap of donor networks between interfaith programs and organizations hostile to the other community is itself a driver of conspiratorial suspicion, and funders who wish to support engagement should attend to it. For clergy and digital creators, the incentives of platforms favor exposure over relationship, and counteracting them requires deliberate investment in content that models disagreement without dehumanization.

A RESEARCH AGENDA

The framework generates testable claims. A comparative corpus could include three tiers: statements and reports issued by national and regional Jewish and Muslim communal organizations; transcribed online videos in which Jewish and Muslim clergy address interfaith relations, Zionism, and one another; and public social media discourse sampled around each of the five episodes. Coders would identify the four elements of the shared narrative grammar (outward

[40]Iqbal Akhtar, *Covenantal Pluralism: The Geopolitics of Interfaith Religious Freedom* (Cham: Springer, 2026).

face, hidden agenda, directing agent, and act of exposure) and classify the register by the type of evidence invoked and the audience addressed. The criteria proposed in the previous section can be operationalized as codes for specificity of attribution, falsifiability, conduct versus identity, and the treatment of in-group participants.

The positional hypothesis predicts that the conspiratorial register will predominate in Muslim opposition and the securitizing register in Jewish opposition, that both will spike after the episodes identified here, and that the travel-ban period will show a decline in both. It further predicts that within each community, actors with greater institutional access will favor securitizing forms and actors with less access will favor conspiratorial ones. The prediction can be tested within the Muslim community, where some organizations have developed government relations capacity, and within the Jewish community, where actors excluded from mainstream institutions may adopt conspiratorial forms in describing their own community's leadership. Survey research could complement the corpus by measuring conspiracy mentality, perceived powerlessness, and institutional trust among Jewish and Muslim respondents, using Muslim samples larger than those available in existing national studies.

CONCLUSION

Opposition to Jewish–Muslim engagement in the United States has usually been described, by its targets, as prejudice: antisemitism on one side and Islamophobia on the other. This article has argued that the two oppositions are better understood as mirrored suspicion, sharing a narrative grammar of concealment and exposure while differing in register according to each community's position relative to the institutions of security and power. The conspiratorial and securitizing registers are not opposites, one irrational and the other sober. They are two ways of voicing the

same claim about hidden intent, one from outside the institutions that certify danger and one from within them.

Reading the two registers together has three consequences. It makes visible the degree to which each feeds on the other, so that neither community can dismantle its own suspicion without corresponding change in the other. It shows that suspicion is concentrated in organizational and online arenas rather than in lay opinion, which locates responsibility with the institutions and platforms through which the communities speak. And it makes it possible to distinguish principled dissent from suspicion on both sides by the same criteria. Jewish–Muslim relations in the United States will remain contested for as long as Israel and Palestine remain contested. Whether that contest takes the form of argument between partners or suspicion between adversaries is something that communal institutions, clergy, and platforms can still shape.

REFERENCES

Akhtar, Iqbal. *Covenantal Pluralism: The Geopolitics of Interfaith Religious Freedom*. Cham: Springer, 2026.

Allington, Daniel, David Hirsh, and Louise Katz. "Antisemitism Is Predicted by Anti-Hierarchical Aggression, Totalitarianism, and Belief in Malevolent Global Conspiracies." *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 10 (2023): 155. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-023-01624-y.

Bail, Christopher A. "The Fringe Effect: Civil Society Organizations and the Evolution of Media Discourse about Islam since the September 11th Attacks." *American Sociological Review* 77, no. 6 (2012): 855–79.

Balzacq, Thierry. "The Three Faces of Securitization: Political Agency, Audience and Context." *European Journal of International Relations* 11, no. 2 (2005): 171–201.

Bronfenbrenner, Urie. "The Mirror Image in Soviet-American Relations: A Social Psychologist's Report." *Journal of Social Issues* 17, no. 3 (1961): 45–56.

Bunzl, Matti. "Between Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia: Some Thoughts on the New Europe." *American Ethnologist* 32, no. 4 (2005): 499–508.

Buzan, Barry, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde. *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1998.

Cainkar, Louise. "Racial Control under the Guise of Terror Threat: Policing of US Muslim, Arab, and SWANA Communities." *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 16, no. 1 (2023): 152–75.

Cainkar, Louise, and Saher Selod. "Review of Race Scholarship and the War on Terror." *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 4, no. 2 (2018): 165–77.

Campbell, Heidi. “Who’s Got the Power? Religious Authority and the Internet.” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 12, no. 3 (2007): 1043–62.

Carr, Matt. “You Are Now Entering Eurabia.” *Race & Class* 48, no. 1 (2006): 1–22.

Crocker, Jennifer, Riia Luhtanen, Stephanie Broadnax, and Bruce Evan Blaine. “Belief in U.S. Government Conspiracies against Blacks among Black and White College Students: Powerlessness or System Blame?” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 25, no. 8 (1999): 941–53.

Douglas, Karen M., Robbie M. Sutton, and Aleksandra Cichocka. “The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories.” *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 26, no. 6 (2017): 538–42.

Echchaibi, Nabil. “From Audio Tapes to Video Blogs: The Delocalisation of Authority in Islam.” *Nations and Nationalism* 17, no. 1 (2011): 25–44.

Ecklund, Elaine Howard, Kerby Goff, and Eduard van der Merwe. “Religious Discrimination and Othering in the U.S. After October 7th: A Data Overview.” *Religions* 16, no. 12 (2025): 1552. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16121552.

Emmerich, Arndt. “Jewish–Muslim Friendship Networks: A Study of Intergenerational Boundary Work in Postwar Germany.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 67, no. 1 (2025): 33–61.

Gidley, Ben, Samuel Sami Everett, Elodie Druez, Alyaa Ebbiary, Arndt Emmerich, Dekel Peretz, and Daniella Shaw. “Off and On Stage Interactions: Muslim–Jewish Encounter in Urban Europe.” *Ethnicities* 25 (2025): 235–54.

Gray, Matthew. “Explaining Conspiracy Theories in Modern Arab Middle Eastern Political Discourse: Some Problems and Limitations of the Literature.” *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 17, no. 2 (2008): 155–74.

Harber, Kent D., Dominika Bulska, Thomas Malloy, and Valeria Villa. “Antisemitism, Conspiracy Beliefs, and Anti-Israel Attitudes.” *American Psychologist* 81, no. 4 (2026): 463–77. https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0001635.

Imhoff, Roland, and Martin Bruder. “Speaking (Un-)Truth to Power: Conspiracy Mentality as a Generalised Political Attitude.” *European Journal of Personality* 28, no. 1 (2014): 25–43.

Imhoff, Roland, Felix Zimmer, Olivier Klein, et al. “Conspiracy Mentality and Political Orientation across 26 Countries.” *Nature Human Behaviour* 6, no. 3 (2022): 392–403.

Karagiannis, Emmanuel, and Clark McCauley. “The Emerging Red-Green Alliance: Where Political Islam Meets the Radical Left.” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 25, no. 2 (2013): 167–82.

Kofta, Mirosław, Wiktor Soral, and Michał Bilewicz. “What Breeds Conspiracy Antisemitism? The Role of Political Uncontrollability and Uncertainty in the Belief in Jewish Conspiracy.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 118, no. 5 (2020): 900–918.

LaFreniere Tamez, Hope D., Natalie Anastasio, and Arie Perliger. “Explaining the Rise of Antisemitism in the United States.” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2024). https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2023.2297317.

Lee, Benjamin. “Why We Fight: Understanding the Counter-Jihad Movement.” *Religion Compass* 10, no. 10 (2016): 257–65.

Mavelli, Luca. “Between Normalisation and Exception: The Securitisation of Islam and the Construction of the Secular Subject.” *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 41, no. 2 (2013): 159–81.

O’Donnell, S. Jonathon. “Islamophobic Conspiracism and Neoliberal Subjectivity: The Inassimilable Society.” *Patterns of Prejudice* 52, no. 1 (2018): 1–23.

Peek, Lori. *Behind the Backlash: Muslim Americans after 9/11*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011.

Pertwee, Ed. “Donald Trump, the Anti-Muslim Far Right and the New Conservative Revolution.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 43, no. 16 (2020): 211–30.

Scheitle, Christopher P., Bianca Mabute-Louie, Jauhara Ferguson, Emily Hawkins, and Elaine Howard Ecklund. “Fear of Religious Hate Crime Victimization and the Residual Effects of Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia.” *Social Forces* 101, no. 4 (2023): 2059–86.

Selod, Saher. “Citizenship Denied: The Racialization of Muslim American Men and Women Post-9/11.” *Critical Sociology* 41, no. 1 (2015): 77–95.

Selod, Saher. *Forever Suspect: Racialized Surveillance of Muslim Americans in the War on Terror*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2018.

Turner, Bryan S. “Religious Authority and the New Media.” *Theory, Culture & Society* 24, no. 2 (2007): 117–34.

Wahid, Soleh Hasan, and Syahid Abdulloh. “Digital Islamic Authority: A Revolutionary Shift or Mere Hype? A Systematic Review.” *SN Social Sciences* 6 (2026): 62. https://doi.org/10.1007/s43545-026-01328-5.