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## The Truth is Out There: The Use of Conspiracy Theories by Radical Violent Extremist Organizations

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The Truth is Out There: The Use of Conspiracy Theories by Radical Violent Extremist  
Organizations

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## Abstract

This paper sought to examine conspiracy theory (CT) use across three types of groups: radical violent extremists (RVE), non-violent extremists, and moderates. Using the theory of significance quest, or the desire for one's life to have meaning (Kruglanski, Chen, Dechesne, Fishman, & Orehek, 2009), I sought to determine whether RVE groups were more likely to use CTs, invoke need for cognitive closure (NFCC) via the use of time pressure, elicit anomie, and promote significance quest through violence than the other groups. Using text analysis software, I pulled passages from six groups – two from each level of extremism - that had conspiratorial language and then coded for the variables described above. RVE groups were significantly more likely than the other groups to use CTs and invoke NFCC through time pressure but were less likely than non-violent groups to elicit anomie. In addition, RVE groups were more likely to promote significance gain through action, but not significance restoration or prevention of significance loss. Implications of the findings are discussed.

## The Truth is Out There: The Use of Conspiracy Theories by Radical Violent Extremist Organizations

Although terrorism has existed for millennia (Kruglanski & Fishman, 2006), the rise of global Salafist terrorist groups such as Al-Qaida (AQ) and the Islamic State in Iraq and el-Sham (ISIS), as well as their ability to carry out devastating attacks on a global scale, has prompted renewed interest in the root causes of and remedies for extremism (Horgan, 2017). Indeed, the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism reported that in 2015 alone there were 11,774 terrorist attacks resulting in approximately 28,328 deaths worldwide (Dodwell, Milton, & Ressler, 2016). Although conspiracy theories (CTs) have been proposed as a tool of radical violent extremist groups (McGregor, Hayes, & Prentice, 2015), the use of conspiracy theories in the recruitment process is less well-known. Conspiracy theories increase individuals' feelings of anxiety, distrust towards institutions, and feelings of powerlessness (Abalakina-Paap, Stephan, Craig, & Gregory, 1999), all of which may increase one's propensity for radical violent extremism (RVE, Hogg, Kruglanski, & van den Bos, 2013; McGregor et al., 2015). The purpose of this study is to examine the prevalence of CTs in recruitment materials RVE groups as well as the cognitive mechanisms they are designed to elicit in potential recruits.

### **Radical Violent Extremism and Recruitment**

Terrorism has long been used as a means for exerting political pressure, but the term itself is notoriously difficult to pin down (Horgan, 2017). Crenshaw (2002) noted that the term "terrorism" is often used pejoratively, rhetorically, and with little specificity, resulting in poor construct validity. Kruglanski and Fishman (2009; pg. 3) found 109 different definitions in the research literature and settled on terrorism as "the symbolic use of violence by non-state actors

with social and political (hence not purely criminal) objectives intended to intimidate, frighten, or coerce a wider audience than the direct (instrumental) targets of the attack.” The main component of terrorism is that violence is employed in a symbolic way and meant to achieve a larger political goal. The victims are not the real targets of terrorist actions, but rather the means through which the actions have their intended effects.

Recent research has found that social forces are more important than demographic factors in explaining the radicalization process (Atran, 2003; Haddad & Khashan, 2002; Post et al., 2009; Sageman, 2004). These forces are prominent especially in the Middle East, and create the context in which tacit support for terrorism is normalized. Atran (2003) argues that “apparently extreme behaviors may be elicited and rendered commonplace by particular historical, political, social, and ideological contexts” (pg. 1536). In other words, societies with cultures that condone or, at the very least, don’t condemn violence against civilians for a political purpose may normalize this behavior and thus make engaging in terrorism more likely. Conspiracy theories may play a role in this process, as they promote beliefs that are designed to specifically target particular groups (e.g., Jews, Westerners) against whom proponents of the theories wish to nurture society-wide grievances.

### **Pathways to Conspiracy Thinking**

Conspiracy theories are defined as “narratives in which multiple agents are believed to be working together toward malevolent ends” (Swami, Weis, Lay, Barron, & Furnham, 2016, pg. 86). Conspiracy theories are pernicious and widespread. Half of Americans believe in at least one conspiracy (Chapman University, 2016; Oliver & Wood, 2014), and changing people’s conspiracy beliefs is notoriously difficult (Brotherton, French, & Pickering, 2013). Belief in CTs is linked to an overall distrust of mainstream narratives, as well as anomie, or distrust in

institutions (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Durkheim, 1893). Interestingly, the support of different CTs persist regardless of the specifics of these conspiracies, many of which contradict each other (Wood, Douglas, & Sutton, 2012).

Because of the closed, self-referential thought processes conspiracists employ, people who believe in one conspiracy theory are more likely to believe in others (Goertzel, 1994; Swami et al., 2016). Belief in paranormal or supernatural events is also positively related to both conspiracism and the tendency to engage in magical thinking (Swami et al., 2016). These same authors found that belief in conspiracies was related to two components of schizotypal personality. Thus, they propose that conspiracy theories can be thought of as a subset of anomalous beliefs, akin to paranormal beliefs or magical ideation.

Magical ideation is the belief that certain events which cannot logically be related are in fact causal (Eckblad & Chapman, 1983). Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the leader of al-Qaida in Iraq (the precursor to ISIS) from 2004 to 2006, said, “we perform *jihad* here while our eyes are upon al-Quds. We fight here, while our goal is Rome with good expectations concerning Allah that He makes us the keys for the Prophetic good tidings and Godly decrees” (“Dabiq: The failed crusade,” 2014, pg. 4). al-Quds refers to Jerusalem, and the remaining refers to the apocalyptic ideology of ISIS. They believe that in sparking a sectarian war in the Middle East and drawing in Western nations, they will engender a confrontation in the Syrian town of Dabiq, which was prophesized to be the site of the final battle between good and evil in the *Hadith*. This ideology is not auxiliary to ISIS, but is rather its main point, and al-Zarqawi, the ideological forefather of ISIS ensured that this message permeated through to the rank-and-file of the entire group (Lister, 2015; Warrick, 2016).

People who believe in CTs often endorse multiple conflicting narratives, with seemingly little recognition of the dissonance between them. Wood et al. (2012) found that the more strongly people believe in conspiracy theories, the more likely they are to endorse a simultaneously conflicting narrative of events. Participants who believed that Princess Diana faked her own death were also more likely to believe that she had been murdered. Participants who more strongly endorsed the conspiracy theory that Osama bin Laden was dead before the Navy SEALs raid which killed him were also more likely to believe that he was still alive. In the endorsement of conflicting conspiracy theories, people hold contradictory narratives at the same time by supporting an overarching belief in governmental malfeasance rather than an explicit endorsement of the individual narratives (Wood et al., 2012). Wood and his colleagues argue that the local narratives are not what people focus on, but rather the message behind the narratives, and how that assimilates into their particular worldview.

### **Significance Quest**

The use of grievances to recruit individuals to join radical violent extremist groups activates significance quest, or the desire to feel that one's life has meaning (Kruglanski et al., 2009). Engaging in extreme actions that violate the instinctual need for survival, such as suicide bombing, requires commitment to a cause, the assurance that the action will have its intended consequences, and a perceived lack of other options for achieving the same goal (Dugas & Kruglanski, 2014; Kruglanski et al., 2014). Individuals with extreme beliefs, such as the desire for an Islamic state ruled by a successor to the prophet Muhammad (i.e., an Islamic caliphate), but who believe that political institutions offer a means to this goal, will not engage in violence because plausible alternatives still exist for them. Thus, according to significance quest, radicalization is a matter of degrees, and there is a meaningful distinction between those who

merely have radical views and those who have radical views and engage in violent acts as a means for achieving their goals (Horgan, 2008; Mccauley & Moskalenko, 2017; Taylor & Horgan, 2001).

Significance quest has received support from several experiments. Dugas et al. (2016) found that experimentally inducing loss of significance (LoS) caused participants to regain significance through self-sacrifice significantly more than those who did not experience a significance loss. This effect was particularly salient when significance loss occurred in domains important to the participants. Self-sacrificing behaviors resulted in greater feelings of significance restoration than simply engaging in pleasurable activities, indicating that self-sacrifice is an integral part of significance restoration and that simply doing something pleasurable is not enough to regain lost meaning. Additional support for significance quest as a viable model of radicalization came from a field study of 1,496 ideologically-motivated crimes in the United States, which indicated that individuals who suffered a social or financial loss of significance were more likely to commit violent crimes than those who did not have a prior significance-damaging event (Jasko, LaFree, & Kruglanski, 2017). In other words, individuals who experienced significance loss were more likely to engage in violent behaviors, presumably to regain their lost significance through an act they believed would lead to more gains for their ideological cause.

The process of moving from extreme beliefs to actions involves three steps: the activation of significance quest, the identification of terrorism or joining a RVE group as a means for achieving significance, and finally, a commitment shift towards the goal of significance and away from other goals (Kruglanski et al., 2014). The shift towards terrorism as the means to achieving a goal involves relative devaluation of other means and goals. Shah, Friedman, and

Kruglanski (2002) found that when participants focused on an important, rather than unimportant goal, they listed fewer alternative goals, indicating goal inhibition. Additionally, subliminally priming a focal goal led to both decreased recognition of alternative goals and increased inhibition of alternatives. This effect, known as goal shielding, has been found in both explicit and implicit studies of primary goal commitment, and leads to devaluation of alternative goals relative to the focal goal(s).

Significance quest activation can come from three places: the opportunity to gain significance through action, the restoration of loss of significance, and the prevention of the potential loss of significance that would come from inaction (Dugas & Kruglanski, 2014). Radical violent extremist organizations encourage prospective members to view current events as requiring action and that not doing so is antithetical to Islam (Winkler, El Damanhoury, Dicker, & Lemieux, 2016). *Jihadi* organizations argue that it is the duty of all Muslims to fight against Western hegemony in the region. Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, the deceased spokesman of ISIS said:

The time has come for those generations that were drowning in oceans of disgrace, being nursed on the milk of humiliation, and being ruled by the vilest of all people, after their long slumber in the darkness of neglect – the time has come for them to rise (“Dabiq: The return of Khilafah,” 2014, pg. 8).

ISIS explicitly implores potential recruits to view themselves as victims of injustice, to view inaction as continued humiliation, and to consider violence as the only way to regain lost stature.

### **Need for Closure and the Significance Quest**

The first stage of significance quest, its activation, is likely to be most salient for new recruits, rather than extant group members, and has been found to lead to RVE through the mechanism of need for cognitive closure (Webber et al., 2017). Need for cognitive closure (NFCC) is the intolerance of ambiguity, and the desire to possess an answer, any answer, to a question without thinking about the decision (Kruglanski, 1990; Webster & Kruglanski, 1994). Activating significance quest can arise from personal or group loss, and a field study of individuals who committed politically-motivated crimes found that those who suffered financial setbacks and social detachment were significantly more likely to engage in violent acts compared to those who had not suffered significance-threatening events (Jasko et al., 2017). The activation of threat to significance presumably led these individuals to seek redress, which they found in extremist ideology and later, in political violence to further their group's goals.

Two mechanisms underlie how NFCC influences individual and group processes: urgency and permanence (Kruglanski & Webster, 1996). Urgency refers to the need to "seize" on an answer quickly, whereas permanence is the need to "freeze" on the answer, and thus not engage in hypothesis generation and validation again. When time pressure is heightened, NFCC increases, and individuals are more likely to seize and freeze on an answer without generating alternative hypotheses (Kruglanski & Freund, 1983; Kruglanski & Webster, 1996; Webster & Kruglanski, 1994). The fewer hypotheses generated, the fewer plausible alternatives there may seem to be, which in turn leads to more confidence in the initial judgment (Kelley, 1973).

Time pressure is a consistent theme in RVE propaganda, and one of ISIS's tenets is the urgent need to engage in *jihad* to engender the end times.

The seriousness and attention given to the commands of Allah and the need to fulfill them, as well as the sense of urgency and haste in fulfilling them is a means of strength

that can push a Muslim beyond hesitation and cause him to carry out the most difficult of tasks in the path of Allah. May Allah grant us these qualities, strengthen us, and keep us firm on His path (Islamic State, 2015a; pg. 9).

The thrust of the article from which this quote appears is that waging war on the enemies of the Islamic State, particularly in Syria, will bring about the apocalypse as prophesied by Muhammad, but that joining the fight needs to be done quickly and without hesitation.

Loss of significance has been found to increase the likelihood of self-sacrifice to regain lost self-worth in extremists and non-extremists alike (Dugas et al., 2016). Additionally, LoS significantly predicts engagement in RVE through the mechanism of NFCC (Webber et al., 2017). Significance loss leads to a discrepancy between actual and desired states, which in turn enhances the appeal of closure and a desire for certainty. Indeed, in field studies with two samples of jailed terrorists, Webber and colleagues (2017) found a relationship between LoS and NFCC, which was in turn related to support for extremism, including suicide bombings and armed *jihād*. In addition, experimentally manipulating LoS led to high NFCC, which then led to endorsement of more extreme beliefs. Extremist groups are adept at exploiting this desire for an answer because the CTs they disseminate provide a rigid, Manichean worldview that offers easy solutions and clear strategies for restoring self-worth (Kruglanski et al., 2009).

A clear example of this rigid worldview comes from an issue of *Dabiq*, the Islamic State's magazine. "Everyone who opposes this goal or stands in the path of this goal is an enemy for us and a target for our swords, whatever his name may be and whatever his lineage may be. We have a religion that Allah revealed to be a scale and a judge. Its statement is decisive and its judgment is not amusement. It is the kinship between us and the people, for our scales – by Allah's grace – are divine, our laws are Qur'anic, and our judgments are upon the prophetic

tradition” (“Dabiq: Shari’ah alone will rule Africa,” 2015, pg. 3). According to this passage, those who do not fully support ISIS are its enemies and a legitimate target for violence. There is no grey area: people are either with or against ISIS.

### **Propaganda and the Extremist Narrative**

The potential for large gains in significance is likewise advertised by extremist groups in their propaganda. Rhetoric describing ISIS’s members as conquering heroes is often employed to place historical import on its mission (e.g., “The Muslims today have a loud, thundering statement, and possess heavy boots. They have a statement to make that will cause the world to hear and understand the meaning of terrorism, and boots that will trample the idol of nationalism, destroy the idol of democracy, and uncover its deviant nature.”; “Dabiq: The return of Khilafah,” 2014, pg. 8). Engaging in terrorist acts allows individuals to transcend their otherwise normal lives and engage in historically-important actions, thereby increasing their personal significance.

Anomie, or distrust of state and government institutions (Durkheim, 1893), is another mechanism through which people suffer significance loss (Kruglanski et al., 2014), and is also related to conspiratorial thinking. Individuals with stronger beliefs in conspiracy theories report significantly higher levels of anomie than those with attenuated beliefs in CTs (Abalakina-Paap, Stephan, Craig, & Gregory, 1999). The propaganda ISIS employs explicitly denounces nation-states as illegitimate and unable to provide true governance in accordance with their interpretation of the Quran. In an article addressing the *Ummah*, or all the members of the Muslim faith, and referring to Western governments, ISIS states:

For they have always known that you are the severest of people in enmity to them, as well as the most dangerous of them against the little Jewish state and their agents, equally

from the apostate governments in the Gulf and those in the region...They have thrust their claws into the Ummah's body for centuries, so it is time that those claws are pulled out and those hands are severed, by the permission of Allah, through iman [faith], steadfastness, reliance, patience, and the determination of the sons of the Khilafah [the caliphate], inshaallah [if Allah wills it] ("Rumiyah: The ruling of the belligerent Christians," 2017, pg. 31).

The governments of Israel, the West, and Middle Eastern allies are accused of intentionally harming the worldwide Muslim community, which is a direct instance of ISIS attempting to instill the idea that these states have failed their Muslim citizens.

The relationship between significance arousal, conspiracy theories and extremist propaganda is not limited to anomie. Ontological insecurity, or the denial of reality as truth, may be a cause of beliefs in conspiracy theories as well (Aupers, 2012). Aupers (2012) argued that conspiracism is a natural byproduct of modernity and its concomitant ontological insecurity as well as a reaction to the public debates among scientists regarding their fields of study. The Enlightenment and the accompanying skepticism of authority, which led to the modern scientific method, also led to growth in the prevalence of conspiracy theories, or at least the likelihood that conspiracies will be believed. Recent research has found that ontological insecurity and anomie are related to distrust of scientific institutions and methods, mainstream narratives of events, and endorsement of conspiracy theories (Achterberg, de Koster, & van der Waal, 2017; Raab, Ortlieb, Auer, Guthmann, & Carbon, 2013; van der Tempel & Alcock, 2015)

Moving from significance arousal to identification of terrorism as a means for achieving significance requires three components: grievances, whether personal or group; a culprit for the grievances; and the belief that terrorism is the means for addressing the grievances wrought by

the culprits, and hence pursue significance restoration, gain, or maintenance (Dugas et al., 2016; Kruglanski et al., 2014). The CTs used in ISIS's propaganda explicitly include all three components, and their calls to action are often directed to the entire Muslim community, rather than to extant members of terrorist groups only.

Discussing the battle of Fallujah in Iraq in 2004, Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi insisted that American soldiers were Crusaders bent on destroying Islam at the behest of Israel ("a Christian seed planted by the Jews in a Magian land"; "Rumiyah: The Jihad in East Asia," 2017, pg. 8) and that the appropriate response was unending war:

O ummah of Islam! You have been wounded and defamed incessantly and your illnesses and ailment cannot be treated except by tawhid [belief in the oneness and supremacy of God], which is fastened to the banners of jihad. So, when will [you] make the correct decision to go forth and escape your executioner? The battles today will neither cease nor settle, and our Prophet truly loved that he not sit back, away from a detachment that went forth to fight for Allah's cause. Rather, he kept making raids and waging jihad at all times ("Rumiyah: The Jihad in East Asia," 2017, pg. 11).

Al-Zarqawi calls for the *ummah*, rather than only current ISIS members, to engage in terrorism in response to grievances. In this way, potential recruits are moved through the process from significance arousal to identification of terrorism as a means for significance.

Once terrorism is identified as a means for significance quest, the degree of radicalization depends on the commitment shift to terrorism and the suppression or inhibition of alternative goals or means (Kruglanski et al., 2014). The higher the goal commitment to significance quest through terrorism and the lower the commitment to alternative goals, the more radicalized an

individual is. Alternative goals may include the value of individual rights and freedoms, or religious or societal prohibitions against murder or violence as a means for achieving goals. This shift can occur independently, in groups, or through a combination of the two. Within groups, a collective reality can be created through collective cognitive closure, which may enhance the salience and commitment to the focal goal to the exclusion of other alternatives (Dugas & Kruglanski, 2018).

### **Conspiracism and Radical Violent Extremism**

Extremist groups from across the ideological spectrum employ CTs to both recruit new members and sustain current membership. Bartlett and Miller (2010) conducted a qualitative content analysis of various extremist groups' communications and found that all of those studied espouse some form of conspiracism. The most common conspiracy theory, one that cut across the political spectrum, was that of a Zionist cabal secretly controlling the world's events. Neo-Nazi groups and AQ promoted similarly anti-Semitic conspiracies despite having conflicting organizational goals. Indeed, in 2005, August Kreis, the newly-appointed leader of the Aryan Nation, invited AQ to join an anti-Zionist, anti-government coalition with the Aryan Nation (Schuster, 2005). Although Bartlett and Miller (2010) provided valuable insight into the types of conspiracies promulgated by violent extremist groups, their report lacked rigorous quantitative analyses of terrorist communications. Additionally, with the advent of ISIS and their sophisticated media arm, more English-language resources are available for analysis.

Much of the research on conspiracies has been conducted in the Western world, but Gray (2010) argues that conspiracism in the Middle East is of a different kind and should be treated as such. The Middle East has a long history of involvement in actual conspiracies by the Western world, which may fuel a propensity to believe in far-fetched theories in the present day

(Mansfield, 1991). One of the rallying cries of terrorist groups in the Arab world is the Christian Crusades of the 11th century in which European Christians attempted to wrest control of modern Israel from its Muslim inhabitants (e.g., “Dabiq: The failed crusade,” 2014, “Dabiq: The return of Khilafah,” 2014).

More recent conspiracies abound in the Middle East. The Sykes-Picot agreement was a treaty made in secret by the Great Powers of World War I to divide the Middle East between them, which they did with little regard to religious, ethnic, or tribal boundaries (Erlich, 2014). According to Salafi terrorist groups, the only viable configuration of society is a Muslim caliphate, a borderless community which encompasses the *ummah*, or the community of believers (Sageman, 2004). Nation-states themselves are viewed as illegitimate by Salafist terrorist groups, but that the Sykes-Picot agreement was completed in secrecy and resulted in authoritarian, tribally-mixed states, with little local input, only added to the sense of their illegitimacy (Mansfield, 1991; Warrick, 2016).

In much of ISIS’s propaganda, explicit references to the Sykes-Picot agreement are often made. For example, Abu-Musab al-Zarqawi said,

We do not perform jihad here for a fistful of dirt or an illusory border drawn up by Sykes and Picot. Similarly, we do not perform jihad for a Western taghut to take the place of an Arab taghut. Rather our jihad is loftier and more superior. We perform jihad so that Allah’s word becomes supreme and that the religion becomes completely for Allah. And [we] fight them until there is no fitnah and [until] the religion, all of it, is for Allah (“Dabiq: Shari’ah alone will rule Africa,” 2015, pg. 3).

“Taghut” refers to governments that do not act in accordance with ISIS’s worldview, or, as ISIS believes, in a manner consistent with Islamic scriptures, whereas “fitnah” refers to dissension within the Muslim world generally, but historically refers to the original divide between Shia and Sunni Muslims (Lister, 2015). In this passage, al-Zarqawi states that the system of nation-states, particularly those whose borders were drawn in the Sykes-Picot agreement, are fabricated and thus illegitimate, and that one end goal of ISIS is to quell all dissension in the Islamic world.

Past conspiracies play a role in recruitment by terrorist organizations, but according to Bartlett and Miller (2010), the most oft-cited reason for engaging in terrorism is the continued existence of Israel as a nation, and the way in which the country was established. The Arab-Israeli conflict and the Suez Canal crisis of 1956 are particularly poignant for Muslims in the Middle East (Gray, 2010; Mansfield, 1991). Nasser, the leader of Egypt at the time, nationalized the Suez Canal, which was a main thoroughfare for European and American goods to the Middle East. In response, Britain and France colluded with Israel to wrest control of the canal back from Nasser and ultimately, depose him. Israel invaded the Sinai Peninsula, which Egypt responded to militarily. Subsequently, Britain and France called for a cease-fire, which was ignored, and then invaded the peninsula to “enforce” the cessation. The true reason for the invasion, however, was control of the canal. Although Egypt maintained control of the canal, the prevailing sentiment among Arab countries was that the West was allied against them (Erlich, 2014; Kinzer, 2003; Lister, 2015).

In addition to conspiracies from outside powers, citizens of Middle Eastern countries have often had their own rulers use conspiracies as a means for maintaining power. A recent iteration of this tendency came from Bashar al-Assad in Syria in (Lister, 2015). In the first few months of the 2011 Syrian Revolution, the protestors against the Syrian regime wanted genuine democratic

reform and an end to the state of emergency which gave police and the military broad powers over civilian life (Bakri, 2011; Shadid, 2011a, 2011b; Zoepf, 2011). Assad insisted to the outside world that the protestors were Islamic terrorists, despite ample evidence to the contrary (MacFarquhar, 2011; Slackman, 2011; Stack & Zoepf, 2011). To buttress his claim that his regime was a bulwark between the West and another Middle Eastern country sliding towards radicalization, he ordered the release of militant radicals from Sednaya prison, a notoriously harsh institution (Gutman, 2016; Sanda, Vela, & Maayeh, 2014). The radicals insinuated themselves into the protests, and along with extremists from Iraq, formed the backbone of what is ISIS today (Lister, 2015; Salloum, 2013). Assad fulfilled his own prophecy by releasing the very extremists he was purporting to fight and then smeared the entire protest movement with the brush of religious radicalization. Instances of governmental and institutional mendacity like these decrease trust of official narratives and increase the likelihood of belief in CTs (Allen, 2016; Rothstein, 2004). Bashar al-Assad, in temporarily, albeit artificially, bringing truth to his claims of Islamic radicalization among protestors, worsened the conflict and may have pushed more people to ascribe to CTs and radical propaganda.

### **Conspiracy Theories and Significance Quest**

To my knowledge, there has been no research conducted on the relationship between conspiracy theories and significance quest. However, connections have been made to similar mechanisms, including political extremism, anomie, and distrust in government narratives of events (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Bruder, Haffke, Neave, Nouripanah, & Imhoff, 2013; Goertzel, 1994; Swami, Voracek, Stieger, Tran, & Furnham, 2014; van Prooijen, Krouwel, & Pollet, 2016). Some political scientists argue that there is a typology of conspiracy believers:

individuals who are knowledgeable about politics but lacking in trust (i.e., those who display high levels of anomie) have the most fervent beliefs in CTs (Miller, Saunders, & Farhart, 2016).

Anomie and general distrust in state institutions may lead to the emergence of the first stage of significance quest. This distrust fuels LoS and a discrepancy between perceived and desired states, which in turn leads to “awakening” significance quest and seeking significance-increasing acts or ideologies (Dugas & Kruglanski, 2014). Anomie can lead to deindividuation, and joining a terrorist group can satisfy the needs that are not being met by the state or society at large, including the need for belongingness, self-esteem, and self-enhancement (Bates, 2010).

One of the most influential conceptualizations of conspiracy theories holds that they are powerless people’s attempts to make sense of the world (Hofstadter, 1965). This implies that beliefs in CTs are a result of powerlessness, not antecedent to it. However, research has found that stoking anxiety leads to a significant increase in beliefs in CTs, suggesting that, in situations of high stress, CTs function as a coping mechanism for dealing with anxiety (Grzesiak-Feldman, 2013). Additionally, conspiracy beliefs cut across socioeconomic statuses (Goertzel, 1994), suggesting that economic powerlessness is not a necessary condition for CT beliefs. Recent research has indicated that individuals with more education are less inclined to believe in CTs, but this effect was mediated by subjective social class, feelings of powerlessness, and beliefs in simple answers to complex problems (van Prooijen, 2017). As with terrorism, belief in CTs cuts across socioeconomic and education levels.

ISIS uses its propaganda to simultaneously invoke distrust in governments allied against it and to provide recruits with paths to significance:

The Turkish government today, by entering into an open war with the Islamic State, is only cutting its own throat with its own knife, slicing its own veins with its own hand, hanging itself with its own ropes, and wrecking its own house – and indeed, the weakest house is that of a spider. O soldiers of the Khilafah [Islamic State] in Turkey! O you whose path to performing hijrah [spiritual migration] to Dar al-Islam [Syria] has been blocked by the murtad [apostate], Turkish border patrol forces! You must strike the Turkish taghut [illegitimate government] and his murtad followers...Start with the imams of kufr [the supporters of the government] and the pillars of taghut therein. Attack the police, judges, and military. Attack the scholars of the taghut and the supporters of Erdogan's [Turkey's President] political party (AKP) as well as other murtad parties allied to him. And in the midst of your war against these people, do not forget to kill the citizens of Crusader nations wherever you find them. Make examples of them for those behind them to be terrorstruck [sic] and take revenge by killing them for the crimes perpetrated against your brothers (Islamic State, 2016; pg. 3).

Individuals who wanted to join ISIS but were prevented from crossing into Syria are urged to regain their significance by attacking representatives of the Turkish government, which ISIS accuses of not being sufficiently Islamic, and thus, failing the *ummah*.

### **Conspiracy Theories and Need for Cognitive Closure**

Heightened NFCC is also associated with increased acceptance of CTs (Swami et al., 2014), whereas artificially lowering NFCC diminishes beliefs in CTs (Leman & Cinnirella, 2013). In the context of ambiguous situations in which conspiratorial explanations are made salient, NFCC predicts belief in CTs, but not when conspiracies are unavailable or when the event has an official explanation (Marchlewska, Cichočka, & Kossowska, 2017). In other words, individuals

high in NFCC will “freeze” on a conspiratorial explanation when it is readily accessible and official explanations for the event are unknown.

One component of NFCC is permanence striving, or is the desire for consistency in generalized knowledge, even if the situational specifics are inconsistent (Kruglanski & Webster, 1996). This allows individuals to accept information that confirms a general belief, without needing to generate and validate specific contextual hypotheses about each piece of information. This desire for consistency as a result of NFCC has been effectively primed by experimentally inducing time pressure (Chirumbolo, Livi, Mannetti, Pierro, & Kruglanski, 2004; Kruglanski & Freund, 1983; Shah, Kruglanski, & Thompson, 1998). For individuals with high NFCC, particular conspiracies may directly contradict each other, but the general message they purvey will be more important than the specifics of the theory. Wood et al. (2012) confirmed this in their findings that individuals with strong beliefs in a CT were more likely to believe a CT that contradicted it, as long as a given theory confirmed a previously-held, overarching belief about the world.

### **The Current Study**

The purpose of the current study is to determine if radical violent extremist groups are more likely to use conspiracy theories in their recruitment propaganda than non-violent radical groups and moderate groups. An additional aim is to determine whether the conspiracy theories published by RVE groups arouse significance quest through: need for cognitive closure, anomie, and explicit calls for violence. Thus, the following hypotheses are proposed: a.) RVE groups will use more CTs than non-violent and moderate groups and b.) the CTs used by RVE groups will be more likely to activate significance quest. The CTs used by RVE groups will be designed to activate significance quest through: b1) need for cognitive closure via time pressure, b2) anomie

to promote loss of significance, and b3) explicit promotion of violence as a means for achieving significance.

## **Method**

### **Sample**

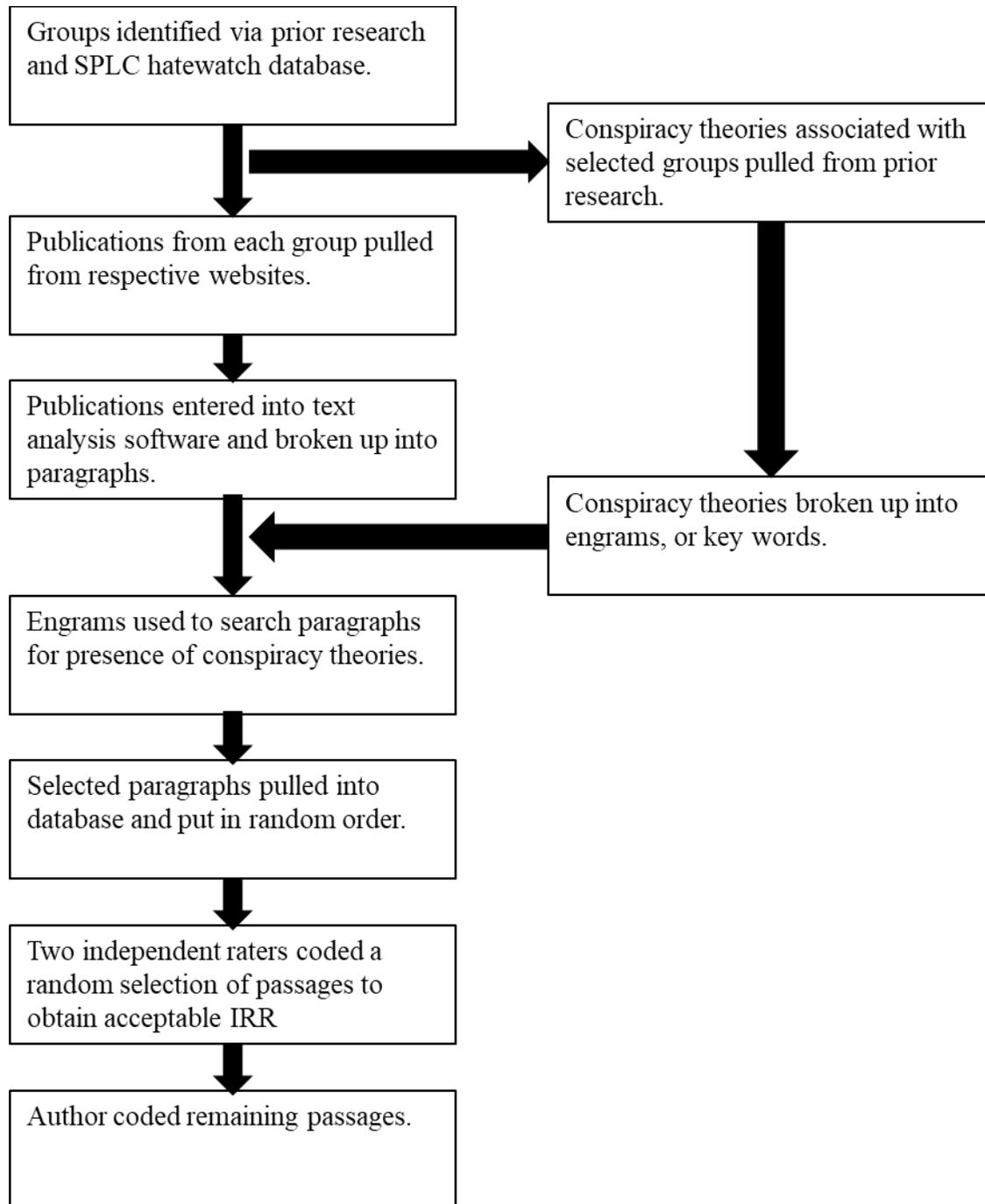
In order to test the hypotheses, propaganda from violent extremist, non-violent extremist, and moderate Islamic and right-wing organizations were compared (see Table 1). The Southern Poverty Law Center's (SPLC) Hatewatch database ("www.hatewatch.org," 2018) was used to find representative groups. This methodology has been used in previous research to identify groups with extremist affiliations (Gerstenfeld, Grant, & Chiang, 2003), and resulted in identification of three violent right-wing groups and one non-violent right-wing group and their attendant publications. The neo-conservative wing of the Republican party was identified as a moderate alternative to the extremist groups, and the *National Review*, which is credited with founding the movement (Judis, 1988; Sivek, 2008), was used as the representative publication.

Table 1

*Groups, Affiliated Publications, and Dates of Publications*

Radical violent extremism		Non-violent radical extremism		Moderate	
<b>ISIS/AQ</b>	<b>Neo-Nazis</b>	<b>Hizb ut-Tahrir</b>	<b>Alt-Right</b>	<b>Progressive Islam</b>	<b>Neo-Conservative</b>
Dabiq (2014-2016)	National Vanguard (2005-present)	Nussrah (2012-2018)	American Renaissance (2007-2012)	The Islamic Monthly (2011-2017)	The National Review (2016-2018)
Rumiyah (2016-2018)	National Socialist Movement (2011-2017)	Mukhtarat (2011-2017)	National Policy Institute (2005-present)		
The Islamic State Report (2014)	The Stormtrooper (2007-2009)		Radix (2012-present)		
Inspire (2010-2016)	Blood and Honour (2008)				

The violent right-wing groups were: National Vanguard, National Socialist Movement (NSM), and Blood and Honour. Although each has different foundations and membership characteristics, all espouse a similarly violent Neo-Nazi worldview in which minorities, particularly, but not limited to, Jews, are deemed the root cause of societal problems (“www.hatewatch.org,” 2018). Each group has explicitly promoted violence in their literature, and have had members implicated in violence against minorities (Gerstenfeld et al., 2003; Marwick & Lewis, 2017; Parkin, Klein, Freilich, & Chermak, 2017; Whitsel, 2001). The National Vanguard publishes a magazine called *The National Vanguard*, whereas the NSM has two magazines: *The National Socialist Movement* and the now-defunct *The Stormtrooper*. Blood and Honour published one field manual for potential recruits which was used.



*Figure 1.* Methodology steps.

The non-violent right-wing extremist groups are affiliated with the alternative right (“alt-right”) movement, a loose conglomeration of white nationalist groups, which are attempting to make their views more palatable in mainstream political discourse by publicly disavowing

violence (Hartzell, 2018; Michael, 2017). The phrase “alt-right” was coined by Richard Spencer, who has remained one of the leaders of the movement despite recent legal troubles (Michel, 2018). One of the main policy positions of the alt-right is a White ethno-state, and members argue that this goal can be achieved without violence (Hartzell, 2018). The publications helmed by Richard Spencer, *National Policy Institute* and *Radix*, were used as representative of this group. In addition, Jared Taylor’s publication, *The American Renaissance*, and a blog named *The Right Stuff* were used. Taylor has been publishing *The American Renaissance* since the 1990’s, and is considered an ideological forefather to Spencer and others in the White nationalist movement (Florido, 2016; Nagle, 2017; Wilson, 2017).

The violent jihadist groups used were ISIS and al-Qaida. *Rumiyah*, *Dabiq*, and the *Islamic State Report* were ISIS’s publications, and *Inspire* was the al-Qaida publication. Hizb ut-Tahrir, an organization that promotes the formation of an Islamic caliphate through non-violent means (Baran, 2004; Karagiannis & McCauley, 2006) was used as representative of a non-violent extremist group on the Islamic side. This group publishes two periodicals: *Nussrah* and *Mukhtarat*, both of which were used. The “control” groups to which we compared these extremist groups were: *The Islamic Monthly*, a publication focused on news and current affairs, and *The National Review*, a conservative periodical prominent in neoconservative policy circles.

Of the publications identified for inclusion, two sources required web crawling to render usable documents: *Radix* and *The Right Stuff*. The R package, *Rcrawler* (Khalil, 2017) was used. This package crawls websites and downloads every linked page in HTML format to a local library, which can then be analyzed. The remainder of the publications offered magazines or other long format documents for download aimed at potential group members.

## Measures

To measure the frequency of CT use in publications, a list of common conspiracies was compiled based on previous research as well as from online forums affiliated with the groups of interest (see Appendix for complete list). There were five from Islamic groups, 14 from Right-wing groups, five that are used by both groups, and a list of generic CTs that are common in non-extremist circles. The researcher further broke down the conspiracy theories into common keywords, or engrams, which could be used in text analysis and data mining software packages. Sample conspiracy theories include that the West is engaging in a crusade against Islam, that national borders are illegitimate, and that there is a world-wide shadow government that secretly controls events behind the scenes.

The only CT that had not been previously used in research is referred to as “Q,” “Q-Anon,” or “the Storm,” and was relatively new, having emerged in October 2017 (Martineau, 2017, 2018; Weeast, 2018). This CT posits that a high-level government operative or group of operatives, referred to by the code-name, “Q,” has access to sensitive material and will drop hints, referred to as “crumbs” by followers, on anonymous websites including 4chan, 8chan, and on the Deep and/or Dark Web. Collectively, the knowledge Q purportedly possesses is called “The Storm,” and includes, among other things, evidence that: a child sex-trafficking ring is being run by Democrats including Bill and Hillary Clinton, that Robert Mueller’s investigation into President Trump is in fact an investigation into the Clintons and former President Barack Obama, and that Donald Trump uncovered real collusion with Russia by Clinton and Obama and agreed to pretend to be under investigation so the true inquiry can proceed unimpeded (“/cbts/ - Calm before the storm,” 2017; “Q Anon - The storm,” 2018; Deschamps, 2017; Martineau, 2017, 2018; Weeast, 2018).

The initial list of 26 CTs was reduced to two per group through random selection. This was done given that each CT was to be coded manually as opposed to an automated process.

Table 2

*Randomly Selected Conspiracy Theories Included in Analyses*

<b>Conspiracy Theory</b>	<b>Associated Group</b>	<b>Engrams used</b>
Crusades	Islamic	Crusades, Christian Crusader, Crusader Nations
The establishment of the caliphate will lead to apocalypse	Islamic	Khilafah, caliphate, apocalypse, malahim, end times
Race War is imminent	Far-Right	White genocide, race war, race traitor, eugenics, 14 words, 1488
New World Order	Far-Right	New World Order (NWO), shadow government, black helicopters, the octopus

The text analysis package *tidytext* (Silge & Robinson, 2016) in the statistical analysis software *R* (R Core Team, 2018) and *RStudio* (RStudio Team, 2016) was used for data exploration and analysis, and *SPSS* was used for data analysis. The *tidytext* package reads documents into *R* and can then be used to manipulate the texts as “tibbles,” which are data frames with one variable per column, one case per row, and one instance per cell. The keywords for the conspiracy theories were entered into the text analysis packages, and when a “hit” was found, the sentence and paragraph in which it occurred was culled into a database. The paragraph thus, is the unit of analysis. Subsequently, each paragraph was coded according to the stated hypotheses (see Appendix B for complete coding scheme). Each paragraph received either a “one” or a “zero” for the presence or absence, respectively, of each component.

Table 3

*Variables in Coding Scheme*

CT?	NFCC?	Anomie?	Violence?	Sign. Gain	Sign. Restoration	Sign. Maintenance	LoS
Does paragraph contain a CT?	Does paragraph elicit NFCC through time pressure?	Does paragraph elicit distrust of mainstream institutions?	Does paragraph explicitly promote violence?	Does paragraph promote significance gain?	Does paragraph promote significance restoration?	Dos paragraph promote significance maintenance?	Does paragraph promote loss of significance?

**Interrater reliability**

ISIS and AQ's propaganda resulted in a total of 1,038,540 words, 42,076 sentences, and 3,736 paragraphs. After using the engrams described above, the text analysis software pulled 50,162 mentions of the Crusades, which resulted in 604 paragraphs. The CT associated with the establishment of a global caliphate engendering the end times was mentioned 527 times in 263 distinct paragraphs. See tables 4 and 5 for further breakdown of the sample.

Table 4

*Sample Characteristics from Islamic Groups*

	ISIS/AQ	Hizb ut-Tahrir	Islamic Monthly
Total words	1,038,540	1,533,264	726,213
Total sentences	42,076	50,860	27,428
Total paragraphs	3,736	4,948	2,617
Crusades words	50,162	296	13
Crusades paragraphs	604	220	12
Apocalypse words	527	4,667	34
Apocalypse paragraphs	263	1,886	21

Table 5

*Sample Characteristics from Right-Wing Groups*

	Neo-Nazis	Alt-Right	National Review
Total words	618,259	7,251,775	1,072,171
Total sentences	25,278	327,870	50,401
Total paragraphs	2,322	29,481	3,547
NWO words	39	390	42
NWO paragraphs	38	316	40
Race war words	53	744	36
Race war paragraphs	39	562	31

Once the paragraphs associated with the randomly selected CTs were compiled, two independent coders rated 27 randomly-selected paragraphs on the coding scheme to establish interrater reliability (IRR). Cohen's kappa was then used to compute IRR. According to Viera and Garrett (2005), any rating above  $k = .60$  is considered substantial agreement. Accordingly, there was substantial agreement between the two raters on the full scale,  $k = .791$  (95% CI, .730 to .852),  $p < .001$ . The questions regarding the presence or absence of a CT and which CT was present displayed almost perfect agreement,  $k = .922$  (95% CI, .820 to 1.00),  $p < .001$ . The questions regarding anomie displayed substantial agreement,  $k = .816$  (95% CI, .734 to .898),  $p < .001$ . Likewise, the significance quest-related questions displayed substantial agreement,  $k = .758$  (95% CI, .638 to .878).

Need for cognitive closure was the most troublesome construct, as the initial 27 articles resulted in a  $k$  slightly below .60,  $k = .578$ ,  $p < .001$ . After meeting to discuss the discrepancies, 20

additional passages were assigned to both raters. Moderate agreement was found,  $k = .600$  (95% CI, .445 to .755),  $p < .001$ . The estimated reliability of need for cognitive closure is at the cutoff for acceptable agreement (Viera and Garrett, 2005), but because the 95% confidence interval includes reliability estimates below this level, results regarding need for cognitive closure should be interpreted with caution. Future researchers should strive to achieve higher agreement on this dimension.

Power analysis of a chi-squared test with five degrees of freedom and a small to moderate effect size,  $w = .30$ , indicated that a total sample of 221 was required, or approximately 37 from each group (i.e., ISIS/AQ, Hizb, The Islamic Monthly, Neo-Nazis, Alt-right, and Neoconservatives). Five degrees of freedom was used because this is the maximum degrees of freedom in any given analysis and would result in the largest minimum sample size required to find an effect. As a result, 50 paragraphs from each group were randomly selected for inclusion into the analysis. The final sample included 283 passages given that *The Islamic Monthly* pulling only 32 total passages. Of the paragraphs initially included, 13 were replaced because of incomplete information. The incomplete passages were comprised of the HTML and PHP coding language used in the websites from which they were pulled and did not provide any text for coding. Replacement paragraphs included randomly selected paragraphs from the primary database. The sample breakdown is given in table six below.

Table 6

*CTs Used in Analysis*

	CT from engram				Total
	Apocalypse	Crusades	NWO	Race War	
ISIS/AQ	17	33	0	0	50
Hizb ut-Tahrir	47	3	0	0	50
Islamic Monthly	21	11	0	0	32
Neo-Nazis	0	0	23	29	52
Alt-Right	0	0	18	31	49
Neoconservatives	0	0	28	22	50
<b>Total</b>	<b>85</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>82</b>	<b>283</b>

**Analysis**

The analysis of the stated hypotheses involved comparing the frequency of the presence (or absence) of identified conspiracy theories in propaganda materials of extremist groups. The rate of conspiracy theory use was compared across violent and less violent extremist groups. Independent raters coded for the use of time pressure (Yes vs. No), the presence of anomie (Yes vs. No), and the promotion of violence (Yes vs. No). Chi-squared tests of independence were used to analyze the data. In order to conduct post-hoc comparisons, the adjusted standardized residual was used (Beasley & Schumacker, 1995). This statistic is a z-score based on the likelihood of group membership and can be used to determine the effect a given cell in a contingency table has on the total chi-squared statistic (MacDonald & Gardner, 2000). Using this statistic instead of conducting multiple 2 x 2 post-hoc comparisons lowers the risk of Type I errors.

The z-scores used as critical values were determined using Sidak's (1967) alpha correction:  $\alpha_{\text{new}} = 1 - (1 - \alpha_{\text{old}})^{1/m}$ , where  $m$  is the number of cells in a given comparison. For a 3 x 2 contingency table, the critical value is  $Z = 2.42$ ,  $\alpha = 0.0085$ , whereas a 4 x 2 table has a critical value of  $Z = 2.49$ ,  $\alpha = .0064$ . A 6 x 2 contingency table has a critical value of  $Z = 2.62$ ,  $\alpha = .0042$ . A positive adjusted residual higher than the critical value indicates that the row by column frequency in that cell is significantly more likely than would be expected by chance. A negative residual indicates the opposite: that the number of occurrences is significantly lower than would be expected by chance.

Additionally, two effect sizes were computed: Cramer's  $\Phi$  for 2 x 2 contingency tables and Cramer's  $V$  for contingency tables larger than 2 x 2. Both are considered "strength-of-association" indices and estimate the variance shared by two or more variables (Ferguson, 2009). Cramer's  $\Phi$  can range from -1 to 1, and can be interpreted similarly to Pearson's  $r$  (Rodgers & Nicewander, 1988). In this case, the sign corresponds to whether the association is strongest on

Table 7

*Critical Values for Contingency Tables of Different Independent Variables*

Contingency Table	Z critical value	$\alpha$ level	Independent Variables
3 x 2	2.42	.0085	Extremism (3 levels)
4 x 2	2.49	.0064	Group membership – violent passages (4 levels)
6 x 2	2.69	.0042	Group membership (6 levels)

the diagonal (positive sign) or the off-diagonal (negative sign). Cramer's  $V$  ranges from zero to one. In both cases an absolute value of .2 is considered a small effect size, an absolute value of .5 a moderate effect, and absolute values of .8 and above a strong effect (Cohen, 1992; Ferguson, 2009).

## Results

Pearson chi-squared tests of independence were conducted to determine the differences among RVE groups, non-violent extremist groups, and moderate groups in terms of the hypotheses listed above. All of the statistics and effect sizes for the analyses are listed in Table 8.

### Conspiracy Theory Use

In order to test the hypothesis that RVE groups would use more CTs in their propaganda than non-violent and moderate groups, a 3 x 2 chi-square was run. Results indicated that there were significant differences among the levels of extremism in propensity of CT use,  $\chi^2(2, N = 283) = 109.279, p < .005, V = .621$ . The most significant contribution to the chi-squared statistic came from the moderate groups (Islamic Monthly and neoconservatives), such that significantly fewer passages contained CTs (12.2%) than expected  $Z = -10.30, \alpha < .0001$ . The RVE groups and non-violent extremist groups made significant contributions to the chi-squared as well, but in the opposite direction. Radical violent extremist groups used CTs significantly more often than expected (84.3% of the time),  $Z = 6.4, \alpha < .0001$ , as did non-violent extremist groups (42.9% of the time),  $Z = 3.4, p = .0003$ . These results are in line with the hypothesis in that RVE groups used CTs more often than non-violent groups, who used them more often than moderate groups.

Table 8

*Chi-Squared Statistics and Effect Sizes Across Levels of Extremism*

Variables	<i>RVE Groups n(%)</i>		<i>Non-violent extremists n(%)</i>		<i>Moderates n(%)</i>		$\chi^2$	<i>V</i>
	Absent	Present	Absent	Present	Absent	Present		
CT presence	16 (15.7%)	86 (84.3%)	27 (27.3%)	72 (72.7%)	72 (87.8%)	10 (12.2%)	109.28	.622
NFCC	51 (50.0%)	51 (50.0%)	53 (53.5%)	46 (46.5%)	78 (95.1%)	4 (4.9%)	48.026	.412
Anomie	35 (34.3%)	67 (65.7%)	29 (29.3%)	70 (70.7%)	72 (87.8%)	10 (12.2%)	73.581	.510
Violence	54 (2.9%)	48 (47.1%)	90 (90.9%)	9 (9.1%)	82 (100.0%)	0 (0.0%)	74.145	.512

*Note.* All chi-squared values significant at the  $p < .005$  level.

To examine if these effects were related to ideological background (Islamic or Right-wing), explicit promotion of violence, or extremism, three additional 2 x 2 chi-squared tests were conducted. In the first, ideology was found to be unrelated to the presence of CTs,  $\chi^2(1, N = 283) = 0.008, p = .930$ . This indicates that Right-Wing and Islamic groups were equally likely to use CTs. The second found that violent ideology was significantly related to CT use,  $\chi^2(1, N = 283) = 41.15, p < .005, \Phi = -.381$ . The negative sign on the  $\Phi$  coefficient indicates that the data are heavily weighted on the off-diagonals, which in this contingency table corresponds to the “violent group with CTs present” cell (84.3% of the violent passages) and the “non-violent group with CTs absent” cell (54.7% of the non-violent passages). In other words, in line with the hypotheses, violent groups were significantly more likely than non-violent groups to use CTs in their propaganda.

Additionally, extremist groups were significantly more likely to use CTs than moderate groups,  $\chi^2(1, N = 283) = 106.48, p < .001, \Phi = -.613$ . The negative  $\Phi$  coefficient indicates that more data are in the cells: “extremist group with CT present” (78.6% of the extremist passages and 94.0% of the CTs) and “moderate group without CTs” (87.8% of the moderate passages and 62.6% of the non-CT passages). RVE groups were significantly more likely than non-violent groups and moderate groups to use CTs, and this variance is explained by the use of violence and the level of extremism, regardless of ideology. Violence and extreme beliefs explain the difference in the use of CTs between these groups, whereas ideology does not.

In order to determine if these effects were being driven by a single group, a 6 x 2 (group x CT) chi-squared test was conducted. There were significant differences between groups in the prevalence of CTs in their publications,  $\chi^2(5, N = 283) = 110.61, p < .001, V = .625$ , but this alone does not indicate the magnitude nor direction of influence of individual groups. Adjusted

standardized residuals allow for the individual contributions of each group to be examined. Any adjusted residual above an absolute value of  $Z = 2.62$  indicates that the observed count in the cell is significantly different than would have been expected by chance. The further from zero the  $Z$  value is, the stronger that cell's effect on the overall chi-squared statistic.

Of the six groups, only one, Hizb ut-Tahrir, did not have a significant effect on whether CTs depended on group membership,  $Z = 1.4, p = .081$ . The most influential groups were the moderates: Islamic Monthly and Neoconservatives ( $Z = -6.1, \alpha < .0001$  and  $Z = -7.2, \alpha < .0001$ , respectively). The negative  $Z$  value indicates that these groups were significantly less likely than expected to have CTs present in their publications. Neo-Nazis and ISIS/AQ also had significant individual effects ( $Z = 4.4, \alpha < .0001$  and  $Z = 3.6, \alpha = .0002$ , respectively), such that these groups were significantly more likely to publish CTs than would be expected by chance. Likewise, the Alt-Right had a significant impact on the overall group differences,  $Z = 2.9, \alpha = .002$ , but was less influential than any other group except for Hizb ut-Tahrir.

Table 9

*Prevalence of CTs Across Publications*

	CT Present n(%)	Adjusted Residual
ISIS/AQ	41 (82.0%)	3.6*
Hizb ut-Tahrir	34 (68.0%)	1.4
Islamic Monthly	3 (9.4%)	-6.1*
Neo-Nazis	45 (86.5%)	4.4*
Alt-Right	38 (77.6%)	2.9*
Neoconservatives	7 (14.0%)	-7.2*

\*Significant at the  $\alpha = .0004$  level

**Need for Cognitive Closure**

As with the prevalence of CTs in publications, the first analysis was to determine whether RVE groups were more likely than non-violent extremist groups and moderate groups to use time pressure to elicit NFCC. A 3 x 2 chi-squared test (extremism x NFCC) indicated that there were significant differences between the three groups in the use of time pressure,  $\chi^2(2, N = 283) = 48.026, p < .001, V = .412$ . Adjusted standard residuals revealed that all three groups had significant effects on the between-group differences. Moderates had the largest effect,  $Z = -6.9, \alpha < .0001$ , followed by RVE groups,  $Z = 3.8, \alpha = .0001$ , and non-violent extremists,  $Z = 2.8, \alpha = .0026$ . Thus, moderates were significantly less likely to use time pressure in their publications than would be expected by chance, whereas RVE groups and non-violent extremists were significantly more likely than that which would be expected by chance. As predicted, the use of NFCC was greater in RVE groups than non-violent extremist groups and moderate groups.

Table 10

*Prevalence of NFCC Across Levels of Extremism*

	NFCC Present n(%)	Adjusted Residual
RVE	51 (50.0%)	3.8*
Non-violent extremists	46 (46.5%)	2.8*
Moderates	4 (4.9%)	-6.9*

\*Significant at  $\alpha < .009$  level

To parse where these differences emerged, three additional 2 x 2 chi-squared tests were conducted: ideology x NFCC, violence x NFCC, and extremism x NFCC. Groups with Islamic ideologies were significantly more likely to use time pressure in their CTs than those on the Right-wing,  $\chi^2(1, N = 283) = 10.279, p = .001, \Phi = -.191$ . This is a small effect size, but

significant nonetheless and indicates that time pressure is more prominent among Islamic groups (45.5% of Islamic passages) than among Right-wing groups (27.2% of Right-wing passages). Additionally, the violent groups were significantly more likely to employ time pressure than the non-violent groups in this sample,  $\chi^2(1, N = 283) = 14.231, p < .001, \Phi = -.224$ . Once again, the effect size is small, but does mean that violent groups were more likely to use time pressure to elicit NFCC (50.0% of violent passages) than non-violent groups (27.6% of passages).

At first glance, the largest effect on whether a group uses time pressure seemed to be the extremism of the group. Extremist groups were significantly more likely than moderate groups to use time pressure to elicit NFCC,  $\chi^2(1, N = 283) = 47.752, p < .005, \Phi = -.411$ . However, examination of the observed frequencies indicate that this effect is not because extremist groups use time pressure over and above violent groups or Islamic groups, but rather that moderate groups rarely used time pressure. Indeed, moderate groups elicited NFCC only 4.9% of the time, whereas extremist groups used time pressure in their communication 48.3% of the time, a percentage comparable to violent groups (50.0%) and Islamic groups (45.5%). Thus, the comparably larger effect size of extremism is simply an artifact of the comparison group. Collectively, the results surrounding NFCC suggest that groups with violent, extremist, Islamic ideologies are the most likely to elicit NFCC through the use of time pressure, although the effect size is small.

To determine whether group membership was related to NFCC, a 6 x 2 chi-squared test was conducted. Results indicated that there were significant differences between groups in the prevalence of NFCC,  $\chi^2(5, N = 283) = 57.236, p < .005, V = .450$ . The most influential group was the Neoconservatives, who were significantly less likely to elicit NFCC through time pressure than would be expected under the null hypothesis,  $Z = -5.5, \alpha < .0001$ . Unexpectedly,

Hizb ut-Tahrir's effect on group differences,  $Z = 4.0$ ,  $\alpha < .0001$ , was stronger than ISIS and AQ's,  $Z = 3.0$ ,  $p = .001$ . Both groups were significantly more likely than chance to elicit NFCC in their publications, but, in this case, in the opposite order than expected. The non-violent extremist group contributed more strongly to the group differences than the RVE groups, meaning that they were more likely to use NFCC than RVE groups. Another surprising finding is that neither Neo-Nazis,  $Z = 1.7$ ,  $\alpha = .045$ , nor the Alt-right,  $Z = 0.5$ ,  $\alpha = .308$ , contributed significantly to differences between the groups, as neither group's residual was higher than the critical value of  $Z = 2.62$ . This indicates that the Neo-Nazis and Alt-right were no more likely than chance to use NFCC in their publications, and confirms the earlier findings surrounding ideology and time pressure.

### **Anomie**

The hypothesis that anomie would be greatest among violent extremists was tested using a 3 x 2 chi-squared test. There were significant differences in elicitation of mistrust among RVE groups, non-violent extremist groups, and moderate groups,  $\chi^2(2, N = 283) = 72.581$ ,  $p < .005$ ,  $V = .510$ . Adjusted residuals indicate the moderate groups contributed the most to the differences,  $Z = -8.5$ ,  $\alpha < .0001$ , followed by non-violent extremists,  $Z = 4.6$ ,  $\alpha < .0001$ , and RVE groups,  $Z = 3.5$ ,  $p = .0002$ . The moderate groups' lack of anomie elicitation is in line with the hypothesis, but the fact that non-violent extremists were more likely to use anomie than RVE groups is not.

Table 11

*Presence of Anomie Across Levels of Extremism*

	Anomie Present n(%)	Adjusted Residual
RVE	67 (65.7%)	3.5*
Non-violent extremists	70 (70.7%)	4.6*
Moderates	10 (12.2%)	-8.5*

\*Significant at  $\alpha < .009$

To determine where these differences came from, three additional 2 x 2 chi-squared tests were conducted. Islamic and Right-wing groups were equally likely to use their publications to elicit mistrust of institutions,  $\chi^2(1, N = 283) = 0.117, p = .732$ . However, violent groups were significantly more likely than non-violent groups to elicit anomie,  $\chi^2(1, N = 283) = 12.066, p = .001, \Phi = -.206$ , and extremist groups were significantly more likely than non-extremist groups to elicit anomie,  $\chi^2(1, N = 283) = 73.073, p < .005, \Phi = -.508$ . This result is interesting considering the findings from the initial analysis indicating that non-violent extremist groups were more likely than RVE groups to elicit anomie but can be explained by the pull in the opposite direction from the moderate groups. In other words, although non-violent extremist groups were more likely than RVE groups to use their publications to elicit distrust of mainstream institutions, the effect was cancelled out by the fact that moderate groups were significantly more likely than chance to avoid anomie.

The presence of anomie and its relation to group membership was then tested using a 6 x 2 chi-squared (see Table 8). There were significant differences among groups in the elicitation of anomie,  $\chi^2(5, N = 283) = 73.88, p < .005, V = .511$ . The largest absolute contributions to this difference came from Neoconservatives and the Islamic Monthly ( $Z = -5.9, \alpha < .0001$  and

$Z = -5.1$ ,  $\alpha < .0001$ , respectively) followed by the Alt-right and Hizb ut-Tahrir ( $Z = 3.0$ ,  $\alpha = .0014$  and  $Z = 2.8$ ,  $\alpha = .0026$ , respectively). The two moderate groups were significantly less likely than chance to elicit anomie in their publications, whereas the two non-violent extremist groups were significantly more likely than chance to do so. Interestingly, neither of the RVE groups – ISIS/AQ and Neo-Nazis – contributed significantly to the difference in anomie across groups. Both groups' residual values were below the critical value of  $Z = 2.62$ , meaning that neither violent extremist group was significantly more likely to use anomie than that which would be predicted by chance.

Table 12

*Prevalence of Anomie Across Groups*

	Anomie Present n(%)	Adjusted Residual
ISIS/AQ	32 (64.0%)	1.9
Hizb ut-Tahrir	35 (70.0%)	2.8*
Islamic Monthly	3 (9.4%)	-5.1*
Neo-Nazis	35 (67.3%)	2.5
Alt-Right	35 (71.4%)	3.0*
Neoconservatives	7 (14.0%)	-5.9*

\*Significant  $\alpha < .004$  level

**Violence**

A 6 x 2 chi-squared test was conducted to determine whether RVE groups were more likely than non-violent extremist groups and moderate groups to use violence as a means for activating significance quest. In support of grouping ISIS, AQ, and Neo-Nazis as RVE groups, there were significant group differences in whether explicit promotion of violence was present,  $\chi^2(5, N = 283) = 80.533$ ,  $p < .005$ ,  $V = .533$ . Only ISIS/AQ and Neo-Nazis were significantly

more likely than chance to promote violence in their publications ( $Z = 7.0, \alpha < .0001$  and  $Z = 3.6, \alpha = .0002$ , respectively). Neoconservatives,  $Z = -3.9, \alpha < .0001$ , the Alt-right,  $Z = -3.1, \alpha = .001$ , and the Islamic Monthly,  $Z = -3.0, \alpha = .001$ , were significantly less likely to use violence in their publications than would have been expected by chance, whereas Hizb ut-Tahrir was not significantly different from chance,  $Z = -1.2, \alpha = .115$ . To ensure that ISIS/AQ and Neo-Nazis, the groups classified as RVE, were not statistically different from each other in promoting violence, a 2 x 2 chi-square test was conducted. This revealed that there was no significant difference between these groups in terms of the use of violent passages,  $\chi^2 (1, N = 102) = 3.147, p = .076$ .

In order to test whether violence was used to activate significance quest, the data file was split along whether a passage was explicitly violent or not and then analyzed for the presence of significance gain, significance restoration, significance maintenance, and loss of significance. A total of 57 passages had explicit calls for violence. Forty-eight of the passages were from RVE groups whereas nine were from non-violent extremist groups. Because none of the moderate groups promoted violence in any of their passages, they are excluded from the violent passage group. Thus, the tests on violent passages were conducted to determine whether RVE groups were significantly more likely than non-violent extremist groups to promote significance quest using violence. The non-violent passages have the same number of categories as the preceding analyses, but with reduced sample size.

**Significance gain.** For violent passages, a 2 x 2 chi-square test was conducted on extremism and significance gain. No significant differences in the likelihood of promoting significance gain in violent passages emerged between these groups,  $\chi^2 (1, N = 57) = 1.811,$

$p = .178$ . In the non-violent passages, however, significant group differences emerged in the likelihood to promote significance gain,  $\chi^2 (2, N = 226) = 20.494, p < .005, V = .301$ . Contrary to expectations, RVE groups were not significantly more likely than chance to promote significance gain,  $Z = 2.1, \alpha = .018$  (the adjusted critical value for a 3 x 2 chi-squared is  $Z = 2.42$ ). Non-violent extremists were significantly more likely than chance to promote significant gain in non-violent passages,  $Z = 2.6, p = .005$ , whereas moderate groups were significantly less likely than chance to promote significance gain in non-violent passages,  $Z = -4.5, \alpha < .0001$ .

Ideologically, Islamic groups were significantly more likely than Right-wing groups to promote significance gain in both violent passages,  $\chi^2 (1, N = 57) = 6.768, p = .009, \Phi = -.345$ , and non-violent passages,  $\chi^2 (1, N = 226) = 11.537, p = .001, \Phi = -.226$ . To further parse where these differences are, a 4 x 2 chi-squared test was conducted on group membership and significance gain in violent passages and a 6 x 2 chi-squared test was conducted on the non-violent passages. In both analyses, Fisher's exact test was used because more than one cell had expected counts fewer than five.

In the violent passages, there were significant differences between groups in the likelihood of promoting significance gain, *Fisher's*  $s = 11.503, p = .005, V = .429$  such that IS/AQ was significantly more likely than chance to promote significance gain through violent action,  $Z = 3.2, \alpha = .007$ . None of the other groups had a significant impact on the chi-squared statistic, although Neo-Nazis,  $Z = -2.4, \alpha = .0082$ , fell just below the critical value for this chi-square test. However, this finding was opposite of the expected direction, as the negative sign indicates that violent passages in Neo-Nazi publications were less likely than chance to promote significance gain. In the non-violent passages, only Hizb ut-Tahrir was significantly more likely than chance

to promote significance gain,  $Z = 5.0$ ,  $\alpha < .0001$ , whereas Neoconservatives were significantly less likely than chance to do so,  $Z = -3.2$ ,  $\alpha = .0069$ .

**Significance restoration.** A 2 x 2 chi-squared test was conducted on extremism and significance restoration in the violent passages, whereas a 3 x 2 test was conducted on extremism in the non-violent passages. In the violent passages, non-violent extremists were significantly more likely than RVE groups to recommend action to restore lost significance,  $\chi^2 (1, N = 57) = 8.552$ ,  $p = .003$ ,  $\Phi = .387$ . The same pattern emerged in the non-violent passages,  $\chi^2 (2, N = 226) = 31.947$ ,  $p < .005$ ,  $V = .376$ , such that non-violent extremists were significantly more likely than chance to promote significance restoration,  $Z = 5.7$ ,  $\alpha < .0001$ , whereas RVE groups and moderates were significantly less likely than chance to do so ( $Z = -2.5$ ,  $\alpha = .006$  and  $Z = -3.6$ ,  $\alpha = .0002$ , respectively).

Group membership was then entered into the chi-squared tests to determine where the differences arose from. In both the violent and non-violent passages, more than two cells had expected counts less than five. Because of this, Fisher's exact test was used. In violent passages, there were significant differences between groups in the likelihood of promoting significance restoration,  $Fisher's = 10.892$ ,  $p = .006$ ,  $V = .452$ , but the only significant contributor to this test statistic was IS/AQ. They were significantly less likely than would be expected by chance to promote significance restoration in violent passages,  $Z = -2.7$ ,  $\alpha = .0035$ . Hizb ut-Tahrir and the Alt-right were near the critical value of  $Z = 2.49$  ( $Z = 2.2$  and  $Z = 2.0$ , respectively), but did not pass the threshold. In the non-violent passages, significant differences in significance restoration emerged between groups,  $Fisher's = 50.860$ ,  $p < .005$ ,  $V = .553$ . Hizb ut-Tahrir was significantly more likely than chance to promote significance restoration in violent passages,  $Z = 8.2$ ,  $\alpha < .0001$ , whereas Neoconservatives were significantly less likely than chance to do so,

$Z = -2.8, \alpha = .0026.$

**Significance maintenance.** In the violent passages, there was no difference between levels of extremism on the likelihood of advocating for significance maintenance,  $\chi^2 (1, N = 57) = 0.032, p = .859.$  In the non-violent passages, however, a significant effect emerged,  $\chi^2 (2, N = 225) = 16.437, p < .005, V = .270.$  Non-violent extremists were significantly more likely than chance to promote significance maintenance,  $Z = 3.5, \alpha = .0002,$  whereas moderates were significantly less likely than chance to do so,  $Z = -3.8, \alpha = .0001.$  RVE groups did not significantly contribute to this effect, contrary to the hypothesis.

In non-violent passages, there was no significant difference between ideologies and the likelihood of preventing significance loss,  $\chi^2 (1, N = 225) = 2.274, p = .132.$  But, in violent passages, ideology did play a role in whether significance maintenance was promoted, such that Right-wing groups were significantly more likely than Islamic groups to promote significance maintenance,  $\chi^2 (1, N = 57) = 5.168, p = .023, \Phi = .301.$

In the violent passages, group membership was unrelated to whether significance maintenance was promoted,  $\chi^2 (3, N = 57) = 5.266, p = .153.$  In the non-violent passages, however, group membership was significantly related to whether preventing significance loss was promoted,  $\chi^2 (5, N = 225) = 21.347, p = .001, V = .308.$  Despite this, the only group with a significant impact on the overall chi-squared statistic was the Alt-right, which was significantly more likely than chance to mention significance maintenance,  $Z = 3.8, \alpha = .0001.$

**Loss of significance.** The final examination of violent and non-violent passages and how they are used to activate significance quest dealt with LoS. LoS requires no action, but is simply a promulgation of loss of status of either the individual or the group (Kruglanski et al., 2014; Webber et al., 2017). In both violent and non-violent passages, level of extremism was

significantly related to LoS. In non-violent passages,  $\chi^2 (2, N = 226) = 42.741, p < .005, V = .435$ , non-violent extremists were significantly more likely than chance to promote LoS in their passages,  $Z = 5.0, \alpha < .0001$ , whereas moderates were significantly less likely than chance to do so,  $Z = -6.4, \alpha < .001$ , and RVE groups were no more likely than chance to do so,  $Z = 1.5, \alpha = .0668$ . In violent passages, non-violent extremists were significantly more likely than RVE groups to promote LoS,  $\chi^2 (1, N = 57) = 16.437, p = .01, \Phi = .360$

To further examine these differences, group membership served as the independent variable. In non-violent passages, group membership was significantly related to whether LoS was present in a passage,  $\chi^2 (5, N = 226) = 50.526, p < .005, V = .473$ . Hizb ut-Tahrir and Neoconservatives were the major drivers of this statistic ( $Z = 4.4, \alpha < .001$  and  $Z = -5.1, \alpha < .001$ , respectively) such that Hizb was significantly more likely than chance to use LoS in their passages whereas Neoconservatives were significantly less likely to do so. In violent passages, significant differences emerged between groups as well, *Fisher's*  $= 20.077, p < .005, V = .596$ , such that Neo-Nazis were significantly more likely than chance to use LoS,  $Z = 2.5, \alpha = .006$ , whereas ISIS/AQ was significantly less likely to do so,  $Z = -4.4, \alpha < .0001$ . Both Hizb ut Tahrir and the Alt-right approached significant contributions ( $Z = 2.2$  and  $Z = 1.5$ , respectively). It appears that in the initial analysis, the positive contribution of Neo-Nazis and the negative contribution of ISIS/AQ cancelled each other out, whereas the positive, albeit non-significant individual contributions of the Alt-right and Hizb combined to make non-violent extremists significantly more likely than RVE groups to use LoS in their passages.

### Discussion

A motif in nearly all of the analyses is that the strongest driver of significant group differences were the moderate groups (The Islamic Monthly and the Neoconservatives).

Although this lends support to the stated hypotheses, I believe that interpretation of the effect sizes should be made with caution. The group differences were often driven by moderate groups being less likely to use CTs and promote NFCC, anomie, and violence, rather than radical-violent extremist groups being *more likely* to do so. Few differences emerged regarding radical-violent extremist groups and extremist (yet non-violent) groups. This is not to say that the results should be discounted, but rather, that more exploration of the dataset is needed across a broader range of groups, passages, and CTs to arrive at more definitive conclusions.

In line with the hypotheses regarding CT use, RVE groups were significantly more likely than non-violent extremists and moderates to use CTs in their publications. Additionally, non-violent extremists were significantly more likely than moderates to use CTs. This fully supports the hypothesis. This difference was related only to violence and extremism and was unrelated to whether a group subscribed to Islamic or Right-wing ideology. However, an individual group difference emerged which was unexpected: Hizb ut-Tahrir was no more likely than chance to use CTs, whereas Alt-right groups were significantly more likely than chance to do so. The expectation was that this group would be just as likely as the Alt-right to use CTs. One explanation for this is that Hizb ut-Tahrir's stated goal is the establishment of an Islamic caliphate, but they do not typically couch this goal in apocalyptic terms, unlike ISIS (Karagiannis & McCauley, 2006). Because of the key words used to parse the text, and the CTs randomly selected, many passages were pulled that mentioned a caliphate but lacked conspiratorial context, which lowered the percentage of CTs found in Hizb ut-Tahrir's publications and may be a reason for the discrepancy between it and the Alt-right. For example, in issue 16 of *Mukhtarat*, the author argues that Islam is the only viable political ideology for a truly faithful nation, but does not mention any apocalyptic visions as a result:

It is time for us living in the West to realize the struggle that is taking place here to change Islam and take an active part to prevent this. This can only be done, brothers and sisters, by building a strong conviction that Islam is a complete din (religion/creed) that can address all our affairs in the 21st century and, moreover, it is Islam that has the solutions to the problems facing the whole of humanity today (Mukhtarat, 2012; pg. 34).

The hypothesis that RVE groups would be more likely to elicit NFCC through time pressure than non-violent extremist groups and moderate groups was also borne out. Additionally, non-violent extremist groups were significantly more likely than moderate groups to elicit NFCC. Unlike CT prevalence, however, Islamic groups were significantly more likely to use NFCC than right-wing groups, particularly Hizb ut-Tahrir, although ISIS and AQ also contributed to the differences. In the case of Hizb ut-Tahrir, many of the passages were direct calls to political action on local issues in Pakistan, Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon. ISIS and AQ were not as likely as Hizb to use time pressure but were significantly more likely than chance to do so.

Interestingly, and contrary to expectations, Neo-Nazis and the Alt-right were not significant contributors to group differences in NFCC elicitation. One plausible explanation for this is that ISIS and Hizb needed recruits as they were publishing their content, whereas Neo-Nazis and the Alt-right did not. Copello (2018) found that the publication of *Dabiq* began soon after ISIS declared itself a caliphate in 2014 and was ramping up its military offensive in Iraq and Syria. Disseminating propaganda with time pressure would be a way for ISIS to attract desperately-needed soldiers for a full-scale war. Hizb, although not engaged in a war, was trying to recruit members in a politically volatile region that seemed on the brink of large-scale political upheaval during the Arab Spring in 2011 (Erlich, 2014; Lister, 2015). Neo-Nazis and the Alt-right, in contrast, were not occupying territory, nor were they fighting a war or toppling a regime.

Thus, the need for new members in these groups may not be as pressing as for the extremist Islamic groups.

Additionally, ISIS has been active in recruiting adolescents and emerging adults, and NFCC plays an important role in identity development and formation at these ages (Horgan, Taylor, Bloom, & Winter, 2016; “IS trains hundreds of child soldiers in Syria,” 2015). Older adolescents with low NFCC are more likely to explore and achieve new identities than those with an information-avoidant processing style, or high NFCC (Krettenauer, 2005). In other words, adolescents who have a high tolerance for ambiguity are more likely to explore their identity in relation to family, friends, and other social groups, and less likely to settle on an identity without considering their options. Additionally, individuals with high NFCC adhere more closely to ingroup norms than those with low NFCC (Manchi Chao, Zhang, & Chiu, 2010). Radicalization most often occurs in groups of young men (Sageman, 2004), and those with high NFCC will be more likely to stay with an increasingly radicalized ingroup in spite of any moral or ethical qualms regarding their means of influence on society (e.g., violence toward civilians).

Anomie was significantly more likely in non-violent extremist publications than in RVE and moderate publications. This was contrary to the hypothesis that elicitation of mistrust would be most likely among RVE groups. The prevalence of anomie in the Alt-right and Hizb ut-Tahrir could be a function of target audience. Of the groups in this analysis, RVEs are the most radicalized, whereas the non-violent extremists are considered a “gateway” to further radicalization (Hartzell, 2018; Karagiannis & McCauley, 2006). Perhaps the non-violent extremist groups use anomie to drive people towards extremism, whereas the RVE groups presume that individuals reading their publications are sufficiently radicalized and do not need to be informed of the purported dishonesty of mainstream institutions. This is in line with internal

communications from the Alt-right (Anglin, 2017; Lyons, 2017). One of their main goals is to convince people who hold mainstream views (“normies”) that the institutions they trust are in fact lying to them and are either self-serving or working at the behest of larger, malevolent forces. For example, in *Radix*, the author argues that Obama’s national security team is bent on global hegemony and, because it is made up entirely of women, is either incompetent, cold, or angry:

As the saying goes: Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned, and it seems rational decision making has no place in that inferno. So, who are these cast of characters lending a feminine touch to American global hegemony? I’d like to call them the sisterhood of the hashtag doctrine, styled after the film *The Sisterhood of the Travelling Pants*. They each represent an archetype that is portrayed in every cultural item about female groups and they definitely have “girl power” written onto their style... Susan Rice: she’s the token minority of the foreign policy crew. She does token minority things, such as demonstrating incompetence and playing the race card when she’s attacked. No matter – she’s now Obama’s national security adviser (M. McGregor, 2014).

In confirmation of the processes employed to classify groups, Neo-Nazis and ISIS/AQ were the only groups significantly more likely than chance to promote violent acts in their passages. Hizb and the Alt-right did have violence recommended in certain passages but combined, they only contributed nine of the 57 violent passages. In violent passages, ISIS/AQ was more likely than chance to promote significance gain, but not restoration or maintenance. This was unexpected as significance quest would suggest that RVE groups would be likely to use all three components of activation to drive recruitment. However, this could be a function of the string of military victories achieved during the period of publication. In many of the passages,

ISIS extols its fighters for the number of enemy combatants killed or the territory conquered and encourages other to follow suit.

To the soldiers of the Khilafah and its supporters all over the world! To the predatory lions who pounced upon the beds of kufr, made it forget comfort, muddied the face of its intelligence agencies, and made safety a dream from amongst their many dreams! Know – may Allah support you with his aid – that your blessed operations turn the scales and turn the spout of the cannons of kufr away from the Muslims. Thus, attack them in their homes, markets, streets, clubs, and wherever they least expect it. Enflame the ground beneath their feet and blacken their skies so that they are busied with themselves. Multiply your efforts and intensify your operations, may Allah bless you (Islamic State, 2016; pg. 7).

In the passages analyzed, the grievances expressed about other groups came from a position of power, rather than from one of weakness.

ISIS/AQ was significantly less likely than chance to promote restoration and no more likely than chance to promote significance maintenance in both violent and non-violent passages. Again, this could be a function of the time period in which the selected passages were published. ISIS emerged from near destruction in Iraq to take over huge swathes of territory and declare itself a caliphate – something AQ never achieved, and indeed thought was too extreme (Lister, 2015). ISIS held this territory for years, and recent documents have emerged suggesting that they ran an effective, albeit brutal, administrative state in Iraq and Syria (Callimachi, 2018). With these achievements, who needs grievances? ISIS was the winning side at the time, and many of their passages boast about their accomplishments:

We would not be exaggerating if we were to say that hundreds of movements, parties, and factions have arisen over the course of the past century claiming to be working for the return of the Khilafah, the implementation of the Shari'ah, and the establishment of the religion on the earth. However, they all failed to achieve that, despite some of them having reached a stage of either actual consolidation or pseudo-consolidation. Among them were those who even managed to establish some of the rulings of the Shari'ah, but the aforementioned aspirations were never achieved in their entirety except by the Islamic State, and virtue has and always will belong to Allah (Islamic State, 2016a; pg. 7).

Non-violent extremists, on the other hand, were more likely to employ significance restoration in both violent and non-violent passages. Hizb was a significant contributor to group differences in significance restoration and LoS, whereas the Alt-right used significance maintenance significantly more often than chance. Significance restoration and maintenance require some grievance, and as with anomie, perhaps non-violent groups use restoration as a path towards further extremism. Alt-right passages often employed some sort of grievance, such as White people losing their rights or slowly being disenfranchised.

Contrary to expectations, Neo-Nazis were no more likely than chance to promote significance gain, restoration, or maintenance in violent and non-violent passages, whereas the Alt-right was a significant contributor only in significance restoration in non-violent passages. However, Neo-Nazis used LoS frequently in their passages, which suggests that their approach to radicalization may be different than ISIS/AQ. Many of the passages from Neo-Nazis emphasized the supposed loss of rights that White people have experienced at the hands of minorities.

White power beliefs and ideals are anything that, by their very nature are conducive to, and in accordance with achieving the interests and objectives of white power -- that which is good for the white race, i.e., its safety, preservation, and advancement... Being under the boot-heel of those who seek our destruction (and/or the total elimination of 'whiteness' -- ultimately translating into a state of full-blown submission), does not constitute survival and prosperity! Needless to say, sitting on the sidelines will no longer suffice. The future of our race demands nothing less than full-blown effort, participation, and sacrifice (National Socialist Movement, 2015; pg. 12)

Thus, these groups may be more interested in promoting grievances against mainstream institutions than in promoting action to prevent, maintain, or gain significance.

Researchers investigating significance quest applied this concept to Islamic extremists only. In comparison to ISIS/AQ, Neo-Nazis have very little urgency for recruiting large numbers of new members. The movement is largely decentralized ("www.hatewatch.org," 2018), and not in power in the countries in which they have significant membership. In light of the results in the current study, it seems that Neo-Nazis and the Alt-right, both of which are White-supremacist, are more interested in stoking grievances and/or restoring supposedly lost standing for White people than in calling for action to gain or maintain significance. Despite the fact that Neo-Nazis are a radical violent extremist group, they do not appear to follow the same pattern of significance quest in their publications as ISIS/AQ.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

A major limitation with this study is the inter-rater reliability achieved for NFCC. NFCC is the foundation for the theoretical underpinnings of this study; however, raters attempting to

identify its presence or absence disagreed occasionally on its presence. More passages should be coded by multiple raters to address this limitation.

Another limitation of this study is the author's lack of intimate knowledge of the Arabic language, Islam, and the *Koran*. The close reading of important texts such as the *Koran* and the *Hadiths* is instrumental in understanding the appeal of ISIS and other RVE groups in the Muslim world. The author has attempted to rely on reputable sources for translation of key words and phrases, but likely missed nuances in the language that would be apparent to one more versed in the culture. In the same vein, the publications used from Islamic sources except *The Islamic Monthly* were originally published in Arabic and then translated to English. Thus, this research approximates what English-speaking individuals would encounter in these publications, rather than the Arabic-speaking population.

Violent Neo-Nazis, although becoming increasingly outspoken (Reid, Valasik, & Reid, 2018; Wilson, 2017), still have a difficult time getting a platform in the U.S. (Reuters, 2017). Neo-Nazis as a whole are loosely organized, with no central authority issuing directives or controlling the narrative (Reid et al., 2018). Because of the fragmentary nature of the movement, finding representative publications was more difficult than for the other groups, and thus, the sample for Neo-Nazis may not be as reliable or accurate as that of the other groups.

Additionally, many self-described Neo-Nazis who have or have had public platforms (e.g., Andrew Anglin of the *Daily Stormer*) explicitly denounce violence. This is done with a wink and a nod and is intended as a recruiting tactic to lure disaffected people to the movement and then gradually introduce more extreme views without scaring them away ("redpilling the normies," in Far-Right parlance). Andrew Anglin himself, in a leaked style guide for his website, said,

The unindoctrinated should not be able to tell if we are joking or not. There should also be a conscious awareness of mocking stereotypes of hateful racists. I usually think of this as self-deprecating humor - I am a racist making fun of stereotype of racists, because I don't take myself super-seriously. This is obviously a ploy and I actually do want to gas [racial slur referring to Jews]. But that's neither here nor there (Anglin, 2017; pg. 11).

Although their views and end goals are implicitly violent and would require violent action to put into practice, their explicit, albeit superficial, nods to non-violence excluded them from the analyses. These groups should be the subject of future studies to examine how purportedly non-violent Neo-Nazis use CTs to recruit members.

The same issue arises with the Alt-right, which has become increasingly fractured since the murder of a counter-protestor in the “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017 (Nagle, 2017). Since then, many figureheads of the movement have lost influence and some of the most important content on the Alt-right comes from *YouTube* channels and podcasts such as *The Daily Shoah* and *Alt-Right Radio*. Important information about this movement and the recruitment methods its members employ could be gleaned from these alternative sources.

Future research on text analysis of RVE and other groups is multi-faceted. In this particular dataset, multiple directions will be explored. First and foremost, the full list of CTs should be pulled from each source. Using the already-coded passages as input for a Natural Language Processing (NLP) algorithm may result in a more efficient exploration of the texts pulled from each source. In addition, coding not used in this paper was conducted on the passages used, including whether time pressure was construed as a failure to act (consequence) or a reward for acting, who the consequence or reward would accrue to, which institution anomie

was directed towards, and what the intention of lying was. Exploration of the uses of NFCC and anomie would yield further insight into the patterns of recruitment these groups engage in.

### **Conclusion**

In line with two hypotheses, RVE groups used CTs and NFCC more than non-violent extremists. The pattern with anomie was reversed, such that non-violent extremists were more likely than RVE groups to elicit distrust in mainstream institutions. Additionally, the activation of significance quest through violent passages was more complex than initially hypothesized: ISIS/AQ used significance gain, but neither maintenance nor restoration, whereas Neo-Nazis only used loss of significance.

Radical violent extremists using CTs to elicit NFCC implies that these groups do want to force potential recruits to make a decision quickly, a key component of activating significance quest. However, the fact that encouraging significance quest through violence and anomie was not a common theme suggests that the pathways to significance quest are not as straightforward as expected. It appears that the context in which the groups exist affects the types of language used in recruitment materials, regardless of the end goals of the groups. ISIS wants to establish a borderless theocracy based on Wahhabist interpretation of Sharia'h law, whereas Neo-Nazis seek to break the hold that Jews and Globalists supposedly have on world events and establish a White ethno-state (Ezekiel, 2002; Sageman, 2004; Warrick, 2016). Both seek to achieve these goals through violence and often rail against the same boogeymen: a cabal of malevolent individuals running the world for their own gain. Their goals are remarkably similar, but their relative positions of power appear to affect how they seek to motivate radicalization.

Because ISIS had a functioning state it appears that they were more interested in promoting what potential recruits could gain from joining them, rather than what they could regain or prevent from losing. Neo-Nazis, on the other hand, have little political influence and thus sought to stoke grievances, rather than promote the power of their group. Now that ISIS has lost much of the territory it gained since 2014, their rhetoric may shift towards a more grievance-oriented strategy, one seeking to regain the lost glory of the caliphate. Collectively, these findings indicate that the path towards significance quest may be different for different groups at different stages in their lifespan, and that geopolitical context is an important moderator of the theory of significance quest.

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### Appendix A

#### Full list of conspiracy theories

<b>Conspiracy Theory</b>	<b>Associated Group</b>	<b>Language used</b>	<b>Source(s)</b>
Crusades	Islamic	Crusades, Crusader, Christian Crusader, Crusader Nations, Western crusade	Bartlett & Miller, 2010; Gray, 2010
War on Islam	Islamic	War on Islam, attack on Islam, war on Muslims, anti-Muslims	Bartlett & Miller (2010); Gray (2010)
Zionist-Christian apostate government	Islamic	taghut, murtad, takfir, kafir, apostate, idol, idolatry, infidel	Bartlett & Miller (2010); Gray (2010); Lister (2015)
National boundaries are illegitimate	Islamic	border, Sykes, Picot, nation-state	Bartlett & Miller (2010); Gray (2010); Lister (2015)
The establishment of the Caliphate will bring about the end times	Islamic	Khilafah, caliphate, apocalypse, end times	Gray (2010); Lister (2015); Warrick (2016)
Zionist Occupied Government (ZOG)	Far-Right	ZOG, Zionist Occupied Government	Barkun, 2003; Bartlett & Miller (2010); Gray (2010)
New World Order	Far-Right	New World Order, NWO, shadow government, the Octopus, black helicopters, BH	Bartlett & Miller (2010); Swami et al. (2011); Swami et al. (2017); Swami, Chamorro-Premuzic, & Furnham, (2010)
Illuminati	Far-Right	Illuminati	Barkun (2003); Bartlett & Miller (2010)
False Flag Operation	Far-Right	False flag, inside job, crisis actor, 9/11, 7/7, Parkland, Sandy Hook, Orlando, Las Vegas, Paris	Barkun (2003); Bartlett & Miller (2010); Swami et al. (2010); Swami et al. (2017); Warner & Neville-Shepard (2014)
Freemasons	Far-Right	Freemasons	Barkun (2003); Bartlett & Miller (2010)
One World Government	Far-Right	One World Government, OWG	Barkun (2003); Bartlett & Miller (2010)
George Soros and/or his organization controls world events	Far-Right	Soros, George Soros, Soros Foundation	Oliver & Wood (2014)

Race War is imminent	Far-Right	White genocide, race war, race traitor, eugenics, war on whites, white lives matter, all lives matter, 14 words, 1488	Perry (2004)
Liberal Marxist-homosexual-Zionist coalition	Far-Right	Libtard, gay agenda, Cultural Marxism, communist infiltration, culture war, Jewish Bolshevism	Barkun (2003)
Turner Diaries	Far-Right	Turner Diaries, The Order	Bartlett & Miller (2010)
FEMA concentration camps	Far-Right	FEMA, FEMA concentration camps	Barkun (2003)
Chemtrails	Far-Right	chemtrails	Oliver & Wood (2014)
Birtherism	Far-Right	birtherism, Obama birth certificate	Oliver & Wood (2014); Warner & Neville-Shepard (2014)
Deep State	Far-Right	Deep State, the storm, Qanon	“/cbts/ - Calm before the storm” (2017); “Q Anon - The storm” (2018); Deschamps (2017); Martineau (2017, 2018); Neiwart (2018); Weeast (2018)
Protocols of the Elders of Zion	Both	The Protocols, Elders of Zion, Protocols of the Elders, Zion Protocols	Bartlett & Miller (2010); Gray (2010)
Jewish bankers manipulating events	Both	Jewish bankers, worldwide Jewry, Jewish lobby, The Franklin Prophecy, Jewish Tax, Kosher Tax	Bartlett & Miller (2010); Brotherton et al. (2013); Gray (2010); Swami et al. (2010)
Holy War	Both	Holy war	Gray (2010); Lewis (2003)
Holocaust Myth	Both	Holohoax, shoah, Holocaust myth, revisionist, revisionism	Bartlett & Miller (2010); Gray (2010)
Jews engaging in blood rituals	Both	blood ritual, blood libel, human sacrifice	Bartlett & Miller (2010)
Generic CTs	Unspecified	JFK assassination, John F. Kennedy, Moon landing, Princess Diana, Princess Di, AIDS,	Brotherton et al. (2013); Swami et al. (2010); Swami et al. (2017)

population control,  
vaxxers, anti-vaccine

## Appendix B

## Coding Scheme for Conspiracy Theories

1. Is the excerpt a conspiracy theory?
  - a. Does it indicate that malevolent actors are working behind the scenes to promote their own agenda?
  - b. Does it fall into one of the categories listed in the CT table?
  - c. If yes, 1 for “CT?” If not, 0 for “CT?”
    - i. If 0, do not proceed to 2 through 5, simply move on to the next CT
2. Which CT is it?
  - a. See table for coding scheme
3. Does CT activate NFCC through time pressure?
  - a. Does it indicate that the individual reading it needs to act now?
  - b. Time is running out, they need to make a decision, etc.
  - c. Does it indicate that negative consequences will occur if the individual does not act quickly?
    - i. Consequences:
      1. can range from those befalling the individual (i.e., “unless you do this soon, you have not acted in accordance with Allah’s will”)
      2. to the group (i.e., “unless you do this now, all Muslims will suffer”)
  - d. Does it indicate that there will be positive rewards for acting quickly?
  - e. If yes to any of the above, 1 for “NFCC” If not, 0
4. Does CT activate anomie, or distrust of government institutions, or mainstream narratives?
  - a. Does it indicate that the government, press, or other authority has lied about its intentions?
  - b. Does it indicate that authority figures have covered up the “real truth”?
  - c. Does it indicate that there is “more to the story” than what we are being told?
  - d. Does CT indicate that a powerful, behind-the-scenes actor is actually controlling world events (i.e., Jews, bankers, corporations, etc.)?
  - e. Does the CT explicitly question the motivations of mainstream sources of information (i.e., mainstream media)?
    - i. e.g., “the media is controlled by Democrats, Jews, etc. with the intention of maintaining power”
  - f. If yes to any of the above, 1 for “Anomie” If not, 0
5. Does the CT indicate that the CT itself is “special knowledge,” that very few people are brave or smart enough to accept, understand, and/or act on?
  - a. Implies a sort of superiority for those who believe the CT. They are braver, smarter, etc. than those who don’t believe it.
6. Does CT explicitly promote violence as a means for achieving significance?
  - a. Does CT or context of CT indicate that engaging in violence is a means for redressing wrongs perpetrated on the group?
7. Does CT promote significance gain?

- a. example: “we have full confidence in your motivations and capabilities. **Unchain yourselves from the spineless leadership and deliver a victory that the ummah yearns for and has not seen since the era of the Khilafah**, the shield of the Muslims.
  - i. In this example, people are being implored to engage in actions of historical importance and to transcend
- 8. Does CT promote significance restoration?
  - a. Has to include a loss of significance – some sort of humiliation, as well as a path towards regaining significance
  - b. example: “and the ugly truth of America and western kaffir countries was revealed to them, that they are blood suckers, and **looters of the ummah’s wealth, the truth of their vehement hatred and treacherous hostility to Islam and Muslims, and the truth of what they brought to the Muslims and their countries**, from turmoil, and what caused their destruction and decimation, and the establishment of Israel, a sword hanging over their heads, and a dagger stabbed in their breasts, **despite all that the Muslims revised themselves, they became fully convinced that there is no salvation except by the return to Allah and to restore his rulings in life.**”
    - i. In this passage, the West is said to have sucked the blood from Muslim lands and humiliate them, but that the honor of Muslims can be restored through the establishment of a caliphate.
- 9. Does CT promote prevention of significance loss?
  - a. This is more of an avoidant orientation: “unless you take some action, something bad will happen to you, the group, etc.”
  - b. example: “at colleges across America, student protesters are intimidating conservatives who dare to attempt to speak...student-led intimidation and censorship can be found at colleges of all stripes, **as the administration-imposed censorship of the speech- code era in the 1990s gives way to something even worse—a rerun of the 1960s, in which radical students impose mob rule.**”
    - i. This passage is arguing that the Left is imposing “mob rule” on campus, invoking the Reign of Terror in the French Revolution, and arguing that the Right needs to stop it in order to keep free speech alive and America great...again
  - c. example: “if only such a plan could have been implemented in 1941 then, **although the people of Hawaii would now be speaking Japanese, at least the war in Europe would have been won by white nationalists**, and the Soviet Union would be out of the picture... **we cannot hope for a strong and healthy military establishment until we have a strong and healthy civilian society. and we cannot have the latter until the entire spiritual and ideological basis on which it rests has been utterly transformed...** although 30 per cent of the army is black, only 6.4 per cent of the officer corps is. pentagon officials seem quite embarrassed about this discrepancy, apparently accepting the position that it is due to "discrimination." (such a stance might be expected, since jimmy carter's army is not unlike the pride an

animal trainer might show in being able to teach a **one-legged chimpanzee to ride a bicycle**: a marvelous feat, but so what”

- i. They go on to speak about allowing Black people in the military and argue that it’s a bad thing. So, to prevent the decline of the military and the risk to America as a result, we need to stop letting uneducated Black people into the military.