

THE SOUFAN CENTER

**SPECIAL REPORT:**

# QUANTIFYING THE Q CONSPIRACY:

*A Data-Driven Approach to Understanding the Threat Posed by QAnon*

April 2021



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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<b>AQ</b>	Al-Qaeda
<b>DHS</b>	The Department of Homeland Security
<b>DVE</b>	Domestic Violent Extremism
<b>FBI</b>	Federal Bureau of Investigation
<b>FI</b>	Foreign Influence
<b>HHS</b>	Health and Human Services
<b>ISIS</b>	Islamic State
<b>JBS</b>	John Birch Society
<b>MAGA</b>	Make America Great Again
<b>ODNI</b>	Office of the Director of National Intelligence
<b>PIRA</b>	Provisional Irish Republican Army
<b>REMVE</b>	Racially and Ethnically Motivated Violent Extremism
<b>WSE</b>	White Supremacy Extremism

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## KEY FINDINGS

- The QAnon conspiracy theory taps into a similar process of radicalization as witnessed with other forms of extremism, including Salafi-jihadism, indicating that as the QAnon movement continues to evolve, it could grow more violent in the foreseeable future.
- Adherents of the QAnon conspiracy theory are already seeking to leverage existing social grievances to attract new recruits. Individuals are radicalized in online echo chambers by false narratives and inspired by other attacks, such as the January 6, 2021 insurrection in the U.S.
- According to survey data reviewed by TSC experts, around 20% of respondents self-identify as QAnon believers and an even larger portion subscribe to one or more QAnon-narratives including allegations of voter fraud, suspicions about the reality of COVID-19, and child sex trafficking conspiracies, suggesting there exists a broad cognitive opening among the U.S. population that can be manipulated by violent extremist groups and recruiters.
- This larger pool of potential recruits might be viewed as possible “free agents,” with anti-Semitism serving as the ideological bridge between QAnon and white supremacy extremist (WSE) organizations or other violent far-right groups and ideologies.
- States like China and Russia utilize QAnon-narratives as part of their disinformation campaigns, increasing the reach and resonance of the conspiracy theory to susceptible audiences in the United States and beyond.
- As occurred with al-Qaeda and Islamic State propaganda, algorithms employed by social media companies to generate continued engagement with platforms are partly responsible for radicalizing individuals to support QAnon. The findings of this report make clear, it is imperative to protect freedom of speech, but social media companies also need to re-examine their de-platforming approaches, design of algorithms, and the prevalence of disinformation on their platforms.
- The policy implications of the sustained influence of QAnon conspiracy theories, especially when buttressed by foreign powers, are profound. As such, the U.S. Government, private sector, and civil society organizations have important roles to play in countering the spread of QAnon-related conspiracy theories. The following recommendations will contribute to slowing the spread of these false narratives:

- First and foremost, the U.S. government must remove the key element that allows for any conspiracy theory to thrive—crisis. The decline of COVID-19, however, does not mean an end to conspiracy theories.
- Second, social media companies need to re-examine their de-platforming approaches, especially when the data from this report indicates that the potency of multiple foreign influence campaigns remains high.
- Third, social media companies need to refine their algorithms which continue to recommend toxic QAnon-related content, some of which is created overseas.
- Fourth, community-oriented and offline solutions are also necessary. Specifically, civil society and academic organizations must continue to develop and administer digital and media literacy programs through educational and other institutions.
- Finally, the Biden administration should consider working with Congress and civil society organizations to determine if the battle against disinformation warrants the creation of a new interagency organization that includes personnel with both domestic and international mandates.

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## INTRODUCTION

A May 2019 intelligence bulletin from the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s (FBI) Phoenix office labeled conspiracy theories as a domestic terrorism threat for the first time.<sup>1</sup> The bulletin mentioned QAnon by name specifically and described the broader movement of “conspiracy theory-driven domestic extremists” as deserving particular attention. “Conspiracy theories promoting violence” was designated one of the most serious aspects of the domestic violent extremism threat in a recently released unclassified report by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI).<sup>2</sup> QAnon is a far right conspiratorial movement that creates and co-opts “theories” to fit an evolving narrative underpinned by the core notion that the “Deep State,” led by a cabal of elitist pedophiles, is leading the United States.<sup>3</sup> These ideas are fueled by occasional messages from an anonymous individual, known as Q. Although the identity of “Q” remains unknown, the posts aim to create the notion that the author is an individual possessing a military intelligence background and shares secret information with followers. The posts, known as Qdrops<sup>4</sup>, often reference anti-Semitic tropes depicting George Soros and the Rothschild family

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<sup>1</sup> Winter, Jana. “Exclusive: FBI Document Warns Conspiracy Theories Are a New Domestic Terrorism Threat.” *Yahoo! News*, August 1, 2019. <https://news.yahoo.com/fbi-documents-conspiracy-theories-terrorism-160000507.html>.

<sup>2</sup> “Domestic Violent Extremism Poses Heightened Threat in 2021.” Office of the Director of National Intelligence, March 17, 2021. <https://www.dhs.gov/publication/domestic-violent-extremism-poses-heightened-threat-2021>.

<sup>3</sup> “IntelBrief: A Conspiracy of Dunces: QAnon and the Threat to the U.S. Homeland.” *The Soufan Center*, July 20, 2020. <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-a-conspiracy-of-dunces-qanon-and-the-threat-to-the-u-s-homeland/>.

<sup>4</sup> For more on the history of QAnon, see: “The Making of QAnon: A Crowdsourced Conspiracy.” *Bellingcat*, January 7, 2021. <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/americas/2021/01/07/the-making-of-qanon-a-crowdsourced-conspiracy/>.



as Satan-worshipping “puppet masters” who fund efforts to create a new world order.<sup>5</sup> Anti-Semitism and fears of a “New World Order” dovetail with longstanding conspiracies promoted by a range of anti-government extremists and white supremacist groups.

This is not simply an online phenomenon. The QAnon conspiracy has been weaponized to commit acts of violence. “Pizzagate”<sup>6</sup>, the December 2016 incident where an armed gunman stormed a D.C. pizza shop because he incorrectly believed the senior Democrats were running a child sex trafficking ring in the basement, served as a precursor to QAnon violence, but has since been followed by several violent incidents.<sup>7</sup> Tragically, 34 individuals have conducted violent offenses—such as homicide, assault, criminal threats, and violent entry of a building—in the United States in the name of QAnon, and three people have lost their lives to QAnon-inspired attacks. Still, according to the same data set, in the United States today, a relatively small portion of QAnon adherents, five out of 56, have successfully carried out violent plots.<sup>8</sup> However, as of February 2021, at least 27 individuals who participated in the Capitol insurrection on 6 January 2021 were affiliated with the QAnon conspiracy.<sup>9</sup> There are serious concerns that in the aftermath, disenfranchised hordes of QAnon supporters will gravitate toward more hardcore elements operating under the broader far-right extremist umbrella.<sup>10</sup> The data gathered for this report, and the analysis presented illustrate the current threat the QAnon movement poses to U.S. national security, and concludes that it is a phenomenon that has the potential to serve as a force multiplier in the broader domestic violent extremist milieu. While not the specific focus of this report, there are also legitimate concerns about QAnon’s global expansion.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Greenspan, Rachel E. “QAnon Builds on Centuries of Anti-Semitic Conspiracy Theories That Put Jewish People at Risk.” *Insider*, October 24, 2020. <https://www.insider.com/qanon-conspiracy-theory-anti-semitism-jewish-racist-believe-save-children-2020-10>.

<sup>6</sup> Ortiz, Eric. “‘Pizzagate’ Gunman Sentenced to Four Years in Prison.” *NBC News*, June 22, 2017. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/pizzagate-gunman-edgar-maddison-welch-sentenced-four-years-prison-n775621>.

<sup>7</sup> For example, Matthew Philip Wright, Eduardo Moreno, and Jessica Prim.

<sup>8</sup> As of March 1, 2021.

<sup>9</sup> Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS). “QAnon Offenders in the United States.” National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, February 2021. [https://www.start.umd.edu/pubs/START\\_PIRUS\\_QAnon\\_Feb2021.pdf](https://www.start.umd.edu/pubs/START_PIRUS_QAnon_Feb2021.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> Clarke, Colin P. “A New Era of Far-Right Violence.” *The New York Times*, January 23, 2021. sec. Opinion. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/22/opinion/domestic-terrorism-far-right-insurrection.html>. see also, Brett Forrest. “What Is QAnon? What We Know About the Conspiracy-Theory Group.” *Wall Street Journal*, February 5, 2021. sec. Politics. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/what-is-qanon-what-we-know-about-the-conspiracy-theory-11597694801>.

<sup>11</sup> “IntelBrief: QAnon – Gaining International Attention and Political Clout?” *The Soufan Center*, August 4, 2020. <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-qanon-gaining-international-attention-and-political-clout/>.

This assessment is underpinned by three primary findings. First, the QAnon conspiracy theory generates a process of radicalization and violence similar to that fueling other violent extremist movements, including the so-called Islamic State. This indicates that the QAnon movement has the potential to incite more acts of violence in the foreseeable future. Adherents of the QAnon conspiracy theory are already seeking to leverage existing social grievances<sup>12</sup> to recruit followers into online echo chambers, where they are radicalized by false narratives and inspired by other attacks, potentially to a point where some followers mobilize toward violent ends. Second, a significant portion of those surveyed self-identify as adherents of the QAnon movement, and an even greater portion adhere to one or more QAnon-narratives. While the survey data presented in this report should be considered in relation to other markers, it is evident there exists a cognitive opening among the U.S. population that can be manipulated by violent extremist groups and recruiters in support of the QAnon movement. Third, malign state actors utilize QAnon-narratives to peddle disinformation on social media. In both 2020 and for the first two months of 2021, almost one-fifth of all QAnon posts on Facebook originated from administrators overseas. In 2021, China is the primary foreign actor touting QAnon-narratives online, but Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Iran also contribute to amplifying the QAnon conspiracy theory online to reach a broader audience. Such activity blurs the line between domestic and foreign disinformation, representing a significant challenge for the U.S. government and international action.

Compounded, these findings suggests the QAnon conspiracy theory has the potential to serve as a force multiplier for domestic violent extremism (DVE), including racially and ethnically motivated violent extremists (REMVEs) who are already seeking to recruit them into their ranks.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Feinberg, Andrew. “QAnon Has Merged with Christian Evangelicals, Experts Say. The Results Could Be Lethal.” *The Independent*, March 8, 2021. sec. Voices. <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/qanon-march-4-white-christian-evangelicals-b1812490.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Harwell, Drew. “QAnon Believers Seek to Adapt Their Extremist Ideology for a New Era: ‘Things Have Just Started.’” *Washington Post*, January 21, 2021. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/01/21/qanon-faithful-biden-trump/>;  
see also, Harwell, Drew et al. “QAnon Reshaped Trump’s Party and Radicalized Believers. The Capitol Siege May Just Be the Start.” *Washington Post*, January 13, 2021. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/01/13/qanon-capitol-siege-trump/>.

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## RESORTING TO THE EXTREMIST PLAYBOOK

While 2020 was marked by deep political divide in the United States, the inauguration of a new —Democratic—President in January 2021 incited an identity crisis for many QAnon followers in the United States. Indeed, the swearing in of Joseph R. Biden as the 46<sup>th</sup> President of the United States has prompted some QAnon adherents to become disenchanted while others have doubled down on “trusting the plan” as set out by Q. Remaining QAnon followers are desperately seeking to embrace new narratives that explain a world in which former President Trump is no longer in power. This has proven difficult. Q’s remaining followers seized onto an inchoate theory that President Trump would return to power on March 4, the original date of the Presidential inauguration.<sup>14</sup> Those who embrace this convoluted theory, pilfered from the sovereign citizen movement, believe that there have not been any legitimate presidents since Ulysses S. Grant (the 18<sup>th</sup> President), because “secret” laws were passed in 1871 that turned the U.S. into a corporation instead of a democratic country. Adherents shared “signs” online that March 4 would bring about the inauguration of Donald Trump to serve for four more years and that followers should flock to Washington D.C.<sup>15</sup> Others, however, suggested that March 4 had been “cancelled” or was orchestrated by the “deep state” and have clung to other deadlines. While no mobilization occurred in the end, there was enough extremist chatter online that both the FBI and DHS

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<sup>14</sup> The conspiracy, derived from the sovereign citizen movement, contends that President Trump will return to power on March 4 and be sworn in as the 19th President of the United States. The date of March 4 is significant in that U.S. presidents were, until 1937, inaugurated on March 4, as opposed to January 20.

<sup>15</sup> Blazakis, Jason. “Op-Ed: Why QAnon’s Similarity to Other Cults Makes It a Significant National Security Threat.” *Los Angeles Times*, February 21, 2021. sec. Opinion. <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2021-02-21/qanon-cults-capitol-attack-trump-threat>.

issued warnings, and the House of Representatives canceled a previously planned legislative session.<sup>16</sup> Prominent voices from the national security community criticized Congress for giving in to terrorism, instead of remaining resilient in the face of ongoing threats.<sup>17</sup>

The apparent splintering of the movement, however, does not mean that the threat it poses will simply fade away.<sup>18</sup> Rather, the ideological creed and commitment to violence among QAnon adherents is likely to mutate in the foreseeable future. The cognitive gymnastics illustrated by the most zealous of QAnon believers showcases the durability of the movement and their willingness to shift goalposts to fit the ideology. Like cults or extremist organizations, adherents become indoctrinated to the point where reality no longer serves to disprove their worldview. This can, in part, be understood by looking at how QAnon has leveraged the extremist playbook previously utilized by al-Qaeda and enhanced by ISIS.<sup>19</sup>

*Extremists use a remarkably similar playbook across ideologies, seeking to first identify, and then harness the personal and political grievances of individuals and groups.*

Extremists use a remarkably similar playbook across ideologies, seeking to first identify, and then harness the personal and political grievances of individuals and groups. QAnon extremists have identified a litany of grievances, ranging from a strong distrust in government to a hatred of elites, whom they associate with a myriad social ills, from human trafficking and sexual abuse of

<sup>16</sup> Levy, Rachael and Alexa Corse. “House Cancels Thursday Session After Security Agencies Cite Risk of New Violence.” *Wall Street Journal*, March 4, 2021. sec. Politics. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/security-defense-officials-to-face-more-questioning-on-capitol-riot-failures-11614781480>.

<sup>17</sup> Schake, Kori. “Opinion | Don’t Give In to Terror.” *The New York Times*, March 5, 2021. sec. Opinion. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/05/opinion/capitol-qanon-trump-terrorism.html>.

<sup>18</sup> MacFarquhar, Neil. “Far-Right Groups Are Splintering in Wake of the Capitol Riot.” *The New York Times*, March 2, 2021. sec. U.S. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/01/us/extremism-capitol-riot.html>.

<sup>19</sup> Watts, Clint and Mike Pesca. “What ISIS Can Tell Us About QAnon.” *Slate*, September 15, 2020. <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2020/09/qanon-clint-watts-isis-comparisons-gist-transcript.html>;

Giannotta, Brent. “What I Learned about Islamic State Applies to QAnon Too.” *Los Angeles Times*, February 24, 2021. sec. Opinion. <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2021-02-24/what-i-learned-about-islamic-state-applies-to-qanon-too>;

Comerford, Milo and Jacob Davey. “Comparing Jihadist and Far-Right Extremist Narratives on COVID-19.” *GNET*, April 27, 2020. <https://gnet-research.org/2020/04/27/comparing-jihadist-and-far-right-extremist-narratives-on-covid-19/>.

minors to fraud perpetrated to “steal” a Presidential election. Salafi-jihadists ideologues railed against the West’s alleged war on Islam, while QAnon conspiracy theorists amplify grievances related to the so-called “Deep State.”

The extremist playbook seeks to capitalize on conflict, sectarianism, and other aspects of societal instability to recruit and radicalize supporters. Similarly, conspiracy adherents seize upon “societal crisis and high-anxiety situations,” to expand their pool of potential supporters. This in part helps to explain why the QAnon conspiracy spread so widely during the course of 2020 as the world dealt with the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>20</sup> Feelings of loss of control and the concept that individuals have access to exclusive information are other drivers of conspiratorial thinking, again, two aspects likely exacerbated by the pandemic and increased time online consuming vast quantities of disinformation.<sup>21</sup>

There is also an altruistic element of conspiracies, as research indicates that individuals “may adopt conspiratorial beliefs” out of “social concern for other people.”<sup>22</sup> This is apparent in the resonance of the child sex trafficking aspects of the QAnon theory, evidenced by the “Save the Children” slogan and the Wayfair incident, which stipulated that the online furniture retailer was engaged in wide-scale child sex trafficking.<sup>23</sup> Analogously, Jihadist groups told their supporters that they were helping to defend Islam from invading hordes of infidels who were descending upon Muslim lands to steal their oil and subjugate their women. Capitalizing on this humanitarian instinct, groups like ISIS recruited thousands of foreign terrorist fighters to travel,

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<sup>20</sup> “IntelBrief: The Coronavirus Will Increase Extremism Across the Ideological Spectrum.” *The Soufan Center*, April 13, 2020. <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-the-coronavirus-will-increase-extremism-across-the-ideological-spectrum/>;

“IntelBrief: COVID-19 Exposes Fault Lines in U.S. Public Trust and Government.” *The Soufan Center*, April 3, 2020. <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-covid-19-exposes-fault-lines-in-u-s-public-trust-and-government/>;

“IntelBrief: White Supremacists and the Weaponization of the Coronavirus (COVID-19).” *The Soufan Center*, March 25, 2020. <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-white-supremacists-and-the-weaponization-of-the-coronavirus-covid-19/>.

<sup>21</sup> “IntelBrief: Russia Exploits Coronavirus as New Opportunity to Spread Disinformation.” *The Soufan Center*, March 24, 2020. <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-russia-exploits-coronavirus-as-new-opportunity-to-spread-disinformation/>;

“IntelBrief: Doubt and Disinformation During the Pandemic.” *The Soufan Center*, March 16, 2021. <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2021-march-16/>.

<sup>22</sup> Amarasingam, Amarnath. “The Impact of Conspiracy Theories and How to Counter Them: Reviewing the Literature on Conspiracy Theories and Radicalization to Violence.” In Anthony Richards et al., *Jihadist Terror: New Threats, New Responses*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2019, pp.31.

<sup>23</sup> The July 2020 QAnon-driven conspiracy, which stipulated that the online furniture retailer Wayfair was engaged in wide-scale child sex trafficking, went viral, despite the lack of evidence and sheer inanity of the notion.

sometimes with families, to conflict zones, believing they were supporting rebellion against a brutal regime and then ending up supporting a brutal terrorist group.<sup>24</sup>

In addition, as with other violent extremist groups and the radicalization process they set in motion, social media and digital communications have played an important role in reaching potential supporters and recruits more broadly, but also more directly. Consequently, experts have noted that, “As with the Islamic State, QAnon ideology proliferates through easily-shareable digital content espousing grievances and injustices by evil oppressors. New QAnon believers descend down internet rabbit holes and encounter an ecosystem of fellow believers with whom they can bond and gain encouragement.”<sup>25</sup>

There are other important aspects of the broader body of knowledge on conspiracy theories with direct applicability to QAnon, some of which are rather foreboding in what they portend for the future of this movement. For example, those who believe in conspiracies often feel themselves to be marginalized and under siege. But because there is a strong belief that “salvation exists at the end of this difficult road” of persecution, there is an increased willingness for many to “fend off counter-arguments” and adhere closely to “an inbuilt logic that dismisses criticism as part of the conspiracy.” This adds to the resilience of conspiracy theories and prepares individuals to rationalize prophecies that fail to materialize—such as those regarding the imminence of Trump’s declaration of martial law, the arrest of President Biden, and a return to another four years of the Trump administration.

### *Exploiting Existing Societal Fault Lines*

With the QAnon conspiracy flailing in the aftermath of the inauguration of President Biden, adherents of this conspiracy-theory driven group—“Anons”—are looking to exploit existing societal grievances in other areas to replenish their ranks and add a veneer of legitimacy to their movement. QAnon has resorted to coopt hashtags on social media as a “Trojan horse” for spreading its hateful creed among more mainstream causes, thus ensuring their messages are woven into “mainstream” exchanges on the topic.

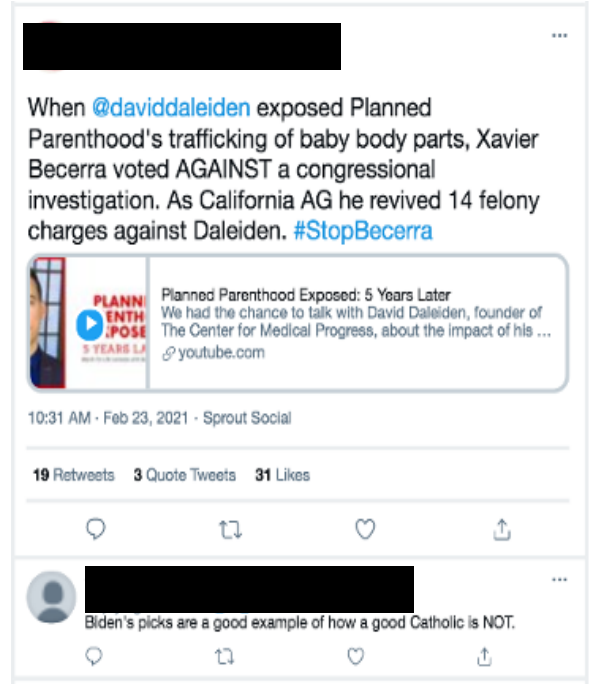
Some QAnon narratives have focused on anti-abortion activists and vaccine skeptics in order to attempt to recruit new followers that may be unaware of QAnon’s conspiratorial roots. In 2020, anti-abortion posts as a percentage of QAnon posts on Facebook steadily increased from June

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<sup>24</sup> Neumann, Peter. “Suspects into Collaborators.” *London Review of Books*, April 2, 2014. <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v36/n07/peter-neumann/suspects-into-collaborators>.

<sup>25</sup> Giannotta, Brent. “What I Learned about Islamic State Applies to QAnon Too.” *Los Angeles Times*, February 24, 2021. sec. Opinion. <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2021-02-24/what-i-learned-about-islamic-state-applies-to-qanon-too>.

onwards, with a 12% increase in the second half of 2020. Further, into 2021, there has been a notable increase—the volume of anti-abortion posts in February 2021 was up 58%, compared to January 2021.<sup>26</sup> One recent QAnon conspiracy, which accuses Planned Parenthood of trafficking body parts of aborted fetuses, has co-opted a hashtag originally associated with a campaign by legitimate political and social interest groups to block Xavier Becerra’s nomination for Secretary of Health and Human Services (see Screenshot 1). This is similar to how ISIS coopted hashtags on social media in order to attempt to use societal issues and grievances—or even current events or sporting events—to spread their hateful creed and attract followers. For example, during the 2014 World Cup, in a social media campaign on Twitter, ISIS used hashtags such as #Brazil2014, #ENG, #France, and #WC2014 to target Muslims living in the West and convince them to join the organization’s ranks.<sup>27</sup>



Screenshot 1 | Source: Twitter, Accessed February 2021

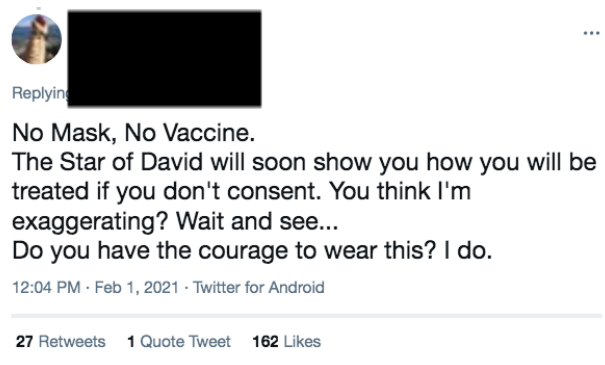
QAnon adherents are also seeking to manipulate narratives surrounding vaccine skepticism, anti-vaxx sentiments, and disinformation regarding the COVID-19 vaccine. There are growing concerns that this could lead to real-world violence, possibly against vaccine distribution sites, healthcare workers, or companies associated with the vaccines.<sup>28</sup> On both, mainstream social media platforms as well as encrypted chat applications, users post articles, videos, photos, and memes propagating disinformation surrounding the COVID-19 vaccines alongside QAnon narratives and hashtags. For example, on February 1, a well-known QAnon user on Twitter with over 36,000 followers posted: “No mask. No vaccine,” followed by likening the (anticipated) harassment experienced by those not wearing masks or opting not to get vaccinated to the experiences of Jewish people being forced to wear yellow patches with the Star of David in Nazi-Germany (see Screenshot 2).

<sup>26</sup> Appendix II.

<sup>27</sup> Milmo, Cahal. “Iraq: Isis Hijacks World Cup Hashtags for Propaganda.” *The Independent*, June 23, 2014. sec. News. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/iraq-crisis-exclusive-isis-jihadists-using-world-cup-and-premier-league-hashtags-promote-extremist-propaganda-twitter-9555167.html>.

<sup>28</sup> Watts, Clint. “COVID-19 Vaccine Conspiracies & the Next Wave of Disinformation.” *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, December 6, 2020. <https://www.fpri.org/fie/covid-19-vaccine-next-wave-of-disinformation/>.

QAnon’s staying power was cemented when the movement became inextricably linked with the presidency of Donald Trump.<sup>29</sup> In 2020, nearly 100 Congressional candidates embraced some aspect of the conspiracy theory during their run for office, highlighting the tangible political impact of the movement in the United States.<sup>30</sup> QAnon’s ability to endure may hinge upon its capacity to integrate its theories with core tenets often associated with mainstream divides or social movements, or to co-opt members of various movements, from anti-abortion activists to those highly skeptical of (and in some cases vehemently opposed to) vaccines.<sup>31</sup>



**Screenshot 2 | Source: Twitter, Accessed March 2021**

<sup>29</sup> Zadrozny, Brandy and Ben Collins. “Who Is behind the Qanon Conspiracy? We’ve Traced It to Three People.” *NBC News*, August 14, 2018. <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/how-three-conspiracy-theorists-took-q-sparked-qanon-n900531>.

<sup>30</sup> Kaplan, Alex/ “Here Are the QAnon Supporters Running for Congress in 2020.” *Media Matters for America*, January 7, 2020. <https://www.mediamatters.org/qanon-conspiracy-theory/here-are-qanon-supporters-running-congress-2020>;

Lerer, Lisa. “The QAnon Caucus.” *The New York Times*, June 18, 2020. sec. U.S. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/18/us/politics/qanon-candidates.html>;

Kaplan, Alex. “In 2020, QAnon Became All of Our Problem.” *Media Matters for America*, December 31, 2020. <https://www.mediamatters.org/qanon-conspiracy-theory/2020-qanon-became-all-our-problem>.

<sup>31</sup> LaFrance, Adrienne. “The Prophecies of Q” *The Atlantic*, June 2020. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/06/qanon-nothing-can-stop-what-is-coming/610567/>;

Lerer, Lisa. “The QAnon Caucus.” *The New York Times*, June 18, 2020. sec. U.S. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/18/us/politics/qanon-candidates.html>;

Argentino, Marc-André. “The Church of QAnon: Will Conspiracy Theories Form the Basis of a New Religious Movement?” *The Conversation*, May 18, 2020. <http://theconversation.com/the-church-of-qanon-will-conspiracy-theories-form-the-basis-of-a-new-religious-movement-137859>.



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## THE APPEAL OF QANON NARRATIVES

The threat posed by the QAnon movement to U.S. national security becomes more striking when considering the scale of support for and association with the movement, and the potential pool of recruits that may become radicalized to commit acts of violence. Several polls have attempted to discern the percentage of the U.S. population that adhere to or believe in QAnon.<sup>32</sup> Limbik, a Content Science company that uses artificial intelligence and predictive modeling to analyze and counter weaponized information online, has developed a Believability-Classification Survey in order to discern the potential appeal and resonance of conspiracy theories among the U.S. population. Results included in this report are based on interviews conducted between November 7, 2020 and February 6, 2021 among a nationally representative sample of 9,308 U.S. adults.<sup>33</sup> Findings include the percentage of those surveyed who self-identified as a QAnon believer, member, or supporter, which ranged between 20% and 23% from November 2020 to February 2021. In addition, the survey found that men are overrepresented at almost twice the rate

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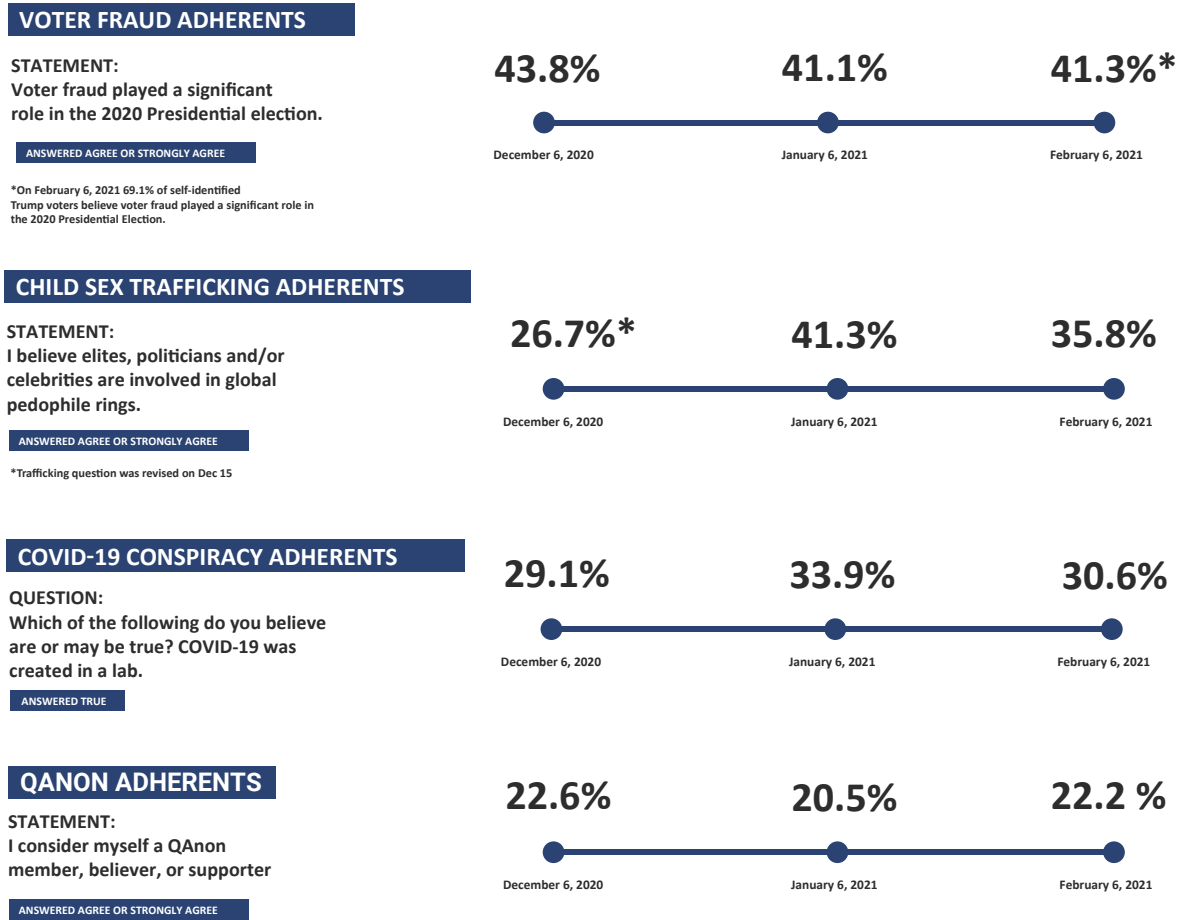
<sup>32</sup> See, for example: Rose, Joel. “Even If It’s ‘Bonkers.’ Poll Finds Many Believe QAnon And Other Conspiracy Theories.” *Morning Edition (NPR)*, December 30, 2020. <https://www.npr.org/2020/12/30/951095644/even-if-its-bonkers-poll-finds-many-believe-qanon-and-other-conspiracy-theories>;

Djupe, Paul A. and Jacob Dennen. “Analysis | Christian Nationalists and QAnon Followers Tend to Be Anti-Semitic. That Was Seen in the Capitol Attack.” *Washington Post*, January 26, 2021. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/01/26/christian-nationalists-qanon-followers-tend-be-anti-semitic-that-was-visible-capitol-attack/>.

<sup>33</sup> The Believability Classification Survey is a continuous, dynamic survey administered by Limbik. Results included in this report are based on interviews conducted between November 7, 2020 and February 6, 2021 among a nationally representative sample of 9,308 U.S. adults. Results of any sample are subject to sampling variation. The magnitude of variation is measurable and affected by the number of interviews and the level of percentages expressing the results. For the interviews conducted in this particular study, the chances are 95 in 100 that the survey result does not vary, plus or minus, by more than 1.0 percentage point from the result that would be obtained if interviews had been conducted with all persons in the universe represented by the sample.

compared to self-identified female QAnon believers; close to 30% of men self-identify as QAnon believers, members, or supporters, compared to 14% of females.<sup>34</sup>

**Figure 1: Survey Responses on QAnon Narratives**



This does not, however, mean that we can ignore the documented growing appeal of QAnon narratives among women. Six of the 27 QAnon followers who are known, to date, to have participated in the insurrection on the Capitol are women.<sup>35</sup> As Farah Pandith, Jacob Ware, and Mia Bloom note when examining the appeal of QAnon and other extremist narratives among women: “The growing appeal of extremist ideologies to women and girls and the female-to-female luring tactics demonstrate that something has shifted in the ideological ecosystem around

<sup>34</sup> Appendix II.

<sup>35</sup> Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS). “QAnon Offenders in the United States.” *National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism*, February 2021. [https://www.start.umd.edu/pubs/START\\_PIRUS\\_QAnon\\_Feb2021.pdf](https://www.start.umd.edu/pubs/START_PIRUS_QAnon_Feb2021.pdf).

identity and belonging.”<sup>36</sup> Indeed, the Limbik survey found that women are more likely than men to believe in conspiracy theories that feed into the QAnon movement, including those that purport to protect children, building on the belief in the existence of global pedophile rings.<sup>37</sup> As such, while women may not self-identify as QAnon followers at the same rate as men, they still play an integral role in the movement and in spreading its narratives, creating an enabling environment for later association. These findings correlate to other works that have documented the prevalence and importance of women within the QAnon movement.<sup>38</sup>

Indeed, when looking at an array of disinformation and conspiracy theories disseminated by the QAnon movement, a large percentage of survey respondents demonstrated ideological inclinations that make them amenable to supporting QAnon; similar trends have been shown by those supporting other violent extremist groups. An average of 42% of those surveyed between December 2020 and February 2021 believe voter fraud played a significant role in the 2020 Presidential Election—with 69% of self-identified Trump voters agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement as of February 6, 2021. An average of 35% of respondents believe in child trafficking conspiracies that involve the global elite, and around 31% believe that COVID-19 was created in a lab. Of note, one month after the events of January 6, 2021, 25% of respondents support the insurrectionists.<sup>39</sup> While survey results must be evaluated in conjunction with other markers, these data points suggest that there may be a significant cognitive opening among

*These data points suggest that there may be a significant cognitive opening among the U.S. population that makes Americans more susceptible to further radicalization within the QAnon movement.*

<sup>36</sup> Pandith, Farah, Jacob Ware, and Mia Bloom. “Here’s Why Women Are a Growing Terror Threat, and What Biden Can Do to Combat Them.” *NBC News*, December 11, 2020. <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/female-extremists-qanon-isis-are-rise-we-need-new-strategy-ncna1250619>.

<sup>37</sup> “Availables” refers to individuals susceptible to believing in QAnon conspiracies, whereas “adherents” signifies that someone is a QAnon follower. When aggregating QAnon conspiracy adherents and availables, women are more likely than men to believe in certain QAnon narratives, such as child sex trafficking conspiracies, but not all QAnon-related conspiracies. 67.4% of females and 66.7% of men believe, or are susceptible to believing in the existence of global pedophile rings. For more, see Annex II.

<sup>38</sup> Loofbourow, Lili. “It Makes Perfect Sense That QAnon Took Off With Women This Summer.” *Slate Magazine*, September 18, 2020. <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2020/09/qanon-women-why.html>; Tiffany, Kaitlyn. “The Women Making Conspiracy Theories Beautiful.” *The Atlantic*, August 18, 2020. <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2020/08/how-instagram-aesthetics-repackage-qanon/615364/>.

<sup>39</sup> Appendix II.

the U.S. population that makes Americans more susceptible to further radicalization within the QAnon movement.

These findings should also be considered within the broader framework of mass radicalization. Group interactions influence individuals' attitudes, beliefs, and commitment to action, and there are a range of cognitive biases that impact individual decision-making, including in-group/out-group biases<sup>40</sup>, conformity, compliance, group-think polarization, and diffusion of responsibility.<sup>41</sup> Since conspiracy theories have been described as a “radicalizing multiplier”<sup>42</sup>, particularly in contexts of extremism, the overall numbers of individuals who self-identify as QAnon adherents is concerning. As a veteran journalist covering extremism, Hannah Allam, suggested, “the mass embrace of bogus conspiracy theories poses a national security concern.”<sup>43</sup>

The Internet has played an outsized role in accelerating radicalization and weaponizing information, including within the QAnon movement. Over the past 15 years, the average time span of radicalization has condensed from approximately 18 months to 7 months, largely due to the ability of extremists to network online.<sup>44</sup> As Sophia Moskalenko and Clark McCauley have observed, “social media are more radicalizing than face-to-face groups because they are larger collectives (more sources of information) and because in these large collectives there is more likelihood of encountering radical individuals.”<sup>45</sup> This is applicable to QAnon adherents as well. Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PRIUS) found that 66.7% of QAnon adherents moved from radicalization to mobilizing for an ideologically motivated crime within less than a year.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> For more on the in-group and out-group aspects of group radicalization, see: Berger, J.M. *Extremism*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2018, pp.121-123.

<sup>41</sup> Helmus, Todd C. “Why and How Some People Become Terrorists.” In Paul K. Davis and Kim Cragin, eds., *Social Science for Counterterrorism: Putting the Pieces Together*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corp., 2009, pp.74-75.

<sup>42</sup> Bartlett, Jamie and Carl Miller. “The Power of Unreason: Conspiracy Theories, Extremism, and Counter-Terrorism.” *Demos*, 2010, pp.4-5.

<sup>43</sup> Allam, Hannah. “Right-Wing Embrace Of Conspiracy Is ‘Mass Radicalization,’ Experts Warn.” *NPR*, December 15, 2020. <https://www.npr.org/2020/12/15/946381523/right-wing-embrace-of-conspiracy-is-mass-radicalization-experts-warn>.

<sup>44</sup> Stanton, Zack. “The Problem Isn’t Just One Insurrection. It’s Mass Radicalization.” *POLITICO*, February 11, 2021. <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/02/11/mass-radicalization-trump-insurrection-468746>.

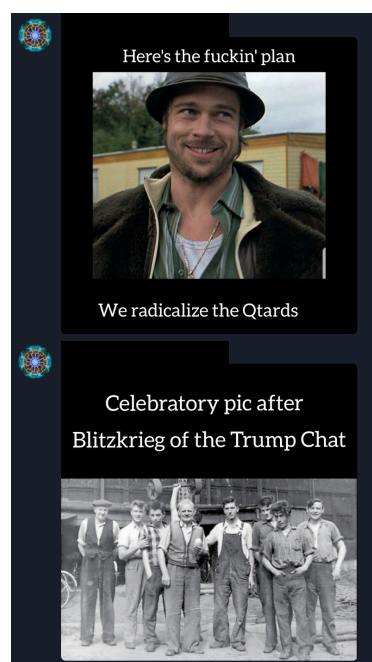
<sup>45</sup> Moskalenko, Sophia and Clark McCauley. *Radicalization to Terrorism: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford University Press, 2020), pp.198.

<sup>46</sup> Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS). “QAnon Offenders in the United States.” National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, February 2021. [https://www.start.umd.edu/pubs/START\\_PIRUS\\_QAnon\\_Feb2021.pdf](https://www.start.umd.edu/pubs/START_PIRUS_QAnon_Feb2021.pdf).

Such rapid mobilization makes the efforts of law enforcement to prevent acts of violence more difficult. Individuals who believe in conspiracy theories are prone to “an increase in hostility and aggression.”<sup>47</sup> This was evident from the scene at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021. Moreover, as extremism scholar Amarnath Amarasingam has noted, “conspiracy theories contribute to the idea that violence is the only remaining option for survival.”<sup>48</sup> Coupled with the potential cognitive opening among a portion of Americans to QAnon-peddled narratives, conspiracy theories, and disinformation, it paints a dire picture for the future of the conspiracy theory-driven domestic extremist landscape.

### *Violent Extremists Recruiting Anons*

As adherents become disillusioned with what the movement has promised, some individuals may become vulnerable to recruitment by other violent extremists. Data-gathering and analysis of online encrypted chat forums suggest violent far-right actors, including REMVEs, are capitalizing on January’s events in an attempt to recruit disillusioned Trump supporters and QAnon followers (see Screenshot 3). It is important to note that these recruitment attempts are not tied to a specific group or formally established organization, per se, but the point is that these are discussions taking place on encrypted platforms and channels. For example, WSE channels on Telegram that tout accelerationism<sup>49</sup> have shared recruitment strategies and encouraged followers to “raid” QAnon and Make America Great Again (MAGA) channels on the platform. On January 11, 2021 a post forwarded on multiple WSE channels on Telegram read, “Parler being shut down has sent tens of thousands (or more) of people to telegram. All of them are seeking refuge and looking for answers since their Q-bullshit lied to them. Maga people are demoralized. Now is our opportunity to grab them by the hand and lead them toward ideological truth...” One account sharing this post had over 45,000 followers and, as of March 20, 2021 that post had gained more than 24,000 views.



**Screenshot 3 | Source: Telegram, Accessed January 2021**

<sup>47</sup> Abalakina-Paap, Marina et al. “Beliefs in Conspiracies.” *Political Psychology* 20, no. 3 (December 17, 2002), pp. 637–47. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0162-895X.00160>.

<sup>48</sup> Amarasingam, Amarnath. “The Impact of Conspiracy Theories and How to Counter Them: Reviewing the Literature on Conspiracy Theories and Radicalization to Violence.” In Anthony Richards et al., *Jihadist Terror: New Threats, New Responses*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2019, pp.33.

<sup>49</sup> Gartenstein-Ross, David, Samuel Hodgson, and Colin P. Clarke.. “The Growing Threat Posed by Accelerationism and Accelerationist Groups Worldwide.” *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, April 20, 2020. <https://www.fpri.org/article/2020/04/the-growing-threat-posed-by-accelerationism-and-accelerationist-groups-worldwide/>.

Other WSE accounts are pushing narratives suggesting QAnon is a psychological operation controlled by the U.S. or Israeli intelligence service. On January 22, 2021, a channel espousing anti-Semitism and racism dedicated to discrediting the QAnon conspiracy theory posted: “Q was a psy op used to run out the clock. You got played. Now you know, you can’t wait on a corrupt system to fix itself or for something magical to fix it for you. You have to take control, change your own life. Nobody is going to save you.” The overt anti-Semitism of QAnon-narratives may provide an opening for followers to join even more radical and violent organizations that use anti-Semitic language to incite violence.

The recruitment tactics shared in online white supremacy channels also include pushing narratives surrounding election fraud and child sex trafficking—related conspiracies that the Limbik survey data suggest a portion of respondents believe to be true. On January 20, a Telegram channel using a swastika as its profile picture forwarded a message urging followers to go to a list of channels, including those associated with QAnon, and connect with subscribers. The list was followed by a recommendation to “focus less on trying to red pill them on WW2 and more on how to make them angrier about the election and the new Democrat regime. Heighten their burning hatred of injustice.”

On January 22, a WSE channel with over 25,000 subscribers posted, “you don’t have to believe in Q to know that Biden is a pedophile and would murder a baby without hesitation if it would extend his life by 15 minutes.” Research shows that belief in one conspiracy theory is an “excellent predictor” of belief in different, even unrelated conspiracy theories.<sup>50</sup> In addition, the rhetoric pushed to recruit and further radicalize QAnon followers in the darkest corners of the internet bears striking resemblance to the hateful and violent creed peddled by Salafi-jihadist organizations, like

*The rhetoric pushed to recruit and further radicalize QAnon followers in the darkest corners of the internet bears striking resemblance to the hateful and violent creed peddled by Salafi-jihadist organizations, like al-Qaeda and the so-called Islamic State. Namely, that “there is no political solution,” and that violence is the only way forward.*

like

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<sup>50</sup> Van Prooijen, J.W. “Sometimes Inclusion Breeds Suspicion: Self-Uncertainty and Belongingness Predict Belief in Conspiracy Theories.” *European Journal of Social Psychology*, vol.46, 2015, pp.267; see also, T. Goertzel, “Belief in Conspiracy Theories,” *Political Psychology*, vol.15, 1994, pp.733-744.

al-Qaeda and the so-called Islamic State.<sup>51</sup> Namely, that “there is no political solution,” and that violence is the only way forward.

QAnon recruits joining organizations with more violent ambitions presents a national security threat and increases the pool of individuals potentially willing to commit acts of violence. Terrorism is a numbers game—a small numbers game. As the PIRA reminded British government counterterrorism officials, “You have to be lucky every time. We only have to be lucky once.”<sup>52</sup>

Even if a fraction of the aggregate number of individuals migrating from QAnon to more extreme groups actually partake in violence, it could mean an uptick of domestic terrorism attacks in the United States. The psychological damage wrought by even three or four major domestic terrorism attacks per year—attacks on par with what happened in Pittsburgh in 2018 or El Paso in 2019, could have longterm consequences increasing distrust and division in the United States. That many of the individuals who descended upon the Capitol in early January were unaffiliated with any particular group, yet radicalized to the point where they were eager to participate in a violent insurrection, is a perilous sign that DVE organizations have a sizable pool of potential recruits.<sup>53</sup>

Coming on a trend towards low-tech, low-cost “self-directed” attacks such as those seen recently in Europe<sup>54</sup>, the UK, and the U.S., an increased propensity for unaffiliated individuals to commit terrorist acts will complicate law enforcement efforts to identify and prevent threats materializing. PIRUS noted that, as of February 2021, the data set contained ten QAnon followers with known ties to other extremist movements, including organizations like the Proud Boys and the Oath Keepers. Of those individuals, four carried out successful plots in the United States, which illustrate the threat posed by cross-pollination of narratives.

RMVEs are not the only actors seeking to exploit the QAnon conspiracy theory. The societal grievances exploited by QAnon-narratives also fits neatly into disinformation tactics used by U.S.

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<sup>51</sup> Giannotta, Brent. “What I Learned about Islamic State Applies to QAnon Too.” *Los Angeles Times*, February 24, 2021. sec. Opinion. <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2021-02-24/what-i-learned-about-islamic-state-applies-to-qanon-too>.

<sup>52</sup> Clutterbuck, Lindsay. “Terrorists Have to Be Lucky Once; Targets, Every Time.” *The RAND Blog*, November 30, 2008. <https://www.rand.org/blog/2008/11/terrorists-have-to-be-lucky-once-targets-every-time.html>.

<sup>53</sup> MacFarquhar, Neil. “Far-Right Groups Are Splintering in Wake of the Capitol Riot.” *The New York Times*, March 2, 2021. sec. U.S. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/01/us/extremism-capitol-riot.html>.

<sup>54</sup> Clarke, Colin P. “As Right-Wing Extremism Rises, Jihadism Still Persists.” *World Politics Review* (blog), February 19, 2021. <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/29438/in-europe-terrorism-and-jihadism-remain-threats-as-right-wing-extremism-rises>.

adversaries, like Russia and China, and other malign state and non-state actors. These actors utilize the QAnon conspiracy theory as a vehicle to peddle disinformation to achieve greater distrust and division among communities in the United States, which risks compromising faith in the democratic process itself and the ability to forge a united front on key security challenges, at home and abroad.



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## FOREIGN AMPLIFICATION OF QANON ONLINE

While commonly perceived as a domestic movement within the United States<sup>55</sup>, foreign states are also utilizing the QAnon conspiracy theory to sow societal discord and even potentially compromise the legitimate political processes in the country.

For the purpose of this report, 166,820 QAnon-categorized<sup>56</sup> Facebook posts were analyzed between January 1, 2020 and February 28, 2021. In 2020, the level of foreign influence<sup>57</sup> within QAnon-categorized posts on Facebook remained relatively constant throughout the year—at an average of 19% of all posts analyzed. Still, during certain time periods there were notable peaks—for example, in March 2020, June/July 2020, and November 2020—that can be correlated with events in the United States; respectively, the domestic outbreak of the COVID-19

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<sup>55</sup> Research has shown that the QAnon conspiracy has increasingly attracted adherents in other countries. See for example: “IntelBrief: QAnon – Gaining International Attention and Political Clout?” *The Soufan Center*, August 4, 2020. <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-qanon-gaining-international-attention-and-political-clout/>; Wheeldon, Tom. “‘Stakes Are High’ as QAnon Conspiracy Phenomenon Emerges in France.” *France 24*, February 20, 2021. <https://www.france24.com/en/france/20210220-stakes-are-high-as-qanon-conspiracy-phenomenon-emerges-in-france>; @MiaMBloom. *Twitter*. February 25, 2021. <https://twitter.com/MiaMBloom/status/1364987881174028289>.

<sup>56</sup> QAnon-categorized posts are classified by Limbik and include Facebook posts with references known QAnon hashtags, terms, references, visuals or domains, and/or posts that were posted by an account later identified as a QAnon account and later removed by Facebook. For the purposes of this report, 166,820 QAnon-categorized Facebook posts were analyzed between January 1, 2020 and February 28, 2021.

<sup>57</sup> Foreign Influence quantifies the likelihood an artifact originated from an account with a foreign administrator(s). Foreign Influence used for the purpose of this brief, is defined as artifacts from known Foreign accounts or accounts with a Foreign Influence score (probability) greater than 50.1%, as a percentage of artifacts collected and analyzed between January 1, 2020 and February 28, 2021.

pandemic, the Wayfair Conspiracy, and the Presidential Election. Throughout 2020, the consistent foreign amplification of QAnon narratives online illustrates that externally driven disinformation efforts have contributed to the efficient spread of conspiracy theories. Indeed, the level of foreign influence during January and February 2021 continues this trend—at an average of almost 20% of all posts analyzed.<sup>58</sup>

Russia is often considered the most capable and sophisticated external driver of disinformation. Interestingly, however, our analysis shows that China is currently the state actor most involved in amplifying QAnon narratives on Facebook. In 2020, 44% of posts came from administrators in Russia, 42% from China, 13% from Iran, and 1% from Saudi Arabia. While Russian administrators dominated the foreign influence space within online QAnon narratives in the first half of 2020, China began to rapidly expand its disinformation campaign by March of last year. This timing coincides with increasing political tensions between the U.S. and China owing to a number of issues, including the spread of COVID-19, human rights abuses, and other areas of contention. A recent report from the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) concludes that China “did not deploy interference efforts and considered but did not deploy influence efforts intended to change the outcome of the US Presidential election.”<sup>59</sup> However, according to our data, by September 2020, China had surpassed Russia as the primary origin of Foreign Influence online within QAnon narratives specifically. This trend line has continued in 2021. From January 1 to February 28, 2021, 58% of posts came from administrators in China—at more than double the rate of those from Russian administrators.<sup>60</sup> China’s goal, most likely, is to sow further discord and division among the American population.

In addition to Russia and China, Saudi Arabia and Iran are also using QAnon-narratives as a vehicle to spread disinformation—efforts that are increasing in 2021 compared to 2020. QAnon-themed posts originating from Saudi Arabia and Iran accounted for 14% of foreign influence categorized posts in 2020; a figure that increased to 20% between January 1, 2021 and February 28, 2021.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Appendix II.

<sup>59</sup> “Foreign Threats to the 2020 US Federal Elections.” National Intelligence Council, March 10, 2021. <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ICA-declass-16MAR21.pdf>.

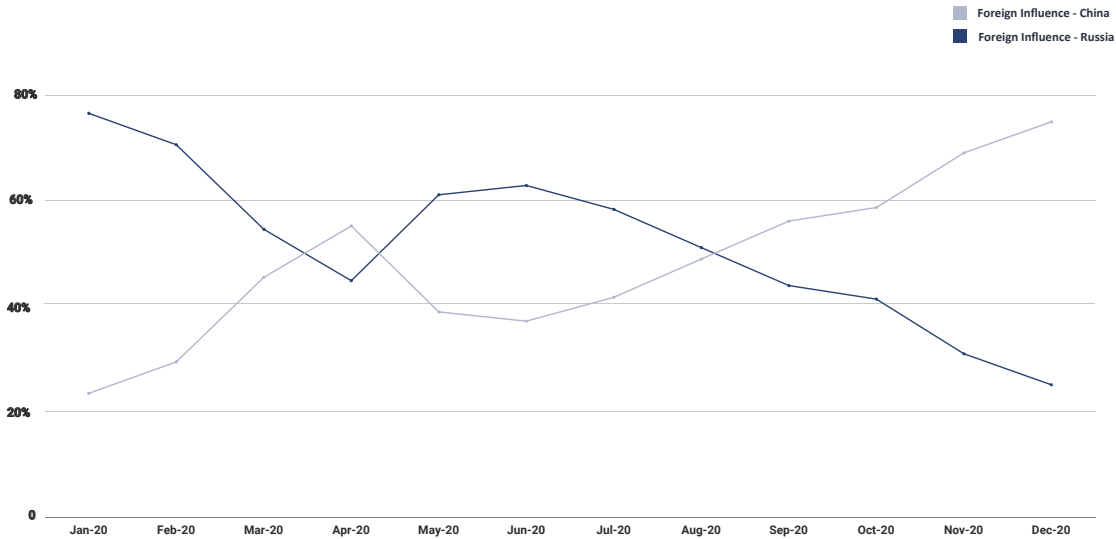
<sup>60</sup> Appendix II.

<sup>61</sup> Appendix II.

**Figure 2: Comparing Foreign Influence between China and Russia**

**China v. Russia Foreign Influence\***

January 1, 2020 - December 31, 2020



\*% of QAnon-Categorized Posts on Facebook

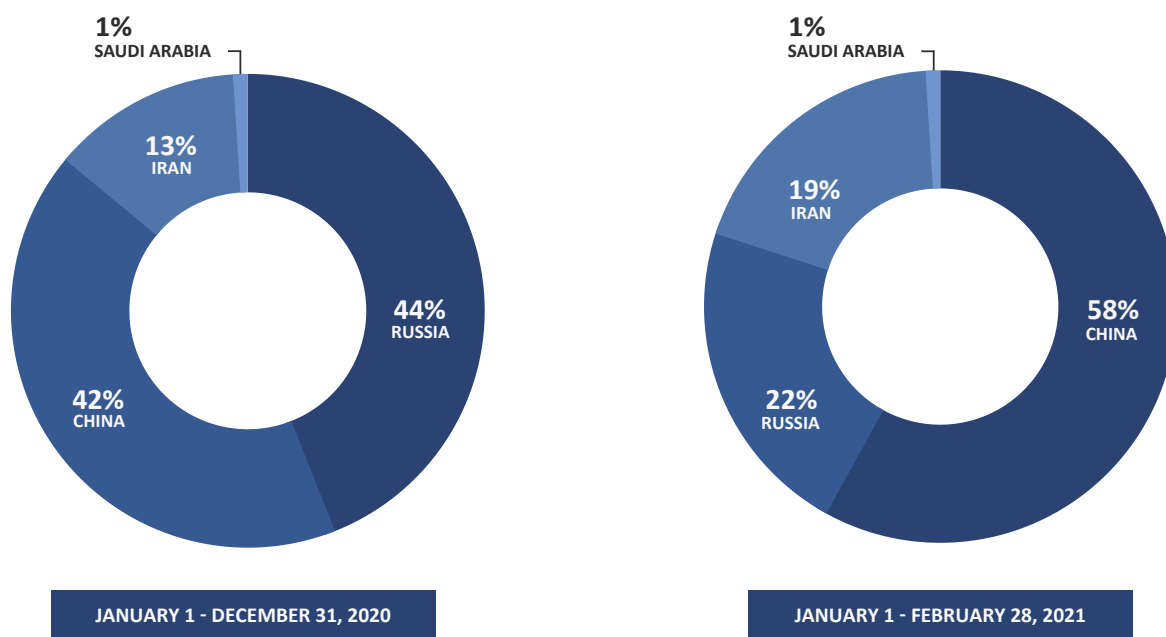
China’s expanding interest in using its English language disinformation capabilities to proliferate QAnon-narratives should be considered within the broader context of the 2020 disinformation landscape. First, reports indicate that China’s disinformation capability has matured since 2019 and reliance on this asymmetric tactic has increased exponentially in 2020, mostly due to Beijing’s war or words with Washington as a result of fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>62</sup> Second, analysis of Chinese disinformation efforts in 2020 has also highlighted Beijing’s propensity to mimic Moscow’s approach—including confrontational information manipulation

<sup>62</sup> See, for example: Kurlantzick, Joshua. “How China Ramped Up Disinformation Efforts During the Pandemic.” *Council on Foreign Relations*, September 10, 2020. <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/how-china-ramped-disinformation-efforts-during-pandemic>;  
 Kovalcikova, Nada. “China Wants to Deflect Attention From Its Own Sluggish Reaction to the Coronavirus.” *The German Marshall Fund of the United States*, April 29, 2020. <https://www.gmfus.org/commentary/china-wants-deflect-attention-its-own-sluggish-reaction-coronavirus>;  
 Kinetz, Erika. “Takeaways: AP Investigation of China COVID-19 Disinformation.” *AP News*, February 15, 2021. sec. Donald Trump. <https://apnews.com/article/donald-trump-health-media-social-media-coronavirus-pandemic-4531cddae4228b86e897aa029fb07231>.

toward polarizing ends.<sup>63</sup> Third, China’s apparent prominence in the QAnon space could also indicate that social media platforms are not equally well-versed in identifying disinformation campaigns of Chinese origin, compared to those from Russia. And because China controls its information environment, Beijing does not consider itself vulnerable to a tit-for-tat escalation in this area with the U.S. or other Western democracies.

**Figure 3: Foreign Influence in QAnon-Categorized Posts on Facebook** <sup>64</sup>

### FOREIGN INFLUENCE IN QANON-CATEGORIZED POSTS ON FACEBOOK



The relatively constant level of foreign influence within QAnon-narratives perpetuated on Facebook raises concerns about the efficacy of purely domestic de-platforming measures. On October 6, 2020, Facebook announced a “QAnon ban” on its platform.<sup>65</sup> Following the January

<sup>63</sup> See, for example: Brandt, Jessica and Bret Schafer. “Five Things to Know About Beijing’s Disinformation Approach.” *Alliance For Securing Democracy*, March 30, 2020. <https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/five-things-to-know-about-beijings-disinformation-approach/>;

Brandt, Jessica and Torrey Taussig. “The Kremlin’s Disinformation Playbook Goes to Beijing.” *Brookings*, May 19, 2020. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/05/19/the-kremlins-disinformation-playbook-goes-to-beijing/>.

<sup>64</sup> Foreign Influence categorized posts accounted for 18.69% of total analyzed QAnon Facebook posts between January 1, 2020 and December 31, 2020, and 19.51% of total analyzed QAnon Facebook posts between January 1, 2021 and February 28, 2021.

<sup>65</sup> Timberg, Craig and Isaac Stanley-Becker. “Facebook Imposes Major New Restrictions on QAnon, Stepping up Enforcement against the Conspiracy Theory.” *Washington Post*, October 6, 2020. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/10/06/facebook-qanon-ban/>.

6, 2021 insurrection, several social media platforms, including Facebook, removed tens of thousands of users that peddled disinformation surrounding the 2020 election.<sup>66</sup> Our data gathering and analysis of foreign influence within the QAnon space on Facebook in 2021, however, show that these de-platforming measures have had very little effect in removing QAnon-content circulated by U.S. adversaries on the platform.

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<sup>66</sup> Messenger, Haley. “Facebook Bans All ‘stop the Steal’ Content.” *NBC News*, January 11, 2021. <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/facebook-bans-all-stop-steal-content-n1253809>.

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## CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

As demonstrated by the data collection and analysis presented in this report, QAnon conspiracy theories will continue to resonate with a significant number of Americans and could mobilize adherents, or “Anons,” to accept that the use of violence is necessary to achieve social and political objectives—in other words, normalizing domestic terrorism. In analyzing the data gathered for this report in conjunction with a relevant review of open source literature, it is clear that the use of polarizing narratives, the spread of foreign disinformation, and the political animus against Biden administration officials continues to motivate QAnon conspiracy theory enthusiasts and thus serves as an enduring national security threat.

COVID-19 has compounded the security and social challenges wrought by conspiracy theory-driven violent extremism by allowing the QAnon narrative to reach more people, as the Internet and social media have become a lifeline for many, like they also have for more benign interaction in the midst of the global pandemic.<sup>67</sup> This is especially the case as socializing or engaging in non-online hobbies become less feasible due to social-distancing restrictions. In this context, an individual’s perception of their identity evolves, and as a consequence, their ability to control their situation deteriorates, and there are fewer “in real life” checks and balances. QAnon’s appeal to those who are fighting to retain power, control, and desperate for answers to complex questions is obvious.

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<sup>67</sup> For more, see: “IntelBrief: The National Security Implications of Conspiracy Theories.” *The Soufan Center*, May 19, 2020. <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-the-national-security-implications-of-conspiracy-theories/>.

The QAnon narrative provides an escape while at the same time exacerbating longstanding fears—some of which have borne out over time—that there is corruption and that world leaders abuse power, and that citizens have been sold a tale of democracy and individual rights only to serve the kleptocratic interests of politicians and corporations. It is undeniable that reports of corruption and abuse plague many political leaders and the private sector. However, the QAnon framing of these twin societal plagues is corrosive and the fact that the stories may be factually incorrect or manipulated does not lessen their impact on adherents. QAnon supporters exaggerate the scale of power-driven abuses and, of course, implicate those who are not really engaged in secret cabal activities designed to change the world order.

The relative durability of the QAnon theory may be what sets it apart from other conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories themselves are not new. The John Birch Society’s (JBS) ability to regale suburbanites often disconnected from legitimate news sources is instructive. JBS’s conspiracy theory that Communists were secretly controlling President Dwight D. Eisenhower was alluring, but the theory had inherent limitations, many of which are not present with the QAnon conspiratorial movement. While JBS used the “red-scare” to create a climate of fear, not unlike the ways COVID-19 has been leveraged by nefarious actors, it did not morph or broaden its message like the QAnon conspiracy theory. Nor did JBS in its early days have access to the Internet and social media to allow for its message to proliferate to a wide-ranging audience. QAnon, as demonstrated in this report, has those advantages and others.

*For Russia, China,  
Iran, and Saudi Arabia,  
amplifying QAnon  
messaging is a  
strike against the  
United States’ core:  
democratic values.*

QAnon has another significant advantage that its forebearers did not. It has received the backing, through intense amplification efforts, of multiple state entities. These efforts have allowed QAnon’s messages to spread despite social media companies’ de-platforming operations. The Soufan Center (TSC) and Limbik data collection and analysis has demonstrated that QAnon has been weaponized by America’s adversaries. In the case of the Russian Federation (and its predecessor, the Soviet Union), this is a natural result of decades of disinformation warfare. QAnon provides Russia a tool to distract U.S. attention from pursuing overseas interests, especially in areas like Ukraine, where Russian (nee Soviet) influence was undisputed. More

importantly, for Russia, China, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, amplifying QAnon messaging is a strike against the United States' core: democratic values.

To an extent, foreign influence efforts centering around QAnon narratives worked. After all, former President Donald J. Trump tried every possible trick in the book to suspend the democratic transition of power to President Joseph R. Biden. Those efforts culminated in the January 6 insurrection where QAnon followers played a prominent role. While QAnon's hopes were seemingly dashed when President Biden was sworn in on January 20, TSC and Limbik data have assessed that the foreign influence campaigns continue, largely unabated.

The policy implications of the sustained influence of QAnon conspiracy theories, especially when buttressed by foreign powers, are profound. As such, the U.S. Government, private sector, and civil society organizations have important roles to play in countering the spread of QAnon-related conspiracy theories. The following recommendations will contribute to slowing the spread of these false narratives:

- **First and foremost, the U.S. government must remove the key element that allows for any conspiracy theory to thrive—crisis.** In this sense, the Biden administration's focus on mitigating continued fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic is paramount. An ancillary benefit of this approach is that the end of the pandemic will blunt the continued spread of the QAnon conspiracy theory. The decline of COVID-19, however, does not mean an end to conspiracy theories.
- **Second, social media companies need to re-examine their de-platforming approaches,** especially when the data from this report indicates that the potency of multiple foreign influence campaigns remain high.
- **Third, social media companies need to refine their algorithms, which continue to recommend toxic QAnon-related content, some of which is created overseas.** In this regard, Congress can play a role by limiting the liability protection social media companies have when their algorithms recommend dangerous content. An example includes a recent bill introduced in Congress that seeks to hold platforms accountable if its algorithm is used to amplify or recommend content directly relevant to a case involving interference with civil rights, neglect to prevent interference with civil rights, and in cases involving acts of international terrorism.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> "Protecting Americans 5 from Dangerous Algorithms Act." Bill introduced by Congresswoman Anna G. Eshoo (CA-18) and Congressman Tom Malinowski (NJ-7), 117th Congress 1st Session, March 24, 2021. [https://malinowski.house.gov/sites/malinowski.house.gov/files/Malinowski\\_Eshoo\\_Algorithms.pdf](https://malinowski.house.gov/sites/malinowski.house.gov/files/Malinowski_Eshoo_Algorithms.pdf).



- **Fourth, community-oriented and offline solutions are also necessary.** Specifically, civil society and academic organizations must continue to develop and administer digital and media literacy programs at the elementary and high-schools. Given the findings of this paper, such as the believability of the QAnon conspiracy theory, the need for additional media and digital literacy programs is acute.
- **Finally, the Biden administration should consider working with Congress and civil society organizations to determine if the battle against disinformation warrants the creation of a new interagency organization** that includes personnel with both domestic and international mandates. Such consideration is warranted since this report has made clear that the line between domestic and foreign disinformation activities remains blurred.

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## APPENDIX I — METHODOLOGY

The quantitative analysis is based on publicly available volume and interaction data from Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, and Twitter gathered through third party social listening services. Social listening is the process of monitoring social media platforms for content related to a specific brand, product, event, or topic. All monitored and analyzed social media content used for this paper is available in the public domain. The data was collected from January 1, 2020 to February 28, 2021. Prior to any reporting, the collected posts and volume and interaction data were analyzed and the datasets were checked for missing data as well as outliers and other anomalies. Ultimately, the datasets were visualized and further analyzed using Tableau.

The qualitative analysis is based on a variety of secondary data from open source materials, including journal articles, traditional media, books, research papers, government publications, encrypted chat forums (including Telegram), and other social media platforms (including Parler, Gab, Voat, and YouTube).

### *Believability-Classification Survey*

The Believability Classification Survey is a continuous, dynamic survey administered by Limbik. Results included in this report are based on interviews conducted between November 7, 2020 and February 6, 2021 among a nationally representative sample of 9,308 U.S. adults.

Results of any sample are subject to sampling variation. The magnitude of variation is measurable and affected by the number of interviews and the level of percentages expressing the

results. For the interviews conducted in this particular study, the changes are 95 in 100 that the survey result does not vary, plus or minus, by more than 1.0 percentage points from the result that would be obtained if interviews had been conducted with all persons in the universe represented by the sample.

### **Trafficking Conspiracy Segmentations**

The survey question used to create Trafficking Conspiracy Segmentations was revised on December 15, 2020. Current and former questions:

Current: “To what extent do you agree with this statement: I believe elites, politicians and/or celebrities are involved in global pedophilia rings and we need to #SaveOurChildren.”

Former: “To what extent do you agree with this statement: I am passionate about stopping child sex trafficking and am actively engaged in the fight to save our children.”

### *Foreign Influence*

Foreign Influence quantifies the likelihood a Facebook post originated from an account with a foreign administrator(s). For the purpose of this research, Foreign Influence is defined as posts from known Foreign accounts or accounts with a Foreign Influence score (probability) greater than 50.1 percent, as a percentage of posts collected and analyzed between January 1, 2020 and February 28, 2021. Foreign Influence is determined using a two-step, machine learning clustering technique developed to discover Foreign Influence activities and most likely country of origin. Using natural language understanding and linguistic anomaly detection, the primary objective of Foreign Influence is to quantify post similarity with known foreign content.

By transforming English-language foreign content from various sources, Limbik’s classifier is continuously trained for multiple countries of origin (i.e. China, Iran, Russia, and Saudi Arabia). Foreign Influence computes the probability that a post originated from an account with an administrator(s) in a particular country. The country with the highest probability is deemed to be the country of origin; confidence is based on the strength of similarity and reflected with a Foreign Influence score.

For the purpose of this report, 166,820 QAnon-categorized Facebook posts were analyzed between January 1, 2020 and February 28, 2021.

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## APPENDIX II — SELECT DATA SETS

### *Believability-Classification Survey Data*

The Believability Classification Survey is a continuous, dynamic survey administered by Limbik. Results included in this report are based on interviews conducted between November 7, 2020 and February 6, 2021 among a nationally representative sample of 9,308 U.S. adults. For context, “available” refers to individuals susceptible to believing in QAnon conspiracies, whereas “adherents” signifies that someone is a QAnon follower.

### **Voter Fraud Adherents**

Statement: I believe voter fraud played a significant role in the 2020 Presidential election.

Voter Fraud Adherents include the 41.3 percent of survey respondents between January 7, 2021 and February 6, 2021 that selected “Strongly agree” or “Agree” when asked: “To what extent do you agree with this statement: Voter fraud played a significant role in the 2020 Presidential election.”

48.2 percent of male survey respondents and 34.4 percent of female respondents classify as Voter Fraud Adherents, as well as 69.1 percent of survey respondents that voted for Donald J. Trump in the 2020 President Election.

Using the same criteria, 41.1 percent of survey respondents between December 7, 2020 and January 6, 2021, and 43.8 percent of survey respondents between November 7, 2020 and December 6, 2020, classify as Voter Fraud Adherents, respectively.

January 7, 2021 - February 6, 2021: 41.3 percent  
December 7, 2020 - January 6, 2021: 41.1 percent  
November 7, 2020 - December 6, 2020: 43.8 percent

### **Child Sex Trafficking Adherents**

Statement: I believe elites, politicians and/or celebrities are involved in global pedophile rings.

Child Sex Trafficking Adherents include the 35.8 percent of survey respondents between January 7, 2021 and February 6, 2021 that selected “Strongly agree” or “Agree” when asked: “To what extent do you agree with this statement: I believe elites, politicians and/or celebrities are involved in global pedophile rings.”

43.2 percent of male survey respondents and 28.3 percent of female respondents classify as Child Sex Trafficking Adherents, as well as 46.1 percent of survey respondents that reside in Georgia.

Using the same criteria, 41.3 percent of survey respondents between December 7, 2020 and January 6, 2021, and 26.7 percent of survey respondents between November 7, 2020 and December 6, 2020, classify as Child Sex Trafficking Adherents, respectively.

Please note the survey question used to classify Child Sex Trafficking Adherents was changes on December 15, 2020, from “To what extent do you agree with this statement: I am passionate about stopping child sex trafficking and am actively engaged in the fight to #SaveOurChildren.” to “To what extent do you agree with this statement: I believe elites, politicians and/or celebrities are involved in global pedophile rings.”

January 7, 2021 - February 6, 2021: 35.8 percent  
December 7, 2020 - January 6, 2021: 41.3 percent  
November 7, 2020 - December 6, 2020: 26.7 percent

### **COVID-19 Conspiracy Adherents**

Question: Which of the following do you believe are or may be true?

Response: COVID-19 was created in a lab.

COVID-19 Conspiracy Adherents include the 30.6 percent of survey respondents between January 7, 2021 and February 6, 2021 that selected “COVID-19 was created in a lab.” when asked: “Which of the following do you believe are or may be true?”

31.6 percent of female survey respondents and 30.5 percent of male respondents classify as COVID-19 Conspiracy Adherents, as well as 35.0 percent of survey respondents between 35-44-years-of-age.

Using the same criteria, 33.9 percent of survey respondents between December 7, 2020 and January 6, 2021, and 29.1 percent of survey respondents between November 7, 2020 and December 6, 2020, classify as COVID-19 Conspiracy Adherents.

January 7, 2021 - February 6, 2021: 30.6 percent  
 December 7, 2020 - January 6, 2021: 33.9 percent  
 November 7, 2020 - December 6, 2020: 29.1 percent

### **QAnon Adherents**

Statement: I consider myself a QAnon member, believer or supporter.

QAnon Adherents include the 22.2 percent of survey respondents between January 7, 2021 and February 6, 2021 that selected “Strongly agree” or “Agree” when asked: “To what extent do you agree with this statement: I consider myself a QAnon member, believer or supporter.”

29.9 percent of male survey respondents and 14.2 percent of female respondents classify as QAnon Adherents, as well as 40.8 percent of survey respondents that reside in Georgia.

Using the same criteria, 20.5 percent of survey respondents between December 7, 2020 and January 6, 2021, and 22.6 percent of survey respondents between November 7, 2020 and December 6, 2020, classify as QAnon adherents.

January 7, 2021 - February 6, 2021: 22.2 percent  
 December 7, 2020 - January 6, 2021: 20.5 percent  
 November 7, 2020 - December 6, 2020: 22.6 percent

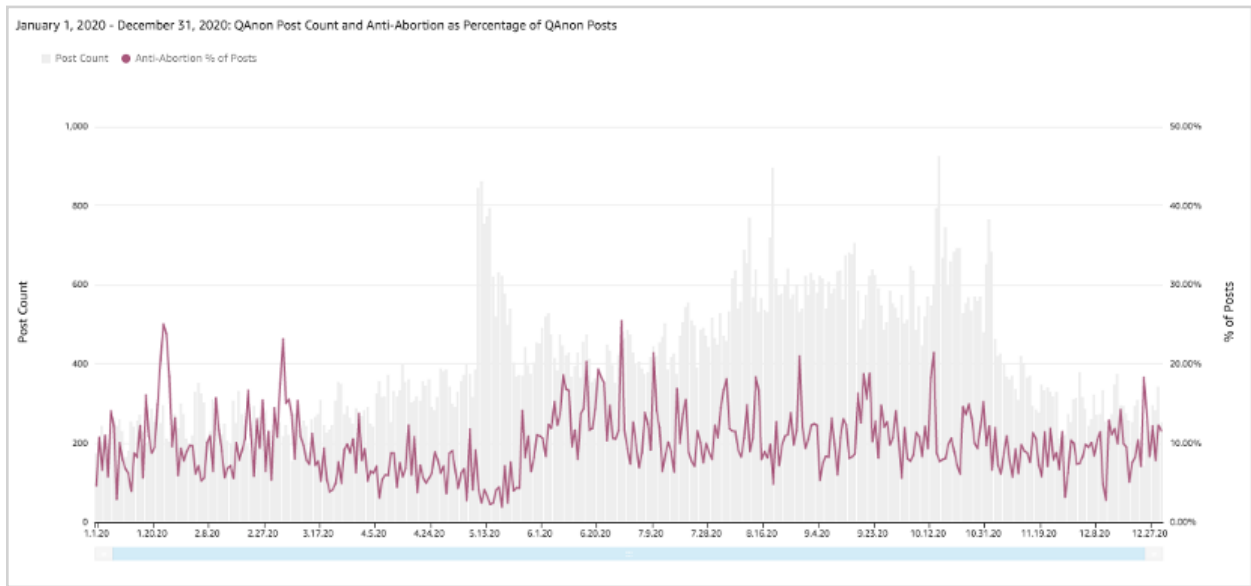
### *Facebook Post Classification and Analysis*

For the purposes of this report, 166,820 Facebook posts posted between January 1, 2020 and February 28, 2021 were analyzed. The posts were sourced and classified as “QAnon” using

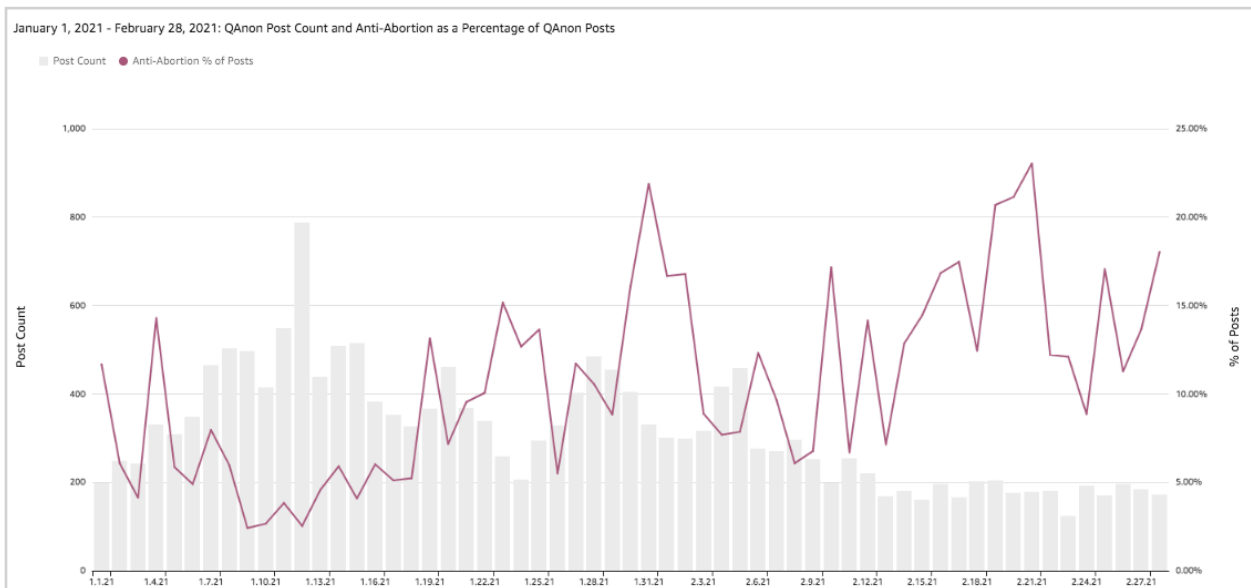
custom search terms and a proprietary classification model, which assigns topical classifications metadata by comparing post metadata to manually classified posts.

Anti-Abortion classified posts as a percentage of total QAnon posts per day was calculated to understand the volume of Anti-Abortion posts between January 1, 2020 and February 28, 2021.

**Anti-Abortion Posts as a Percentage of QAnon Posts: January 1, 2020 - December 31, 2020**



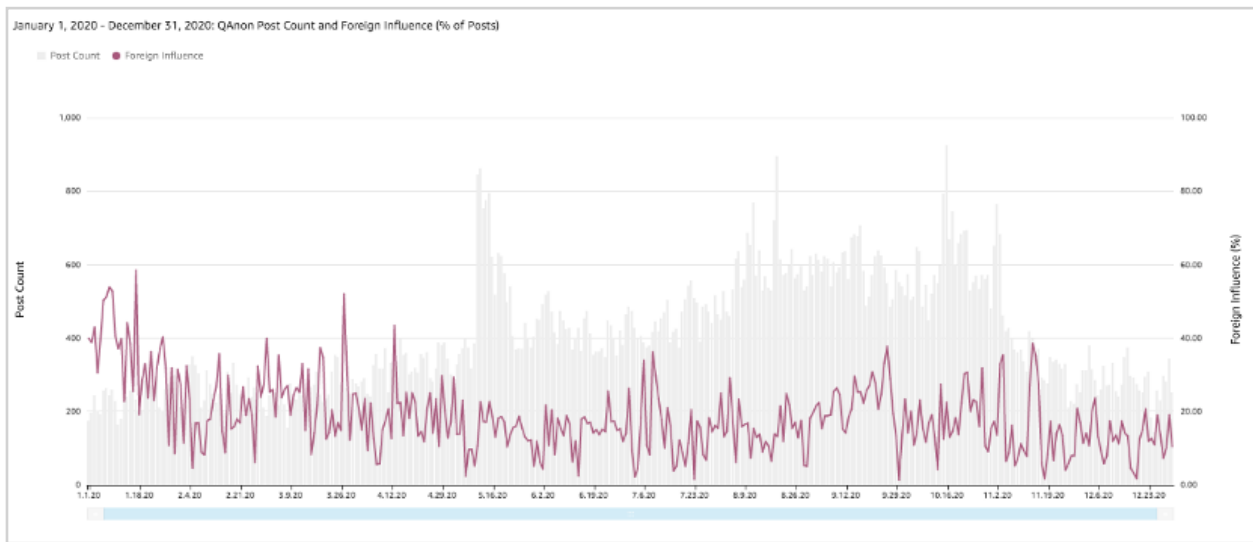
**Anti-Abortion Posts as a Percentage of QAnon Posts: January 1, 2021 - February 28, 2021**



*Foreign Influence*

Limbik’s proprietary Foreign Influence classification model quantifies the likelihood a Facebook post originated from an account with a foreign administrator(s). For the purpose of this report, Foreign Influence is defined as posts from known Foreign accounts or accounts with a Foreign Influence score (probability) greater than 50.1 percent, as a percentage of posts collected and analyzed between January 1, 2020 and February 28, 2021.

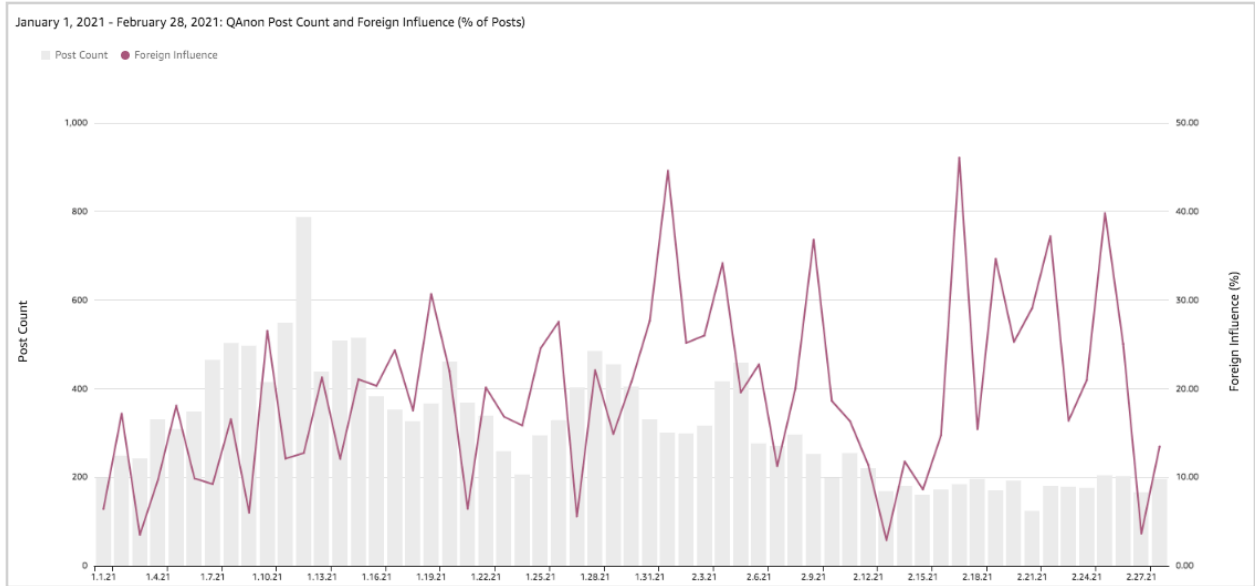
**Foreign Influence Posts as a Percentage of QAnon Posts: January 1, 2020 - December 31, 2020**



Foreign Influence categorized posts accounted for 18.69% of total analyzed QAnon Facebook posts between January 1, 2020 and December 31, 2020.



### Foreign Influence Posts as a Percentage of QAnon Posts: January 1, 2021 - February 28, 2021



Foreign Influence categorized posts accounted for 19.51% of total analyzed QAnon Facebook posts between January 1, 2021 and February 28, 2021.

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## **ABOUT THE SOUFAN CENTER**

The Soufan Center (TSC) is an independent non-profit center offering research, analysis, and strategic dialogue on global security challenges and foreign policy issues, with a particular focus on counterterrorism, violent extremism, armed conflict, and the rule of law. Our work is underpinned by a recognition that human rights and human security perspectives are critical to developing credible, effective, and sustainable solutions. TSC fills a niche role by producing objective and innovative reports and analyses, and fostering dynamic dialogue and exchanges, to effectively equip governments, international organizations, the private sector, and civil society with key resources to inform policies and practice.

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