



# QANON MOVEMENT BEFORE AND AFTER THE CAPITOL HILL RIOT

ZEYNEP DURAN I M. ENES ARSLAN

## INTRODUCTION

**T**errorism as one of the main issues of the world agenda after al-Qaeda's terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001, was handled in the context of the Middle East and was understood mainly concerning Muslims. Yet, the far-right movements in the West and the attacks from these groups have led to the discussion of the far-right movements in the context of extremism, radicalization, and terrorism. At the

end of the 2020, Presidential Elections were held. After the emergence in 2017, the movement of QAnon had gotten stronger than before during the reign of Donald Trump, and reached to the apex of it in the meantime of Presidential Elections in 2020. Afterward, the FBI designated the group as a domestic threat, which has the potential to transform into a threat against the Western World due to its cross-border influence beyond the US. After the protests on 6 January 2021, when

Known as QAnon, this phenomenon first emerged on the website “4chan” as a conspiracy theory inspired by the claims of a user with the alias “Q” -despite the fact that a majority of these claims were neither new nor original- then the supporters of these theories formed an amorphous mass with no clear boundaries.

protesters opposing the election results and claiming that Trump was cheated out of the office, stormed the Capitol Hill housing the US Congress and engaged in vandalism, the American federal institutions started inquiries and engaged in legal processes through uncovering the role of individuals and groups in the Capitol Hill Riot. QAnon has been the most important movement that came to the agenda in this period. Its influence in both the USA and in the Western countries has become a concern for government surveillance and has been characterized by the prominent figures in the classical and social media platforms as ‘extremist’, and its visibility in the mainstream media has remained limited after its sympathizers were banned on the internet. At the same time, QAnon users found new platforms for self-expression through diversity in online platforms and anonymity concerns of some applications such as Signal and Telegram, thereby rushing en masse to these alternative platforms. Therefore, to find out the secret survival recipes of QAnon is a matter of curiosity which should be revealed

by research; because it is active till today and is continuing to preserve its existence, expanding its influence, and most likely expected to maintain its role in coming period.

## EMERGENCE AND DEVELOPMENT OF QANON

QAnon is recognized as a phenomenon that emerged during the US presidential elections in 2017 and reached a wide audience, especially in Europe by spreading all over the world. Known as QAnon, this phenomenon first emerged on the website “4chan” as a conspiracy theory inspired by the claims of a user with the alias “Q” -despite the fact that a majority of these claims were neither new nor original- then the supporters of these theories formed an amorphous mass with no clear boundaries. While there are claims<sup>2</sup> that Q comprises one or more high -level officials cleared for access to important information, there is no clear evidence proving that yet. The part “Anon” after the letter Q in the word QAnon means a user who posts anonymously and is an abbreviation

<sup>1</sup> Brandy Zadrozny ve Ben Collins, “Who Is Behind the Qanon Conspiracy? We’ve Traced It to Three People” *NBC News*, 14 August 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Brett Forrest, “What Is QAnon? What We Know About the Conspiracy-Theory Group” *The Wall Street Journal*, 4 February 2021.



QAnon followers during the Capitol Hill Riot.

of the English word anonymous<sup>3</sup>. QAnon has come to be a movement that reaches hundred thousands of supporters after the believers of Q, an original person or account, reiterated Q's claims on social media.

The supporters of QAnon are observed to have a dualistic worldview, in which the "good" is represented by President Trump of the USA in the name of God and the "bad" is represented by Trump opponents in the name of evil. The war between good and evil, which is secretly carried out, is uncovered by QAnon supporters who want that the war will be ended when the pro-Trump US army launches the long -expected Operation "Storm"<sup>4</sup>. Operation Storm is a mass

arrest operation against certain individuals in the US who fight for evil.

A multitude of claims with no sound evidence as a general characteristic of conspiracy theories is relevant for QAnon as well. According to the claims of QAnon supporters, the world is run by a small cabal of pedophilic child molesters and global human smugglers, while ordinary people are manipulated by politics, the business community, and media<sup>5</sup>. QAnon supporters claim that Trump needs to be supported in its fight against this secret cabal, and accuse some Hollywood stars, Democratic Party members, and high -level government officials of participating in a secret intrigue. A closer

<sup>3</sup> Mike Rothschild, "What Are Anons?," *The Daily Dot*, 15 September 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Kevin Roose, "What Is QAnon, the Viral Pro-Trump Conspiracy Theory?" *The New York Times*, 4 March 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Roose, "What Is QAnon, the Viral Pro-Trump Conspiracy Theory?"

look into these claims by Q reveals that Q recompiles the theories that are already present in the mainstream media and on various platforms rather than having official access to secret and special information.<sup>6</sup>

QAnon, which takes place among far-right movements in the political spectrum, is regarded as a domestic terrorist threat by the FBI, a federal law enforcement agency<sup>7</sup>. Despite its place among the far-right movements in the USA, QAnon managed to expand into various countries particularly in Europe, succeeding in reaching and influencing a wide audience with conspiracy theories. Expanding beyond online platforms, QAnon took to the streets and held demonstrations with tags such as #SaveTheChildren in the name of raising their voices for good and saving all children under threat as well as participating in organizations held for Trump's election campaign.<sup>8</sup>

While QAnon supporters utilize online platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and Reddit for sharing their views and calling people to war, the Covid-19 pandemic that engulfed the entire world has facilitated the spread of conspiracy theories. As people spend more time browsing online platforms in this period, the algorithms of social media platforms constantly push similar contents forward in order to keep people in front of screens. As a vicious cycle, this situation is seen as one of the most important factors behind the spread of conspiracy theories.

In addition to that, it is claimed that Russia's social media bots are another factor for the spread of QAnon's theories.<sup>9</sup> It is well known that Russia, who was accused of interfering in the US elections multiple times and adopted the doctrine of hybrid war in 2014 employs similar methods as asymmetrical warfare. Yet, Russia officially declines these allegations which lacks concrete evidence.<sup>10</sup>

There are also a series of prophecies that QAnon supporters believe in and draw motivation from. Yet, some of these prophecies have already been proven wrong. For example, Operation Storm has not been launched and despite expectations and allegations, no mass arrests have taken place against top Democratic Party officials, some Hollywood stars, and some government officials. Hillary Clinton and John Podesta have not been apprehended, Donald Trump hasn't posted a tweet with the word "Storm" and the National Emergency Warning System was not activated.<sup>11</sup> Most importantly, Trump had to transfer his port after losing elections before any mass arrests could take place against the Cabalists in business, media, politics, and army circles.

### THE CAPITOL HILL RIOT AND QANON'S RISE IN THE ALTERNATIVE MEDIA

After Trump lost the presidential elections that took place in November 2020, disgruntled voices were raised in the media casting

<sup>6</sup> "The Making of QAnon: A Crowdsourced Conspiracy", *Bellingcat*, 7 January 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Oscar Gonzalez, "QAnon: Why This Crazy Conspiracy Theory Thinks Trump Will Return to the White House", *CNET*, 5 March 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Gonzalez, "QAnon: Why this crazy conspiracy theory thinks Trump will return to the White House"

<sup>9</sup> Julia Davis, "Russian Media Turns to QAnon Conspiracies to Help Re-Elect Trump", *The Daily Beast*, 24 August 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Joseph Menn, "QAnon Received Earlier Boost from Russian Accounts on Twitter, Archives Show", *Reuters Media*, 2 November 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Mike Rothschild, "Here Is Every QAnon Prediction That's Failed to Come True", *The Daily Dot*, 27 January 2021.

doubts on the election result and calling for protests. After that, the biggest protests were held in front of the US Congress on January 6, 2021. Many different groups participated in the protest among which QAnon and Proud Boys were the most prominent. When the protests turned into a riot in the US, Congress known as the Capitol Hill, has been recorded as a shameful event in US history. The whole world followed the event closely, in which sympathizers such as the QAnon Shaman caused material damage in the building and during the protests some deaths and wounds took place. After the Congress Riot, the social media accounts of Trump as well as the individuals and groups who support the far-right movements were suspended on the grounds of violent extremism. As QAnon was isolated from classical and social media, it sought to provide its own alternatives.

Established in the online world such as social media platforms, QAnon has an important role and influence in the Capitol Hill Riot on January 6, 2021. The adherents of QAnon acted on Trump's claims of fraud in the elections and advertised the Riot on online platforms playing a pioneering role in inciting people and

groups. Trump-supporter Jacob Anthony Chansley, also known as the QAnon Shaman and Jake Angeli, has become a symbol for the Capitol Hill Riot. Famous for his fur hat, horns, and face paint, Jake Angeli was later spotted in many other far-right demonstrations held in Arizona in recent years.

Parler, which has become an alternative social media platform for far-right users, was banned from online access by Amazon, Google, and Apple for inciting violence and organizing the demonstrations. Even though Parler was reopened with a new logo and a new CEO, it lacked its former reach and influence since many users passed to other applications such as Telegram, Gab, and MeWe. Another fac-



Jake Angeli also known as the "QAnon Shaman".

It is known that QAnon adherents spread their conspiracy theories that the coronavirus vaccinations are in fact "biological weapons developed by a group of malign people from government officials and drug companies" on the Telegram chat group called "Q News Official TV", which has more than fifty thousand members.



A scene during the Capitol Hill Raid, Washington, January 6, 2021.

tor in Parler's loss of trust and influence is the allegations circulated by QAnon on Telegram that Parler's return is enabled by the National Security Agency (NSA) so that it will help to track QAnon.

After the Capitol Hill Riot, a high number of social media accounts belonging to many pro-violence groups and individuals such as QAnon in addition to former President Trump and his supporters were purged from the platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Therefore, the QAnon adherents opted for different platforms for maintaining online communication. A mass exodus of Trump supporters, QAnon adherents, and people from other far-right movements have taken place towards Gab, a social media platform that is seen as an alternative to Twitter by the far-right movements in the USA. The social media platform known as

Gab, which is also used by well-known far-right individuals, stated that 1.7 million new users have registered in just one week and it has had more than 50 million page views. The data provided by Google Trends and Alexa about internet usage analysis also shows a significant move towards this platform. It was also claimed that the weekly download numbers for the Rumble application, an alternative for YouTube, were doubled in only one week. The application called MeWe was seen as an alternative for Facebook and gained approximately 400 thousand daily new users in this period reaching more than 14 million users in total.<sup>12</sup>

The user numbers of QAnon's Telegram chat groups are on the rise as well. For example, it is known that QAnon adherents spread their conspiracy theories that the coronavirus vaccinations are in fact "biologi-

<sup>12</sup> Danielle Abril, "Trump Supporters Flock to MeWe, Gab, and Rumble After Parler Goes Offline", *Fortune*, 12 January 2021.

cal weapons developed by a group of malign people from government officials and drug companies" on the Telegram chat group called "Q News Official TV", which has more than fifty thousand members. In addition to "Q News Official TV", many more QAnon supporter chat groups exist on Telegram, some of which have more than two hundred thousand members. While they are characterized as a terrorism threat by the FBI, extremist QAnon adherents to seek a place for themselves on the platforms such as Telegram, which are less restrictive. While this situation led to the emergence of new formations and partitioning, it did not prevent the QAnon adherents from maintaining their online existence. Rita Katz, executive director of the SITE Intelligence Group, which monitors online extremism, characterizes Telegram as "the most important center of QAnon". Katz stated that while the conspiracy theories about elections lose rhetorical and action power, the rhetoric of QAnon and other far-right groups utilize concepts of worry and doubt about Covid-19 and vaccines.<sup>13</sup>

## FAR-RIGHT MOVEMENTS AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES

QAnon has spread its influence beyond the USA, particularly into Europe, and has started to affect the agenda around the world through its conspiracy theories. The group managed to find supporters ranging from the USA to Australia and is causing material and non-material damage to many people with its conspiracy theories. Family members of some QAnon supporters state

that these people's family relations deteriorated and the heated discussion became ordinary even when the subject of conversation is QAnon. Influential members of QAnon encourage the adherents to focus on alternative theories about historical events such as the Covid-19 pandemic, September 11 attacks, and the assassination of John F. Kennedy and to believe in the extraordinary meanings behind these events. Furthermore, it was claimed that Q's motto was 'think for your-self' and Mike Rothschild, a prominent writer, and researcher that studies conspiracy theories, stated that QAnon adherents believe themselves to be warriors and digital soldiers in a secret war.<sup>14</sup>

Speaking in an online panel discussion titled as Back to the Future: The Historical Roots of Far Right and organized by the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), a Netherlands-based think-tank, JM Berger stated that definitions on far-right groups are vague and there are several far-right movements in the mainstream. JM Berger claims that defenders of white supremacy, Neo-Nazis, and militia patriot movements are well-structured and resemble each other due to the racial ideology they adhere to. Furthermore, there are also smaller and more dispersed far-right groups in addition to the mainstream groups as well. During the panel, the data provided by the Global Terrorism Index was also discussed and in this context, there is more than 250% increase in the attacks by far-right and connected groups since 2014.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Graig Timberg ve Elizabeth Dvoskin, "With Trump Gone, QAnon Groups Focus Fury on Attacking Coronavirus Vaccines", *The Washington Post*, 11 March 2021.

<sup>14</sup> Lauren McWilliams, "How Dangerous Conspiracy Group QAnon Is Tearing Aussie Families Apart".

<sup>15</sup> Donald Holbrook, "Deconstructing the Extreme Right", *ICCT*, 15 January 2021.

Even though these claims do not hold truth, they serve the purposes of mobilizing sympathizers and adherents. As long as it serves the purpose, it is likely that new false prophecies will emerge.



A QAnon supporter working at Trump's election campaign team.

American producer Adam McKay will shoot a new documentary titled "Q: Into the Storm" about the structure of the QAnon Movement and the way its conspiracy theories affect the American people. The documentary will investigate how QAnon influenced politics through the Internet and started an information war by manipulating people's thoughts. According to the statement about the six-episode documentary, which was directed by Cullen Hoback, QAnon takes its power from secrecy and anonymity therefore the documentary was started in order to unveil every aspect in order to demystify it. The documentary will handle the background developments of

the Capitol Hill Riot and investigate the factors that pushed Q's supporters to the event.<sup>16</sup>

### CONSTANT SELF-WHITEWASHING BY QANON AND THE EXPECTATION OF MARCH 4

Even though the outcomes predicted by QAnon never take place when their prophesied time comes<sup>17</sup>, QAnon does not accept the presidency of Biden's abs continuing forging conspiracy theories about the election results. Some QAnon supporters lost their faith after the presidential Inauguration on January 20, lack of action against the pedophilic gang, and Biden's passing into the Oval Office, yet many of

<sup>16</sup> Tyler Hersko, "Q: Into the Storm' Trailer: QAnon Doc Sets Release Date on HBO", *IndieWire*, 10 March 2021.

<sup>17</sup> Ange Lavoipierre, Stephen Smiley ve Scott Mitchell, "No Matter How Many Times QAnon's Predictions Prove to Be Wrong, Some Supporters Keep Justifying It to Themselves", *ABC News*, 24 January 2021.

them find an explanation for these developments and maintain their commitment to the movement.<sup>18</sup>

One of the latest claims by QAnon was that Trump's second term would start on March 4 and the fight against the Democratic Party, which is allegedly the political wing of the secret cabal, would continue in full force. The importance of the date March 4 is that it was the date of presidential inauguration before the constitutional change in 1933.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, QAnon sought to reinforce its claim with a historical fact. The claim has

rapidly spread among the sympathizers, therefore, prompting the Department of Homeland Security and the FBI to launch investigations. Some groups that were preparing for March 4 were spotted and necessary precautions were taken.<sup>20</sup> When the time has come, the prophecy didn't materialize and QAnon's claims were falsified. Even though these claims do not hold truth, they serve the purposes of mobilizing sympathizers and adherents. As long as it serves the purpose, it is likely that new false prophecies will emerge.

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<sup>18</sup> Nicholas Reimann, "QAnon Pushed March 4 as Trump's 'True Inauguration Day'—But Officials Don't Expect Violence", *Forbes*, 2 March 2021.

<sup>19</sup> Shayan Sardarizadeh, "Why Are QAnon Believers Obsessed with 4 March?", *BBC News*, 4 March 2021.

<sup>20</sup> Nicole Narea, "QAnon Believers Think Trump Will Be Inaugurated Again on March 4", *Vox*, 3 March 2021.

## CONCLUSION

Moving away from the mainstream social media platforms, QAnon supporters continue to develop and diversify on different platforms in terms of geographic, demographic, social, and economic factors. Yet, one can argue that the estimates about the number of people who believe QAnon's claims fall short of measuring reality.<sup>21</sup> That is because the information shared by QAnon sympathizers has a strong potential to influence people from all around the world. That potential depends on the difference in meaning and expression that the content shared by QAnon gains when translated into different languages. During the Covid-19 pandemic, anti-vaccination ideas are on the rise in many countries including Turkey. While the relation between the rise of anti-vaccination views and QAnon is unclear, groups such as QAnon that define themselves with conspiracy theories are predicted to be influential to some extent. For example, the number of QAnon sympathizers in Germany was approximately twenty thousand before the pandemic and the current number is estimated to have increased six times to 125,000.<sup>22</sup>

After the Capitol Hill Riot, ten thousand of social media accounts were shut down or restricted who spread hate under the influence of QAnon and the Proud Boys. Such a measure will likely decrease the spread of hate speech and propaganda, however will not enable the termination of the ideas of the masses. On the contrary, these people are likely to seek different platforms, the

groups will diversify and will even be more radicalized.

The far-right movement QAnon has come to be a significant factor that is able to speak clearly about its worries on behalf of itself. Lacking a specific leader with a disclosed identity, QAnon is an influential figure in North America and Europe with its actions and claims. There are no prominent figures within QAnon or similar movements that vie for leadership. This change in the phenomenon of leadership reduces information about the limits and structure of the movement. This uncertainty might cause QAnon to evolve into a non-centralized structure like that of al-Qaeda in the 2000s, even though it is early to speak of such a similarity. Similar to the Salafist militants, who have charismatic figures such as Osama bin Ladin and Anwar al-Awlaqi, the far-right movements have prominent ones like Wesley Swift and David Duke, who are known for their racist and white supremacist world views. Yet, the rise of less known or even unknown leader-like figures is observed. For example, there is no information on open sources about the leader of QAnon known as 'Q'. While there is no clear explanation about the aspects of QAnon's influence on far-right terrorism, there is the possibility that QAnon's influence over people through conspiracy will constitute a suitable environment for lone-actor attacks and forward-looking cell structures. Considering the place of the Capitol Hill Riot in American history and QAnon's role in the Riot, one can argue that the limits of thinking about the aspects of far-right radicalization and terrorism as well as its potential impacts

<sup>21</sup> James Shanahan, "Support for QAnon Is Hard to Measure. Polls May Overestimate It", *The Conversation*, 5 March 2021.

<sup>22</sup> "ABD'deki Komplu Teorisi Hareketi QAnon Almanya'da İlgi Görüyor", *Amerika'nın Sesi*, 28 October 2020.

on the Western World should not be narrowed down.

In conclusion, when looking into the Capitol Hill Riot it seems that the idea of MAGA (Make America Great Again) and Donald Trump stand at the focus despite the presence of different symbols and brands. In this context, QAnon and its prophecies continue to rely on the image of brand and power that Trump has created during his presidency. When Donald Trump, their paragon against the forces of evil lost the presidential elections and his social media accounts were canceled, and QAnon and similar pro-extremist groups were purged from social media, these groups and their followers felt defeated in their war against prophecies and opted for platforms that do not restrict

their speech. Their rhetoric became further radicalized when their sense of defeat was coupled with the fact that their pro-extremist rhetoric is not restricted on these new platforms. The Capitol Hill Riot, which reshaped Trump's party and brought QAnon to the world's agenda, can be evaluated as a beginning. QAnon, who sees Trump as a savior fighting against the 'deep state' and disturbs the Biden administration with its conspiracy theories, has turned into the militant extremism of the real world beyond the virtual world. The Capitol Hill Riot on January 6, 2021, has taken its place in history as an important event in making people understand the role of QAnon in reshaping the Republican Party and radicalizing the American people as well as the increasing power that its conspiracy theories can gain.

### Zeynep Duran

Zeynep Duran received her undergraduate degree from Ankara Yıldırım Beyazıt University, having studied in the Department of International Relations. During her bachelor's program, Ms. Duran did internships at several institutions such as the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs Center for Strategic Research (SAM), the Ministry of Culture and Tourism Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA), and the Ministry of the Interior Directorate General of Migration Management (GIGM). She is currently working at ORSAM as a research assistant within the body of the Security Studies Desk and continuing a master's degree in Security Studies at TOBB University of Economics and Technology. Ms. Duran is interested in Turkish foreign policy, foreign policy analysis, international relations theory, extremism, and non-state armed actors.

### M. Enes Arslan

M. Enes Arslan received his bachelor's degree in International Relations from Aydın Adnan Menderes University, and his master's degree in Political Science and International Relations from İstanbul Sabahattin Zaim University.

M. Enes Arslan works as a research assistant at the Department of Security Studies at Center for Middle Eastern Studies (ORSAM) in Turkey. His research interests are radicalization, political violence, non-state armed actors, and the far right.



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### Center for Middle Eastern Studies

**Address** : Mustafa Kemal Mah. 2128 Sk. No: 3 Çankaya, ANKARA

**Phone** : +90 850 888 15 20

**Email** : info@orsam.org.tr

**Photo** : Anadolu Ajansı (AA), Shutterstock