



# QAnon: The Calm Before the Storm

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## Abstract

QAnon, a group of conspiracy theorists dedicated to the overthrow of the deep state and the facilitation of the rapture, has been growing in strength and prominence since its inception in 2017. Originally started as an anonymous post on a message board, the collective has increased in membership, geographic footprint, and ideological reach. QAnon initiates have also expanded their repertoire of tactics, evolving from online chatter to rallies and, finally, to violent attacks, leading law enforcement to opine that the group may incite incidents of domestic terrorism. Although this outcome is possible, predictions of this kind have less merit unless supported by systematic analysis of the evidence. This essay attempts to address this need by providing an empirically grounded prediction of the future of QAnon. Specifically, it summarizes the results of comparative case analyses, which consists of examining groups and collectives that are comparable to QAnon on key factors and applying their trajectories to QAnon. Case comparisons indicate that QAnon may continue to grow in membership size and regional presence. In addition, QAnon members may persist in their use of violence, leading to an increase in the number and severity of their attacks.

**Keywords** QAnon · New religious movement · Terrorism · Violence · Comparative case analysis

## Introduction

On October 28, 2017, a cryptic message was posted on the anonymous image board *4chan*, an unrestricted platform for extremist content. The post confidently declared the exact time during which Hillary Clinton would be arrested for crimes related to a Satan-worshipping, child sex-trafficking ring. Her predicted arrest as a member of an elite cabal of liberal politicians and celebrities who ritually sacrificed children and drank their blood would mark the beginning of an apocalyptic rapture-like turning point. The title of the post, “Calm before the Storm,” referenced a comment made by then-President Donald Trump to describe a meeting with several US military leaders. The message was posted by a user self-identifying as “Q Clearance Patriot.” The anonymous leader fueling the conspiracy, now known as Q, claimed to be leaking high-level security intelligence. Before long, Q had

bred the QAnon movement, a nebulous and diverse collective of conspiracy theorists.

Following the first Evangelical-laden cryptic message in 2017, QAnon grabbed headlines and garnered the attention of the US citizenry, intelligence agencies, and international allies. The evolved QAnon conspiracy asserts that a group of Satan-worshipping and pedophilic political and social elites are waging a war against Donald Trump, who is deftly countering every parry and thrust. Although the questionable nature of the accuracy and feasibility of the theory suggests that it is relatively benign, it has been growing in popularity among members of the general public. In addition, it has served as a rallying cry, encouraging individuals to ferret out evidence validating and contributing to the theory and to spread the conspiratorial message far and wide. Set within the context of a country already divided by partisan politics, pandemic-related social and economic upheaval, and racial strife, the QAnon message translated into an incitement of violence. What began as furtive online messaging grew into a movement, equipped with protest placards and rally chants, isolated targeted violent attacks, and finally participation in the attack on the United States Capitol building in January of 2021.

As the QAnon conspiracy theory shifted from an abstract ideological orientation to an increasingly organized active collective, law enforcement has taken an interest in QAnon development. Although the bulk of QAnon activities remain

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within legal parameters, consisting primarily of online chatter and legal protest, the isolated incidents of violence carried out in the QAnon name are concerning. Members of the general public have been assaulted, kidnapped, and killed under the auspices of saving humanity from encroaching immorality and evil (Denney and Mongelli 2020).<sup>1</sup> Members of law enforcement have opined that the QAnon message will appeal to an increasingly extremist set of individuals, leading to further violence. Intelligence officials have gone so far as to label QAnon as a domestic terrorist threat due to its capability to radicalize lone actors (Dickson 2019).<sup>2</sup> These forecasts are unequivocally pessimistic, which may be justifiable given the need to err on the side of caution when assessing the potential of violent outcomes. However, these predictions appear to be speculative at best, based only on an assessment of QAnon as an isolated entity. Although QAnon's key characteristics should serve as a primary source of information, there are additional qualitative methods that can also aid in illustrating the nature and potential of the organization.

One method of qualitative analysis, group comparison, is particularly well equipped to make informed assessments of a QAnon trajectory and, as such, will be used in this study. Group comparison or, more specifically, comparative matching involves matching cases on relevant factors that are believed to be influential on the outcome of interest, followed by an assessment of the outcome in the matched cases. If the matched cases display a relatively uniform set of outcomes, this suggests a probable trajectory for the primary case of interest. Given the similarities between QAnon, terrorist organizations, and new religious movements, these latter two provide relevant and appropriate points of comparison and, therefore, will be used here for the purposes of prediction. The reader will first be introduced to QAnon with an emphasis on four cultural and structural characteristics that have been empirically shown to be relevant for group trajectory: leadership structure, group membership, recruitment, and ideology. This will be followed with an introduction to two new religious movements and two terrorist organizations that are similar to QAnon in these factors. Each group's development and progress will be assessed, and the collective effects will be used to shape a predictive QAnon trajectory.

## The Comparative Method

The comparative method consists of the systematic evaluation of a small number of case studies with an eye towards

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the case of Frank Cali, who was kidnapped and killed. His assailant identified as QAnon and claimed Cali was a member of the deep state.

<sup>2</sup> Historically, researchers have used the term "cult" to refer to fringe religious movements. More recently, they have adopted the term "new religious movement." Both terms will be used interchangeably throughout this article.

explanation rather than description. When using the comparative method, researchers identify factors (independent variables) that are believed to be influential on the outcome of interest (the dependent variable) and then select cases that are matched on those factors in order to control for their influence. This allows researchers to then examine the outcome and assess its consistency or diversity across cases. Critics (e.g., Seawright 2005) of the comparative method have noted it is prone to error given that it typically employs a small number of cases and there may be key factors that are not controlled through matching. They suggest that the statistical method is a stronger approach and preferred option. Although their concerns have merit, the statistical approach is not always appropriate. For many questions of interest, there simply may not be enough cases to warrant statistical analysis. In addition, the quantitative method is vulnerable to the failure to control for alternative explanations. As for the comparative method, it permits researchers to explore each case thoroughly, potentially identifying additional factors and considerations that would not be readily recognizable in a quantitative dataset. With these considerations in mind, we opt for the qualitative method at this stage of QAnon analysis. Since QAnon is in its fledgling years, its characteristics are evolving and a qualitative approach allows for a more detailed and thorough assessment of these characteristics. In addition, it would be difficult to locate enough groups and organizations that match QAnon on key metrics to be able to adequately conduct a quantitative analysis. With this choice in mind, we caution the reader that it is wise to take all empirical results as suggestive rather than definitive, whether qualitative or quantitative, and this would include those presented here.

The purpose of this study is, through comparison with similar groups, to predict QAnon's future trajectory. Trajectory refers to the progress of a group through time and may include one or more of the following characteristics: stability and survival (the group remains consistent over time), evolution (the group evolves into something new in structure or ideology), devolution (the group devolves to an earlier stage of structure or ideology), extinction (the group ceases to exist), growth (the group gets bigger in size and/or geographical coverage), and fracturing (the group splits into separate factions or parallel organizations). An empirical assessment of a predicted trajectory requires several steps: (a) identifying factors that are relevant for group outcomes (independent variables), (b) determining the values of those variables in the QAnon case, (c) identifying additional groups that match QAnon on those variables, (d) assessing group trajectories (dependent variable) for the comparison cases, and, finally, (e) applying those outcomes to QAnon. Each of these steps will be covered in the following sections, beginning with the identification of relevant independent variables.

## Variables

Studies using a variety of qualitative and quantitative methods have identified characteristics that are believed to be affiliated with group trajectories. As will be summarized below, common themes across these studies include leadership, membership, recruitment, and ideology, suggesting that predictions focused on group trajectories would benefit from a focus on these variables. *Leadership* refers to the structure of decision-making and autonomy. Groups may be hierarchical or centralized, with decision-making flowing from the top down and well-defined chains of command and control (Kilberg 2012). In contrast, other groups may be networked or decentralized, with authority distributed across multiple facets or cells rather than consolidated in the hands of a council or single leader. *Membership* refers to the number of members and demographic characteristics of a group, including but not limited to racial and ethnic characteristics, age and socio-economic status, social standing and sense of belonging, and religious and political backgrounds. *Recruitment* is a catch-all category of recruitment strategies, tactics, and means. This can include targeted or active recruitment of specific groups and locations, non-targeted or passive recruitment of anyone who might take an interest in the group, a shifting in focus across membership and location for strategic purposes, and a shift in mediums or means of recruitment.

A last variable, *ideology*, refers to the group's primary set of beliefs or ideals guiding group development and activities (Borum 2004). Although there are a variety of ways to categorize ideology, one particularly parsimonious method can be borrowed from terrorism studies. According to Post (2007), political and social movements tend to fall on an ideological spectrum ranging from social revolutionary or left-wing, social conservative or right-wing, national-separatist, religious extremism, and single issue. For the purposes of comparative analysis, it is important to note that these categories will likely overlap among many new religious movements and terrorist organizations. For example, a group may espouse extreme Christian views that are also rooted in racial supremacy and ethnocentrism, indicating religious extremism, right-wing, and national-separatist ideological leanings. Therefore, we will leave ideology as a loosely defined term, using some of the terminology presented by Post while also recognizing the futility in creating definitive non-overlapping categories.

Within the definitional parameters outlined above, the literature supports the importance of these variables for group trajectories. Early research on terrorist groups and new religious movements centered more on the role that ideology and membership play in group trajectory than on the influence of recruitment and leadership. For example, Sprinzak (1995) focused specifically on right-wing organizations, arguing that they display a unique cyclical pattern. These groups begin by directing anger towards an enemy for their perceived

characteristics, which is countered by a state repressive response or defense, solidifying the legitimacy of the target for the aggrieved organization, thus bolstering its membership base and longevity. Wilson (1987) emphasizes the importance of ideology for group demise, particularly for new religious movements. He notes that many movements are built around a temporal proclamation of change (e.g., the arrival of a new stage of life or religious representative). When these proclamations do not bear out, this can be a death knell for a movement. Wilson also emphasizes the importance of membership characteristics, particularly age. Movements that appeal to older initiates, he posits, are less likely to sustain themselves as the members age out, failing to recruit a wave of younger followers. Crenshaw (1999) also discusses both membership and ideology, although she focuses on terrorist organizations in the 1980s and 1990s. She concludes that ideological orientation and membership composition are significantly related to group endurance, positing that ethnonationalist/separatist groups consisting of marginalized ethnic or racial membership groups have a longer average lifespan than do left-wing or right-wing groups. Levine (1980), in contrast, focuses solely on membership when examining rural movement building and sustainability, concluding that new religious and political movements served as refuges for middle-class youth, thus ensuring the longevity of the organization through a continual supply of initiates. Derks (1980) contributed a psychological and social interpretation of membership, emphasizing the importance of social isolation on group growth and sustainability in religious movements.

Membership and ideology continue to hold a place of importance in more current research on movement trajectories but are joined by a new interest in leadership and recruitment methods. For example, Freilich et al. (2009) examined the trajectories of four right-wing white supremacist organizations located in the USA, finding that strong leadership, ideology, and membership cohesion predicted successful group outcomes. In contrast, lack of cohesion and a poor leader resulted in a failure for the group to rise to prominence or even get off the ground. Sagarin et al. (2010) emphasize the role that leadership structure, particularly decentralization, has on the survival of an organization. They posit that decentralization facilitates longevity and, in an interesting twist, suggest that security forces responding to political violence would be best served by adopting this structural characteristic themselves. Smith et al. (2018) examine group longevity by examining individual characteristics in a sample of extremists from the USA, concluding that ideology serves an important role in demise or persistence. Bromley (2014) illustrates the importance of charismatic or symbolic leadership, including the perception of exceptional abilities and capacity to elicit trust, in group and movement formation. Bromley also notes the bidirectional nature of group formation and sustainability. Although leaders facilitate group evolution and cohesion,

dedicated recruits serve to establish a successful leader, indicating that the characteristics of both leadership and members determine group outcomes.

The studies cited above are only a small sample of the pool of empirical research that points to the influence that leadership and membership characteristics, recruitment, and ideology have on organizational trajectories. As the astute reader may have noticed, the literature is not always in agreement regarding the directional influence of each factor. For example, one set of literature emphasizes the benefits of decentralization while the other advocates for a centralized and charismatic leader to ensure group survival and growth. Despite these differences, the conclusion from the research remains the same; assessments of group survival and success should consider these factors before drawing conclusions or making predictions. Therefore, in order to ensure as accurate a prediction as possible, we will attend to these characteristics when matching cases for the purposes of comparison.

Of note, there are additional variables that both terrorist organizations and new religious movements share that are not included in this study. For example, both sets of groups highlight the importance of ritual and commitment. Although these are key characteristics, they are not prominently featured in the empirical literature as potential predictors of group trajectory. In addition, they are difficult to measure accurately. Therefore, these factors have been excluded from this study. Given their exclusion, the previous note bears repeating; the results reported in this study should be interpreted with caution.

## QAnon: Variable Description and Background

A detailed description of QAnon could occupy volumes; however, due to space constraints, we will limit our summary to the four key variables outlined previously, beginning with membership. Members of QAnon have some key characteristics in common. Primarily belonging to the baby boomer generation, they are frequently church-going individuals and lean towards the politically radical (Dickson 2020; Wong 2020). QAnon members tend to be socially isolated; friends, family, and former members describe followers as lonely, elderly, and/or feeling a loss of control in their lives. It is, however, the philosophical ideologies that QAnon followers share that hold the movement together. The anti-establishment distrust of institutions and the shared sense of “us and them” draw in members who see themselves as powerless, standing on the outside of “high society.”

Messages from Q, the original instigator and implicit leader of QAnon, are intended to covertly inform the public of a bizarre conspiratorial anti-establishment ideology, rooted in former President Trump’s top-secret battle against the “deep state,” a term Trump used to describe an alliance of political

elites that actively work against his agenda through unofficial channels. By way of riddle-like clues and cryptic indications, Q encourages followers to uncover the details of this clandestine war predicted to culminate in a storm of deep state arrests. Anons, Q’s followers, see Trump’s populist rhetoric as the fight against an elite establishment that has no regard for the values and traditions of common citizens. In addition, through the intentional use of Evangelical-style terminology, Q also invites participation from the conservative religious community. Compounded by a general rejection of conventional Enlightenment values such as reason and objectivity, they are primed to believe outlandish claims with unquestioning faith and no evidence. In the words of one former follower, coming from “an extremely religious Christian Baptist family...leads you to be open into believing certain things without there necessarily being proof” (Dixon 2020). Echoed in their mantra “where we go one, we go all,” QAnon is a syndicate of the secular and the religious, devoutly committed to working to resist and expose the deep state.

It is notable that friends and family are rarely the primary form of recruitment. Rather, followers are often introduced to the conspiracies by strangers and through online networks. Q’s messages began small, but quickly spread across the underground internet community. This was likely due to the activities of a few small influencers who served as mouthpieces, creating YouTube content that captured the attention of a wider audience (Zadronzy and Collins 2018). It has since steadily risen to the mainstream consciousness through a swirl of social media. Emotion-provoking hashtags, such as #SavetheChildren, have been coopted and circulated by a small number of QAnon users in attempts to engage new followers and influence real-world events (Zadronzy and Collins 2020). This prosocial content is contrasted by other QAnon recruitment messaging that emphasizes vitriol and inciteful content. These various tactics have been particularly effective following key political and social moments. Spikes in QAnon activity, for example, have correlated with Trump rallies, the arrest and death of Jeffrey Epstein, and the killing of George Floyd (Alba 2020; Gallagher et al. 2020). The real catalyst can be correlated to social unrest triggered by the global pandemic in the spring of 2020. QAnon Facebook user activity more than tripled across the month of March (Gallagher et al. 2020). At the same time, Twitter usage grew by more than 40% and links sharing QAnon-related YouTube content more than tripled (Gallagher et al. 2020).

While Q may be a central figure around which the movement has grown, online communities serve as the primary instigator of QAnon activity. QAnon is decentralized; members co-exist autonomously or as members of a faction or cell. Followers are encouraged by the ambiguity of messaging to form their own theories, values, and ideals, thus reflecting the interests of each individual or cell rather than the interests of a hierarchical figurehead. In addition, although members will

seek guidance from Q, decisions regarding direction, strategies, and tactics are made directly by the Anons. In simple terms, the Anons are ideologically motivated self-starters, empowered to make their own decisions and carry out whatever actions they deem necessary in the name of QAnon.

As citizens feel more isolated, disenfranchised, and powerless, the anti-establishment frustration continues to build. “QDrops,” or the breadcrumbs of supposed intelligence leaks that Q doles out, serve as an outlet for those wanting to impose some sort of control over a world that seems to be falling from grace. “It’s almost like a drug,” describes an ex-QAnon theorist, going on to say that “a hit of dopamine goes off in your brain, and you have to go in deeper and deeper and deeper in order to get that feeling again” (Dickson 2020). More than anything, however, followers seem to be seeking a sense of community. QAnon creates a welcoming atmosphere within which followers can unload, analyze, and take action against their fears, directing their attention towards a common target: Trump’s enemies. This kind of environment poses a real and serious threat. As another former QAnon follower phrased it, “[a]ny time you dehumanize any part or segment of the population to such a low level, to the lowest level you can go, people are happy on the opposite side to do the worst against them.” He continues, “when you frame your opponents [as subhuman], you won’t just watch them burn. You’ll be happy about it” (Dickson 2020).

## Comparison Groups

As the previous section illustrates, QAnon is a decentralized organization built on an open or non-targeted virtual recruitment strategy designed to appeal to socially isolated individuals willing to embrace an anti-establishment and oftentimes religiously motivated ideology. Our next step involves identifying groups that are similar in structure, composition, and beliefs. Therefore, we focus first on new religious movements, presenting the argument that QAnon bears many similarities to these movements, thus justifying their applicability. We limit our attention to two specific groups, Christian Identity and the LaRouche Movement. We then shift to terrorist organizations, focusing on the Phineas Priesthood and Atomwaffen Division.

## New Religious Movements and QAnon

Definitions of new religious movements, while not uniform, have several key elements that are commonly agreed upon: (a) a key leader or influential figurehead incites and maintains the group; (b) the group or movement expresses intense devotion and dedication to a person, idea, or cause; (c) the defining ideology of the group is counter to the dominant culture; (d) member recruitment involves methods using heightened

suggestibility and targeted information management to “brainwash” individuals; and (e) the development of the group is often spontaneous (Richardson 1993; West and Langone 1986). Although a conclusive cult definition does not exist, these key elements of movement organizations are sufficient to use as a baseline metric, allowing us to make the argument that QAnon would qualify as a new religious movement.

QAnon is potentially an evolution in the development of new religious movements. Its virtual platform and decentralized leadership structure align with contemporary technological advances in a way not seen in previous prominent cult-like structures. While this form of a new religious movement is seemingly unique, QAnon still has indications of each of the defining five base characteristics outlined above. Regarding the first criteria of leadership, group “leader” Q incited the creation of the group and is responsible for maintaining the information to fuel member participation. Q’s influence is dissimilar to that of notorious personalities such as Charles Manson or Jim Jones, but Q demonstrates the ability to appeal to larger audiences with conspiracy content, a feature that persuasive leaders need to maintain to entice new members. One could also argue that Q uses Donald Trump as a leader by proxy by operating the logistics of the group in the shadows while Trump’s charisma continues to unify members. “Trump is idolized as the savior, more or less, who is leading the battle against the deep state” (Mezzofiore et al. 2020).

As for the second and third definitional criteria (membership devotion and ideological counterculture), QAnon members dedicate themselves to the ideologies that Q and Trump represent. Followers feel underrepresented in society and, as such, are drawn by the anti-establishment, populist ideology that Trump claims to address. These counterculture ideals and fringe characters cater to near-typical cult-style recruitment. The fourth criteria, which refers to suggestibility and targeted information, is also met in QAnon. Some people express concern that QAnon members are “brainwashed” and fear that these people have been “abducted” from reason. News reports claim that “QAnon recruiters and proselytizers use deceptive and manipulative tactics to attract people and feed them messages that trigger certain emotions to hook them and indoctrinate them into a new sense of reality” (Hassan 2020). Q spreads these messages through the internet community, posing conspiracy theories on the deep state that turn members to distrust democratic figures, which then allows members to contribute or expand on the information and disseminate it to more people. This virtual platform is what allows for the fifth criteria to be met; Q’s initial posts spread like wildfire, leading to the seemingly spontaneous and sudden creation of QAnon.

In sum, although QAnon is nontraditional in its adaptation to a technologically advanced era, it also fits the definitional criteria of a cult. As such, we can turn our attention to other

new religious movements as viable points of comparison. After scouring the collection of current and historical movements inhabiting the western world, two stood out as particularly compatible with QAnon on many, if not all, of the key variables or metrics cited previously: Christian Identity and the LaRouche Movement.

### Christian Identity

The new religious movement, Christian Identity, was established after World War II, and is entrenched in British Israelism, the belief that British residents are the descendants of Ancient Israel. The movement was built on a perception of white identity as a “divine instrument for God,” one that should be used to counter a rising racial threat, and it was fueled by right-wing political conspiracies and anti-Semitism (Barkun 1997; Lewis 2014). Christian Identity emerged in the USA due to the influence of four key figures: Bertrand Comparet, William Potter Gale, Wesley Swift, and their associate Gerald L. K. Smith.<sup>3</sup> Although these individuals were central for organizational growth across geopolitical borders, they were not leaders in a traditional sense. Christian Identity is, instead, a decentralized organization. Members are inspired by the anti-Semitic and white-supremist Christian Identity message but, rather than follow the direction of a central leader, followers embrace the Identity ideology and carry it to other religious or extreme-right organizations that also share the view that the white race is a pure race. Specifically, Christian Identity espouses the idea of an inevitable race war; white Christians will battle the evil descendants of Satan or Jewish people. Followers distrust political and government figures and their ability to protect society from this racial threat, instead seeking to overthrow the US’ political institutions by forming militia or guerilla groups (Barkun 1997).

Recruitment is primarily carried out through preaching and messaging that is disseminated through affiliated organizations and churches (Barkun 1997). Christian Identity also uses radio and internet resources to bolster their numbers. The organization is estimated to have approximately 25,000 members across the USA, Canada, and Great Britain, although its members are often associated with other groups, such as the white supremacist Aryan Nation and The Covenant, The Sword, and the Arm of the Lord. This fracturing complicates accurate membership numbers and also leads to diversity in beliefs and practices.

### The LaRouche Movement

The LaRouche Movement, a political cult, was formed on populist beliefs and conspiracy claims made by its founder

(Severo 2019). Lyndon LaRouche, Jr., had a passion for Marxist ideals and political organizations. In the late 1960s, he focused these ideologically motivated values on the formation of his own group and, eventually, on the initiation of a presidential campaign. LaRouche’s political campaign led to the creation of a “LaRouchite” union, complete with membership and offices scattered around the world. Members, while following LaRouche as a central leader and spokesperson, operated on their own accord, inspired by his teachings to work towards the elimination of a corrupt democratic party (Russo 1989; Severo 2019). Although group membership varied, it typically consisted of young, educated individuals, including many self-proclaimed LaRouchite political candidates. Members were estimated to be in the thousands, the result of an effective recruitment strategy that relied on print media, the internet, radio, and cable television. Non-members were fed a healthy dose of messaging focused on uncovering the dangerous “truth” about the underbelly of the democratic political party (Gilbert 2003). LaRouche’s conspiracy claims involved, among other means, forged newspaper articles and online media. He accused the Bush family of Nazi collaboration, blamed environmentalists for attempting to “wipe out the human race,” and claimed Dick Cheney led the 2003 invasion of Iraq, labeling them all as “Children of Satan” (Severo 2019). The LaRouche Movement began as a populist movement but eventually incorporated fascist and anti-Semitic elements into its ideology. LaRouche was presented as an effective and appealing alternative to a corrupt system, a message that connected well with the public that felt underrepresented or outcast by contemporary political and cultural institutions.

### Terrorist Organizations and QAnon

Although QAnon qualifies as a new religious movement, it can also meet the definitional criteria of a terrorist organization. Agencies, countries, and organizations all employ different definitions; however, there are some shared characteristics that are generally undisputed. First, terrorism involves the use or threat of use of violence to further a political, social, or economic goal (LaFree and Dugan 2007). Second, terrorist groups are non-state actors who use terrorism as a means of communication, directing their message to an audience that extends beyond the immediate victims. We posit that QAnon meets these criteria, thus allowing us to include terrorist organizations in our comparative analysis.

Due to QAnon’s decentralized structure and methods of operation, any individual may engage in violence in the QAnon name, and a number of members have chosen to do so. In 2018, an armed Marine veteran blocked traffic on the Hoover Dam with an armored vehicle (Mansell 2020). During the stand-off, former Marine Matthew Phillip Wright held up a placard demanding the release of a government report linked to Hillary Clinton (Ruelas 2020). In 2019, Anthony Camello

<sup>3</sup> A well-known anti-Semitic agitator in the 1940s.

killed Frank Cali, an organized crime affiliate, claiming Cali was part of the “deep state” (Denney and Mongelli 2020). During his trial, Camello flashed QAnon symbols and messages written in the palm of his hand (Allyn 2019). In 2020, Cecilia Fulbright rammed another vehicle in Texas, espousing the QAnon theory that the driver was part of a pedophilic human trafficking ring (Hoppa 2020). Fulbright had a history of posting QAnon-related material on social media platforms (Farberov 2020). Finally, in 2021, an unknown number of QAnon members participated in the attack on the United States Capitol building, bearing their group symbols on clothing and placards and espousing the message that the presidency had been stolen from Trump.

These examples and more illustrate that QAnon members engage in violence or the threat of violence. They do so while promoting the organizational name and ideology to an audience extending beyond the immediate victims. In addition, some members, including former Marine Matthew Phillip Wright, have been convicted of engaging in political terrorism, rather than apolitical offenses. Therefore, although QAnon may not carry the official designation of a terrorist organization, its members engage in activities that would qualify as terrorism. These similarities between QAnon and terrorist organizations allow us to rely on the latter for comparison. For the purposes of qualitative analysis, we will focus on two terrorist organizations, the Phineas Priesthood and Atomwaffe Division, each of which overlap considerably with QAnon in our four main areas of interest.

### Phineas Priesthood

The Phineas Priesthood is a collective of extremists based in the USA who follow the ideological messaging of Richard Kelley Hoskins (1990), as described in his book titled: *Vigilantes of Christendom: The Story of the Phineas Priesthood*. Hoskins presents an extreme right-wing Christian perspective, pressing his followers to eliminate “sodomites” and target interracial “interbreeding” (Rosin 1999). Hoskins’ writings inspired a decentralized movement of autonomous individuals seeking social and political change. Members of the Phineas Priesthood, or Priests, adopt an organizational identity after carrying out an act of initiation: violence directed towards “certain segments of society . . . [is] . . . biblically, morally, and historically justified” (Leopold 2016). These segments may include members of minority groups, interracial couples, federal employees, homosexuals, and institutions and/or individuals linked to abortions. Once an act of violence has been completed, an individual will adopt the moniker of a Priest, but will remain independent, selecting when and how to carry out subsequent actions in the name of the Priesthood. A number of high-profile incidents spanning several decades have been linked to the Priesthood,

each serving as an implicit recruitment tool supplementing Hoskins’ written outreach strategy. In 1996, for example, a group of four men detonated explosive devices at a newspaper office and a Planned Parenthood Clinic in Spokane, WA, before engaging in a series of bank robberies (Hill 2020). In 2014, Larry Steven McQuilliams, a self-identified High Priest, opened fire on several institutions in Texas, including a federal courthouse, a police department, and a Mexican consulate. Due to the amorphous and secretive nature of the Priesthood, membership numbers and composition is difficult to gauge. However, priests that have come under public scrutiny share demographic similarities; they are typically white males coming from lower socio-economic backgrounds who tend to exist on the fringes of society, somewhat isolated and disenfranchised.

### Atomwaffen Division

Atomwaffen Division is a terrorist organization that originated in the USA but has spread to other Western nations, including Canada and Germany (Ware 2019). The group formed as a breakaway of the Iron March forum, a message board for extremist individuals and organizations. Brandon Russell, the founder of Atomwaffen Division, announced its inception in 2015 over social media, claiming that, at the time of the announcement, the group had already been in existence for three years (Southern Poverty Law Center n.d.). In addition to online recruitment, Russell and other members began posting flyers at various universities across the USA. Over the last several years, Atomwaffen has evolved into a decentralized organization consisting of approximately a hundred members, an unknown number of initiates, and twenty cells (Ware 2019). Membership tends to focus on young white males of a diverse educational and economic background that share a dissatisfaction with contemporary social and political norms. The group is built on a Neo-Nazi accelerationist ideology, embracing the belief that modern society is a lost cause, riddled with corruption and immorality. Members advocate for a total collapse of the social order so that a whites-only national socialist state may arise from the ashes. Although the group originally focused on non-violent forms of expression and protest, such as flag-burning and information campaigns, it quickly escalated in tactics, becoming deeply committed to the use of violence, making it central to its doctrine. Its members have been tied to a series of killings and assaults targeting homosexuals, Jews, and individuals who challenge the Atomwaffen ideology. In addition, Atomwaffen Division has maintained an active presence at high-profile rallies and riots, including the 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, VA, that ended with the death of a protester after a white supremacist struck her with his vehicle.

## Comparative Characteristics

Before engaging in analysis, it would be valuable to recap the similarities between QAnon and the four comparison cases. Table 1, presented below, provides an overview of the variance across the five organizations. Regarding leadership structure, as noted previously, QAnon has a symbolic leader in the form of Q but practices a decentralized structure of decision-making and authority. All four of the comparison cases have a similar structure; the organizations embrace an inspirational figurehead (or, in the case of Christian Identity, inspiration founders), but act autonomously, free from a central command structure or hierarchical distribution of power and authority.

Membership composition across the five groups bears a number of similarities but also some unique, albeit subtle, differences. All groups seek out fringe or isolated members of society, the majority of which come from politically and religiously conservative backgrounds. However, the groups differ on demographic characteristics. While QAnon tends to cater to an older generation of initiates, the four comparison groups vary in age composition, with the LaRouche Movement and Atomwaffen Division appealing to a younger generation. In addition, Christian Identity, Phineas Priesthood, and Atomwaffen Division have a majority white membership while QAnon and the LaRouche Movement are racially diverse. In contrast, recruitment strategies are uniform across the groups, varying only in the mediums used. All groups focus on a non-targeted recruitment strategy, broadcasting a message to any interested listener that may be inclined to respond. Groups differ on recruitment tools, but this is in large part a reflection of the technological advancements available at the

time of recruitment. All groups rely on word of mouth, but diversify on their use of the internet, written materials, and cable or radio broadcasts.

Ideologically speaking, all five groups embrace an anti-establishment orientation. They share the common theme of dissatisfaction with institutional structures and a deep ceded desire to witness and facilitate change. They differ, however, on the institutional change necessary. QAnon advocates for a complete political, religious, and social overhaul. The other four also champion structural changes in the government and promote religious conflict, but they differ in their stance regarding race and ethnicity. QAnon does not explicitly address issues of race, while Christian Identity, Phineas Priesthood, and Atomwaffen Division all advocate for white supremacy, and the LaRouche Movement and Atomwaffen adopt an explicit anti-Semitic stance.

In sum, the five groups share key similarities in reference to leadership structure, membership, recruitment, and ideological orientation. However, there are also some subtle differences, particularly in relation to the demographic composition of groups and ideological nuances. These two thematic differences are inevitably tied together. Not surprisingly, groups that have a white-majority membership are also groups that focus on white supremacy. In contrast, groups that do not incorporate a racial narrative into their ideological campaign appeal to a more diverse community. In light of the generous overlap between the groups, we will proceed under the supposition that they are appropriately matched to QAnon and, thus, are ideal for comparative analysis. However, we will be cautious in our conclusions given the racial diversity in membership composition and ideological focus.

**Table 1** Group characteristics

Groups	Leadership	Membership	Recruitment	Ideological orientation
QAnon	Symbolic leader Decentralized structure Isolates as decision-makers Anonymity is permitted	Social isolates Political isolates Left and right political extremists Religious extremists Typically older generation	Non-targeted Internet-based Word of mouth	Anti-establishment Revise political institution Promote religious battle
Christian Identity	Symbolic founders Decentralized structure Isolates as decision-makers	Social isolates Political isolates Religious extremists Typically white	Non-targeted Radio and internet-based Word of mouth	Anti-establishment Revise political institution Promote religious battle Promote race war
LaRouche Movement	Symbolic leader Decentralized structure Isolates as decision-makers	Social isolates Political isolates Right-wing political extremists Typically younger generation and educated	Non-targeted Written materials, radio- and internet-based Word of mouth	Anti-establishment Revise political institution Promote religious battle
Phineas Priesthood	Symbolic leader Decentralized structure Isolates as decision-makers Anonymity is expected	Social isolates Political isolates Religious extremists Typically white males	Non-targeted Written materials Word of mouth	Anti-establishment Revise political institution Promote religious battle Promote race war
Atomwaffen Division	Symbolic leader Decentralized structure Isolates as decision-makers	Social isolates Political isolates Right-wing extremists Typically younger generation and white males	Non-targeted generally Limited targeted (colleges and military) Written materials and internet-based Word of mouth	Anti-establishment Revise political institution Promote religious battle Promote race war



## Analysis

We will begin this section with a summary of the individual trajectories of each comparison case, exploring any changes that occurred between the early years of inception (where QAnon sits now), later developments, and contemporary times. Informed by these comparative trajectories, we will conclude with a grounded prediction of the QAnon trajectory.

As summarized in Table 2, Christian Identity is marked by continued survival, although a fractured trajectory. Originally espoused as a unifying ideology, the organization splintered over time, creating the nexus for the formation or evolution of white-supremacy and religious right groups. These offshoots follow similar ideological paths but have different goals or actions, bearing limited similarity to each other in practice (Barkun 1997). The Christian Identity offspring engage in escalatory tactics, including inciting hatred and employing violence. They are responsible for various violent events, such as the 1983 confrontation between law enforcement and an Identity believer which resulted in the death of two federal marshals, or the 1983–1984 insurgence of The Order, consisting of 20 Identity believers, who engaged in a wave of attacks on the federal government (Lewis 2014). Recruitment tactics have generally remained the same, centered on preaching anti-Semitic ideology and appealing to white-supremist supporters. Although Christian Identity believers continue to carry the narrative of establishing a pure Aryan race, their tactics are informed by their individual cells, resulting in an array of methods, including militia organizing, public rallying, and planned or sporadic attacks.

Similar to Christian Identity, the LaRouche Movement continues to survive, although it too has changed in some respects. Members of the movement continue to campaign for political change in various locations around the world, focusing on key policies or political moments as points of contention and motivation. However, the Movement's tactics have changed over several decades, deprioritizing violence as a viable approach to change. In the early years, the group presented a physical threat, developing a variety of violent actions to take over labor movements and remove “unfavorable” people from political campaigns (Russo 1989). “Operation Mop-Up,” for example, ended in several armed attacks and threats on proclaimed “homosexuals, perverts, and criminals” involved in the New York Central Labor Council (Russo 1989). In recent times, however, the movement has prioritized the expansion of their New International Economic Order through international partnerships and has moved the majority of its organizing online, occupying the virtual world through the LaRouchePAC website. The site continues with conspiracy stories of the political left and posts pro-Trump stories with titles like *Trump the Vote Fraud! Stop Biden's Zombie Election—Exorcise the Vote!* (LaRouchePAC 2020). These narratives, although confrontational in content,

do not pose the same social threat that the early roots of the Movement presented.

As we turn to terrorist groups, it is important to note that approximately half of terrorist organizations expire within twelve months, often after carrying out a single attack (Phillips 2017). However, the Phineas Priesthood and Atomwaffen Division are both active today, having survived the traditionally difficult first year, successfully acquiring name recognition and recruits. The Priests have remained cloaked in an aura of secrecy and their existence is only confirmed when aspiring and successful initiates carry out isolated attacks, later linked back to the Priesthood. Due to their near-complete anonymity, it is difficult to determine if the collective has evolved since its inception but their continued, although isolated, attacks attest to stability, if not growth. In addition to stability in membership and numbers, there appears to be little change in specific tactics. Initiates are still required to carry out targeted violence and, as such, we continue to witness sporadic events that are implicitly or explicitly tied back to the Priests.

Atomwaffen Division, on the other hand, has a public presence, allowing for a more accurate assessment of group trajectory. Although arguably still in its early stages, the group has doubled its membership since 2015 (Southern Poverty Law Center n.d.). As its base has expanded in number, so too has its recruitment strategies, broadening to include not only college students and the general public, but also members of the military. This is paired with geographical expansion, pushing the organization beyond US borders and into the rest of the western world, including Russia, Germany, and the UK, to name but a few. In addition, the group has increased its presence at riotous events and its use of violence in the public sphere, escalating its tactics to coincide with politically charged moments of social unrest and racial strife. Lastly, members of the organization have taken part in organized trainings with the goal of acquiring military-style skills useful for violent overthrow. Atomwaffen Division is, by all appearances, a successful and growing international terrorist organization.

What guidance can these backgrounds provide in predicting a QAnon trajectory? Diverse outcomes offer very little predictive direction given that there is no consistency with which to use as a framework for QAnon. However, if there are similarities or uniformity in trajectories across comparison groups, this suggests an increased probability that QAnon will also follow the same trajectory. As outlined in Table 2 and in the previous paragraphs, there is similarity in the general outcomes, although the specific expressions of those outcomes may vary. At the most fundamental level, all four groups continue to survive and persist in various ways in the years and decades following their inception. The youngest of the groups, Atomwaffen Division, has survived for more than five years and, by all indications, will continue to persist

**Table 2** Group trajectories

Groups	Trajectories
Christian Identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continued survival for approximately one hundred years</li> <li>• Fracturing and growth in membership</li> <li>• Splinter groups with individual trajectories</li> <li>• Stability in tactics</li> </ul>
LaRouche Movement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o Continued violence</li> <li>• Continued survival for approximately fifty years</li> <li>• Stability in membership</li> <li>• Evolution in tactics</li> <li>o Increased nonviolence</li> </ul>
Phineas Priesthood	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continued survival for approximately thirty years</li> <li>• Stability in membership</li> <li>• Stability in tactics</li> <li>o Continued violence</li> </ul>
Atomwaffen Division	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continued survival after approximately five years</li> <li>• Growth in membership</li> <li>• Evolution in tactics</li> <li>o Increased violence</li> </ul>

for some time to come. The remaining groups have a longer track record, ranging from thirty to one hundred years of active membership. In addition, all four comparison cases report stability or increases in membership; not one group seems to have lost popularity over time. Christian Identity and Atomwaffen Division have both demonstrated an increase in membership as well as geographical expansion. The LaRouche Movement and the Phineas Priesthood, on the other hand, appear to have remained relatively stable, although it is difficult to gauge change for the latter group due to its inherent secret nature.

The groups do differ on some key outcomes. Although all four groups have continued to survive, Christian Identity has fractured over time, breaking off into splinter groups, each with their own individual trajectories and practices. Meanwhile, Atomwaffen Division continues to expand, suggesting growth but also the possibility of fracturing in a manner similar to Christian Identity. Tactical trajectories also provide a key point of comparison. With the exception of the LaRouche Movement, the groups all continue to engage in violence. Atomwaffen has increased its violent footprint while Christian Identity and Phineas Priesthood, outside of occasional dips and spikes, have remained relatively committed to violence as a primary form of expression. The LaRouche Movement, on the other hand, has shifted to a virtual format and, with this shift, appears to have halted the practice of physical violence. Although the group still espouses violence as a means of promoting political and social change, its members seem less inclined to use this tactic than they did in previous decades.

The trajectories of the comparison groups leave us with a sobering prediction. QAnon is in its fledgling years and, if

other groups provide any sort of reliable point of comparison, the organization is not set to fade out at any point in the near future. QAnon may have years, if not decades, of active life ahead of it, championing political, social, and religious change. In addition to longevity, the evidence suggests that QAnon will experience continued growth in membership numbers and geographical spread. Media outlets have already begun reporting the appearance of QAnon groups in European nations, paired with a diversification in campaign messaging and strategies designed to make the movement more regionally appropriate (Scott 2020). The presence of these international cells, however, points to the possibility of fracturing in the organization. QAnon may follow in the footsteps of Atomwaffen Division, forming cells nationally and internationally that carry the same ideology and tactical toolkit or it may simulate Christian Identity, breaking off into splinter groups that begin to form parallel but independent ideologies and practices.

The continued role of violence is also questionable. The majority of the comparative cases suggest that QAnon members will continue to embrace violence as an acceptable and, oftentimes, meaningful method of promoting change or addressing perceived grievances. If this occurs, the use of violence may remain stable or escalate, as the comparison cases do not provide a clear path regarding the potential evolution of violence. However, the LaRouche Movement suggests that violence may decrease over time, replaced with vitriolic messaging only. Given that the LaRouche Movement and QAnon both rely on virtual communities more than physical ones, the LaRouche shift in tactics might be a better approximation of QAnon outcomes than the other three comparison groups. Bearing that in mind, we will note that the LaRouche shift to

nonviolence may be an outlier and, thus we must emphasize that the majority of the groups suggest that QAnon will continue down a violent path.

## Implications

As noted previously, comparative case analysis results should be interpreted with caution and this study is no exception. It is possible that the sample does not adequately represent the population of social and political groups and the inclusion of additional cases would have led to a different outcome. In addition, our control variables are not exhaustive. Although leadership, membership, recruitment, and ideology are important variables that influence the trajectory of an organization, there are additional variables that we could not include due to the fledgling nature of QAnon. State intervention, for example, has been earmarked as an important predictor of group outcomes (Argomaniz and Vidal-Diez 2015; Nacos 2016); however, the state has yet to form a response to QAnon, so matching on that characteristic is not an option. In addition, inter-group collaboration or conflict has also played a role in group survival but, once again, it is too early to measure and match that characteristic in QAnon (Phillips 2015; Young and Dugan 2014). Therefore, we acknowledge that, with more time and the formation or development of these key variables, the predictive outcome of QAnon may change.

With those caveats in mind, the future of QAnon is daunting. It appears that the organization may be here for the long haul, likely increasing in membership and regional expansion. In addition, continued violence is expected, one of many tactics employed by Anons, although the centrality of violence as a tool is open for debate. This warrants our attention as academics, practitioners, and educators.

It is difficult to predict what the future will hold, particularly as the USA shifts in partisan orientation, the COVID-19 pandemic fuels feelings of isolation and social disconnect, and racial strife takes centerstage, causing a ripple effect felt around the world. It is possible that the current rifts in society will quickly disappear, becoming an unpleasant yet distant memory. It is also possible that this is just the beginning of a long period of social, political, and civil unrest. Whatever comes next, we must hope for the former but prepare for the latter. Preparation involves more than simply battening the hatches and steeling ourselves for the inevitable. It also entails identifying potential threats that may help usher in a long period of unrest, forming strategies to counter those threats, and working with partners to carry them out in the most effective manner possible. QAnon is a threat and not one we should take lightly. It is time to shift our understanding of the collective as an unexpected yet intriguing group of discontented isolates to a movement increasing in membership, ideological devotion, and escalating tactics.

## Declarations

On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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All authors certify that they have no affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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