

# The “Secret Islamization” of Europe: Exploring Integrated Threat Theory for Predicting Islamophobic Conspiracy Stereotypes

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Despite any factual evidence, the idea of a secret „Islamization of Europe“ is finding increasing support among different groups in Germany. Anders Behring Breivik, who killed seventy-seven people in the July 22, 2011, massacre in Norway, was partly motivated by such beliefs. A test of revised integrated threat theory as a framework for analyzing Islamophobic conspiracy stereotypes in Germany. Symbolic and realistic threats are analyzed as mediators between different antecedents (in-group identification, ambiguity intolerance, clash of civilizations) and the dependent variable, conspiracy stereotypes. An online survey was conducted with 355 respondents from Berlin. The findings indicate that respondents with higher education and left-leaning political orientation were less likely to believe in conspiracy stereotypes and threats. The structural equation model indicates partial mediation via symbolic threats for clash of civilizations and education on conspiracy stereotypes. Symbolic threats fully mediate the relationship between in-group identification and ambiguity intolerance on conspiracy stereotypes.

Since the events of September 11, 2001, public debate, policy, and media in Germany have frequently portrayed Muslims and Islam as a threat to the Western World (Schiffer 2005; Hafez 2007; Kluge 2010; Bielefeldt 2010). Numerous studies indicate a rise in derogatory attitudes and hostile actions against Muslims and Islam in European countries (Allen and Nielsen 2002; Zick, Küpper, and Hövermann 2011). Germany is no exception in this regard (Piper 2010; Brauns 2012; de Nève 2013; Zick and Klein 2014). However, whereas the rise in prejudices against Muslims and Islam attracts increasing attention, a relatively new mode of derogatory attitudes toward the outgroup has hardly been noticed, even though it has prominent supporters in the German blogosphere and public debate: the Islamophobic conspiracy theory (Benz 2011; Hafez 2013; Shooman 2014).

Islamophobic conspiracy theories are a relatively new phenomenon, so little research is currently available. Analyses

of public debate, media, and relevant websites indicate that the core of this relatively new narrative is the idea of a *secret* ongoing Islamization of Europe (Hafez 2013; Shooman 2014). As with the popular thesis of a “clash of civilizations,” this process is purported to be driven by an asymmetrical Muslim population growth that has produced huge masses of unemployed and alienated individuals, who in turn put pressure on Western societies through immigration (Huntington 1998). The idea of asymmetrical population growth due to Muslims having a higher fertility rate, ultimately leading to conflict, is frequently reiterated in the public debate (Foroutan 2012), online forums (Shooman 2014), and the media (Kluge 2010; Bielefeldt 2010), and was prominently adopted and disseminated in the bestseller *Deutschland schafft sich ab* (Germany is abolishing itself) by former politician Thilo Sarrazin (2010). In fact, a recent study reveals that the size of the Muslim population is overestimated all over Europe.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Public estimates show German respondents think that Muslims make up 19% of Germany’s population, however, the actual percentage is only approximately

6%. For more information, see: <http://www.economist.com/blogs/graphicdetail/2015/01/daily-chart-2?fsrc=scn%2Ffb%2Fw1%2Fbl%2Fislamineurope>

Furthermore, some proponents of this narrative argue on popular websites that the “Islamization process” is supported by certain leftist politicians, yet concealed from the masses by deliberate media disinformation (Shooman 2014). An orchestrated campaign with a hidden Muslim agenda is alleged to be behind this process, with the ultimate goal of enforcing Islamic laws and rules in Germany and eventually dominating the entire Western world (Fekete 2011). According to Benz (2011), these increasingly popular conspiracy theories operate with a strong emphasis on ethnic/civilizational in-group identity, to which Islam serves as the significant outgroup. The “Islamization process” is contextualized as part of a more comprehensive intergroup clash of civilizations resulting from the irreconcilability of the Islamic and Western cultures (Schiffer and Wagner 2011).

The case of Anders Breivik clearly indicates the importance of addressing such conspiracy theories (Fekete 2011). Several studies in other contexts indicate that belief in conspiracy theories is significantly associated with negative psychological and behavioral consequences, including prejudice (Mashuri and Zaduqisti 2013, 2014; Bilewicz 2007; Imhoff and Bruder 2014; Swami et al. 2011), discrimination (Bilewicz and Krzeminski 2010; Bilewicz et al. 2013), and even political extremism (Bartlett and Miller 2010). Knowledge about underlying social and psychological mechanisms that might foster belief in conspiracy theories is therefore practically important.

From a theoretical perspective, social psychological research on conspiracy theories is primarily concerned with explaining the relationship between well-established psychological measures (such as anomie, authoritarianism, need for cognition) and belief in various conspiracy theories (Webster and Kruglanski 1994; Abalakina-Paap et al. 1999; Wagner-Egger and Bangertner 2007; Swami et al. 2011). However, some studies have started focusing on conspiracy theories as an outcome of intergroup processes (Kofta and Sedek 2005). In this line of research, some studies indicate that in-group identification (Mashuri and Zaduqisti 2013, 2014), intergroup threat (Bilewicz 2007; Mashuri and Zaduqisti 2013), intergroup conflict (Kofta and Slawuta 2013), and various inter-individual difference variables (such as per-

sonality characteristics and/or personal ideologies; Kofta and Sedek 2005; Kofta and Slawuta 2013; Bilewicz et al. 2013) are related to belief in conspiracy theories.

To the best of my knowledge, no study has yet analyzed conspiracy theories involving Islam and Muslims as a conspiratorial group. Furthermore, most existing studies rely on correlational study designs, rather than assessing model fit criteria for measurement and structural models (although see Bilewicz and Krzeminski 2010).

This study therefore sets out to analyze Islamophobic conspiracy theories from an intergroup perspective. The concept of conspiracy stereotype (Kofta 1995; Kofta and Sedek 2005) is adopted to assess the strength of belief in Islamophobic conspiracy theories within an intergroup perspective. The revised integrated threat theory (ITT; Renfro and Stephan 2002) is operationalized as an analytical framework to predict Islamophobic conspiracy theories using structural equation modeling. The revised ITT postulates that the more individuals perceive certain social categories as realistic and/or symbolic threats, the more likely they are to exhibit prejudice. According to Stephan and Stephan (2000), symbolic threats target to the values, norms, morals, or identity of the in-group, whereas realistic threats are associated with political and economic power and physical well-being. Realistic threats may include concerns regarding material goods such as jobs and housing. Threat perceptions vary in relation to inter-individual difference variables (such as personality characteristics and/or personal ideologies). Numerous studies have confirmed these hypotheses (Stephan, Diaz-Loving, and Duran 2000; Stephan and Renfro 2002; Oswald 2005; Riek, Mania, and Gaertner 2006; González et al. 2008). In the German public debate, Muslims and Islam are frequently contextualized as symbolic and realistic threats (Schiffer 2005; Hafez 2007; Bielefeldt 2010; Kluge 2010; Foroutan 2012). In this study, I propose that the revised ITT is an appropriate framework for predicting conspiracy stereotypes as an outcome of threats and antecedents (in-group identification, intergroup conflict, and ambiguity intolerance). Specifically, I propose testing whether intergroup threats mediate the relationship between the different antecedents and Islamophobic conspiracy stereotypes.

This study therefore contributes to research on the revised ITT by adding conspiracy stereotypes as an additional intergroup outcome. Moreover, the relationship between threat perception and inter-individual difference variables has yet to be fully explored, with Stephan, Renfro and Davis (2009) pointing to the importance of inter-individual differences in threat perception and asking whether people “with certain types of personality characteristics [are] more likely to perceive that they are threatened by out-groups?” (Stephan et al. 2009, 69). In turn, I propose to test ambiguity intolerance as an antecedent to threat and a distal factor to conspiracy stereotypes. Based on previous research (Abalakina-Paap et al. 1999; Wagner-Egger and Bangerter 2007) and theoretical assumptions (Frenkel-Brunswik 1949; Budner 1962; Morris 2000), I hypothesize that ambiguity intolerance is positively related to threat perceptions and conspiracy stereotypes.

### 1. Social Psychological Research on Conspiracy Theories

Despite their increasing prevalence in popular culture, public debate, and politics (Goertzel 1994; Swami et al. 2011), conspiracy theories are still largely neglected by scientific research (Anton 2011). Since 9/11, however, the growing popularity of conspiracy theories has been matched by an increase in social psychological research into them (Swami et al. 2011).

Conspiracy theories can be defined as explanatory frameworks through which (real or fictitious) historical or contemporary events and processes are interpreted as the results of secretive actions conducted by multiple individuals or members of a social category (Moscovici 1987; Anton 2011).

However, there are differences with regard to the group to which the conspiracy is attributed. Campion-Vincent (2005) identifies at least two subcategories of conspiracy theory: system conspiracy theories and minority conspiracy theories. According to Moscovici (1987), minorities are prone to being considered collective conspirators, since the minority, by its very existence, can be perceived as a threat and capable of plotting against the established order and way of life of the majority. The anti-Semitic conspiracy theories of the Middle Ages are classic examples of conspiracy theories involving minorities. System conspiracy, on the other hand,

is a relatively new phenomenon (Campion-Vincent 2005) (first encountered around the time of the French Revolution) associated with powerful elite groups, such as international corporations, secret services, governments, or lobby groups, which are said to secretly seek greater power and dominance, whether on a local or global scale. Wagner-Egger and Bangerter (2007) demonstrate that the two categories differ in their relationship to commonly tested psychological correlates. While both relate to fear and mistrust in existing social institutions and authorities, minority conspiracies are additionally predicted by political conservatism and discomfort with ambiguity (“need for closure”). This is in line with Webster and Kruglanski’s finding of a relationship between conspiracy theories and a “need for cognitive closure” (1994). Abalakina-Paap et al. (1999) find that ambiguity intolerance (Frenkel-Brunswik 1948; Budner 1962), a closely related concept to discomfort with ambiguity, is significantly associated with conspiracy theories, political conservatism, and prejudice. Furthermore, ambiguity intolerance is positively correlated with threat appraisal (Bardi, Guerra, and Ramdeny 2009). Political orientation and ambiguity intolerance were therefore included as predictors of threat and conspiracy theories in this study.

Conspiracy theories operate with intergroup categorizations: the in-group (i.e., the believers of the conspiracy theory) is confronted with an outgroup that is construed as a collective enemy secretly planning and acting to harm the in-group (Mashuri and Zaduqisti 2013). The supposedly conspiring outgroup is perceived as a “collective agent” and attributed collective intentions as a “dangerous, potent and deceptive enemy” (Kofta and Sedek 2005, 42; Kofta 1995). On the basis of extensive research on anti-Semitic prejudice and conspiracy theories, Kofta and Sedek develop a conspiracy stereotype, which they define as (2005, 42):

A causal, holistic theory of an outgroup functioning, ascribing to its members: (1) a collective goal – a permanent, obsessive striving for power and dominance over other groups in general (and the observer’s ingroup in particular); (2) collective behavior – a secret way of doing (e.g., engagement in plots, deception, subversive activities, acting in disguise), and (3) a high degree of group egoism and solidarity (high supportiveness for ingroupers combined with complete disregard for outgroupers’ well-being).

### 1.1. In-group Identification

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner 1986) proposes that individuals tend to achieve or improve positive social identity by comparison to relevant outgroups. If the evaluation of the in-group is favorable, the comparison can lead to a strengthening of social identity. However, if the comparison results in a negative evaluation of the in-group, one possible mechanism to re-establish a positive evaluation of the in-group is through derogatory views of the outgroup. Such a mechanism can be activated if, for example, the outgroup is perceived as a threat to the in-group due to a history of intergroup conflict.

Numerous studies provide empirical evidence for this phenomenon, showing that individuals with high levels of in-group identification are more likely to possess negative views of the outgroup and higher threat perceptions (Corenblum and Stephan 2001; Stephan et al. 2002; Riek, Mania, and Gaertner 2006; Renfro et al. 2006; González et al. 2008). The more individuals identify with their in-group, the more likely they are to be concerned with its interests and the more sensitively they are liable to react to possible threats (Branscombe et al. 1999; Brown 2000). In their study in the Netherlands, Gonzales et al. (2008) demonstrate that symbolic (but not realistic) threats, mediate between (ethnic) in-group identification and anti-Muslim prejudice. This finding is consistent with the meta-analysis by Riek et al. (2006), in which strong in-group identification is primarily related to symbolic threats.

In their study on anti-Western conspiracy stereotypes in Malaysia, Mashuri, and Zaduqisti (2013) show that higher (religious) in-group identification is associated with increased belief in conspiracy stereotypes and that anti-Western outgroup derogation mediates the relationship between in-group identification and conspiracy stereotypes. Furthermore, their study indicates that symbolic threats moderate the mediation of in-group identification and conspiracy stereotypes via outgroup derogation. In a subsequent study, Mashuri and Zaduqisti (2014) demonstrate that in-group identification interacts with intergroup mistrust to predict conspiracy stereotypes via perceived competitive victimhood (Noor et al. 2008).

Based on these observations, I expect that in-group identification will directly affect conspiracy stereotypes and that symbolic threats will mediate between in-group identification and Islamophobic conspiracy stereotypes.

### 1.2. Clash of Civilizations

The original version of the ITT (Stephan and Stephan 2000) suggests that a history of conflict (and hence the perception of intergroup conflict) can have an amplifying effect on intergroup threat perceptions. Several studies provide empirical support for intergroup conflict as an antecedent of threat and subsequently of prejudice (Corenblum and Stephan 2001; Stephan, Stephan, and Gudykunst 1999; Stephan, Diaz-Loving, and Duran 2000).

In the context of intergroup threat and Islamophobic attitudes after September 11, 2001, it seems reasonable to consider intergroup conflict as an additional antecedent of threat. Since the terrorist attacks in 2001, Islam and Muslims are frequently portrayed and perceived as a potential threat to the West in the media, public debate, and government policy (Schiffer 2005; Hafez 2006). One of the most popular framings of this intergroup conflict between the West and the Islamic world, is the “clash of civilizations” theory, first postulated by Bernard Lewis (1990) and later modified and popularized by Huntington (1993). The essence of this theory is, as Huntington puts it himself, that after the Cold War, the “velvet curtain of culture” has replaced the “iron curtain of ideology.” In other words, according to Huntington, inter-civilizational conflicts are no longer ideological, geopolitical, or economic, but rather caused and maintained by cultural factors (Rizvi 2011).

The clash of civilizations thesis has been criticized for its essentialist and ahistorical view of civilizations, in which different civilizations, or rather world religions, are assumed to be the major driving force behind social identity, despite increasing support for the simultaneous relevance of multiple social categorizations (Crisp and Hewstone 2007). The thesis was also criticized for constructing civilizations as monolithic and homogenous entities, with an unchangeable core essence shared and valued by its adherents (Casanova 2011). Additionally, empirical studies were unable to confirm the posited prolif-

eration of inter-civilizational conflicts on a global scale (Russett, Oneal, and Cox 2000; Chiozza 2002; Tusicisny 2004).

On an individual psychological level, little research is available on the effects of the clash-of-civilizations narrative (Sidanius et al. 2015). It has been tested as a predictor of various intergroup outcomes, such as intergroup bias and support for different types of violence (Mostafa and Mohaned 2007; Sidanius et al. 2004; Sidanius et al. 2015), as well as threat perceptions (Stephan et al. 2009), but not yet as a predictor of conspiracy stereotypes.

In the German context, analyses of media coverage, public debate, and policy indicate that Islam and Muslims are frequently narrated as the essential and significant alien out-group in comparison to what is depicted as the modern, democratic, and tolerant in-group (Bielefeldt 2010; Kluge 2010; de Nève 2013). In a representative study on attitudes towards religions, 51 percent considered Islam as a threat, and 80 percent perceived a clash of civilizations between Islam and the West (Pollack and Müller 2013).

Another study shows that this relationship is especially strong among participants with strong in-group identification (Foroutan et al. 2014). A similar relationship between in-group identification and perceiving a clash-of-civilizations intergroup conflict was found by Sidanius et al. (2004) in their study on Arab attributions for the intergroup conflict between the West and the Islamic world. Their results indicate that the participants (Christian Lebanese) who showed higher in-group identification were more likely to attribute the 9/11 attacks to a clash-of-civilizations conflict. In turn, respondents with lower in-group identification attributed the attacks more to an anti-dominance struggle.

With regard to Islamophobic conspiracy stereotypes, analysis of the Islamophobic conspiracy theories on relevant websites indicates that the elements and figures of an intergroup conflict along the lines of a clash of civilizations are frequently used to support the idea of an ongoing secret Islamization of Germany (Benz 2011; Schiffer and Wagner 2011; Shomann 2014).

On the basis of these findings, I expect that stronger endorsement of a clash-of-civilizations type of intergroup conflict will be significantly associated with in-group identification. Because the clash narrative is an explanatory framework that posits intergroup value-differences as the root of the conflict and not, for instance, economical or geopolitical reasons, I expect it to be primarily related to symbolic threat perceptions. Therefore, I assume that endorsement of a clash-of-civilizations intergroup conflict will predict conspiracy theories directly as well as indirectly via symbolic threat.

### 1.3. Ambiguity Intolerance

The concept of ambiguity intolerance was established by Frenkel-Brunswik (1949), whose works were closely related to the works on the authoritarian character (Adorno et al. 1950). Frenkel-Brunswik defines ambiguity intolerance as the “tendency to resort to black-white solutions, to arrive at premature closure as to valuative aspects, often at the neglect of reality, and to seek for unqualified and unambiguous overall acceptance and rejection of other people” (1949, 115). Since Frenkel-Brunswik’s first definition of the concept, it has undergone several reformulations, and differing measurement scales have been developed (Furnham and Marks 2013). One of the most commonly used scales for assessing ambiguity intolerance was developed by Budner (1962). Budner defines ambiguity intolerance as “the tendency to perceive ambiguous situations as sources of threat” (Budner 1962, 29) whereas tolerance for ambiguity is defined as “the tendency to perceive ambiguous situations as desirable” (ibid.). According to Budner, situations are ambiguous if they are complex, ambivalent, insoluble, and/or new. In turn, individuals with a high ambiguity intolerance tend to show aversive reactions, such as discomfort, stress, delay, avoidance, and so on when confronted with ambiguous situations or information (Budner 1962; Furnham and Marks 2013). Accordingly, I believe ambiguity intolerance to be a valuable concept for understanding inter-individual differences in reactions towards Islam and Muslims among non-Muslim Germans. Individuals with high levels of ambiguity intolerance could perceive the presence of Islam and Muslims and their increasing visibility in German society as ambiguous, as it challenges traditional understandings of the in-group and requires *new* and *more complex* narratives of the in-group, eventually leading to

threat perceptions. As Muslims are frequently portrayed in public debate and the media as a significant outgroup and possible threat, individuals with high ambiguity intolerance could tend towards an *overall rejection* of Islam and Muslims by *generalizing* negative aspects of individual behavior onto the whole outgroup. As Kofta and Sedek (2005, 42) note, this generalization process is in line with research showing that people interpret intergroup relations similarly to interpersonal relations (Alexander, Brewer, and Hermann 1999) by perceiving social categories not as static entities but as dynamic and “collective agents” (Morris 2000), which, when attributed with collective intentions of a malicious and deceptive nature, constitute a conspiracy stereotype.

Several studies show that ambiguity intolerance is positively related to prejudice and authoritarian character (Adorno et al. 1950; Sidanius 1978; Watson and Morris 2005), and threat appraisal (Bardi, Guerra, and Ramdeny 2009). Furthermore, ambiguity intolerance and the closely related concept of discomfort for ambiguity have been linked to belief in conspiracy theories (Webster and Kruglanski 1994; Abalakina-Paak et al. 1999, Wagner-Egger and Bangerter 2007). Thus, I expect higher ambiguity intolerance to be associated with higher threat perceptions and a stronger belief in conspiracy stereotypes. Furthermore, I expect threats to mediate between ambiguity intolerance and Islamophobic conspiracy stereotypes.

#### 1.4. Hypotheses

H1: Political orientation towards the right will be significantly and positively associated with conspiracy stereotypes.

H2: Reported in-group identification and the belief in clash of civilizations will be positively significantly related to each other.

H3: In-group identification will have significant positive direct and indirect effect (the latter via symbolic threats) on conspiracy stereotypes.

H4: The belief in clash of civilizations will have a significant positive direct and indirect effect (the latter via symbolic threats) on conspiracy stereotypes.

H5: Ambiguity intolerance will have a direct and indirect effect (the latter via threats) on conspiracy stereotypes.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Data acquisition was conducted via an online survey (Unipark) advertised through channels including university email lists, university bulletin boards, and social media. The survey announcement and starting page specified that participants must be German residents and that participation was voluntary and anonymous. The possibility of winning a prize was offered as an incentive (iPod, iPhone, and iPad). The data collection took place between June and August 2014. After removing all non-native and all Muslim respondents, as well as all respondents with any missing values, a total of  $N = 355$  German-resident, non-Muslim participants completed the survey without missing values. In the final sample, 203 participants were female (57.2 percent), and 152 male (42.8 percent). The ages of the participants ranged from 18 to 36 years ( $M = 25.43$ ,  $SD = 4.12$ ).<sup>2</sup>

### 2.2. Measures

The survey consisted of a demographic section (age, gender, education, migration background, political orientation, and religion) and a section including the following measurement instruments (predictors): in-group identification, clash of civilizations, and ambiguity intolerance. Realistic and symbolic threats were included as mediators. Anti-Islamic conspiracy stereotypes were measured as a dependent variable and were included after the previously mentioned survey sections.

#### 2.2.1. Predictor Variables

Identification with the (national) in-group was measured, as in similar previous studies (Verkuyten 2005), using three items

<sup>2</sup> This paper presents the results of a multipart online survey. The results of this paper are based on the second part of the survey. All participants of this study completed survey number one prior to the

survey of this study. The first survey included the following measures: Social Dominance Orientation (Sidanius and Pratto 1999), intergroup threats, anti-Muslim prejudice and anti-Islamic sentiment.

Demographic informations of the participants are taken from the first part of the survey. All other measures used in this study were part of the second part of the survey.

from the collective self-esteem scale (Luhtanen and Crocker 1992): “My German identity is an important part of myself”; “Being German is a very important part of how I see myself”; and “I am proud to be a German”). All items were measured on a five-point scale ranging from (1) “strongly disagree” to (5) “strongly agree.” Higher scores indicate stronger in-group identification. Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  for the three-item scale is .73.

*Tolerance of ambiguity* was assessed using six items from the scale developed by Budner (1962). Examples include: “What we are used to is always preferable to what is unfamiliar”; and “The sooner we all acquire similar values and ideals, the better.” All items were measured on a five-point scale ranging from (1) “strongly disagree” to (5) “strongly agree.” Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  for the six-item scale is .72.

*Clash-of-civilizations* intergroup conflict was assessed by four items, adapted for the German context from the study by Sidanius et al. (2004). They capture (a) the endorsement of the existence of a currently ongoing clash of civilizations, in general, and (b) the perception of a clash of cultures between Islam (essentialized and monolithic) and the West in particular. The items included “We are currently facing a ‘clash of civilizations’”; “The Islamic culture is inherently incompatible with modernity”; “Islam is not compatible with democracy and human rights”; and “Islam has to modernize itself, otherwise there can be no peaceful coexistence.” Pre-test interviews were conducted to assess the reliability and validity of the construct, and the assessment showed overall good values.<sup>3</sup> The participants responded on a four-point scale ranging from (1) “strongly disagree” to (4) “strongly agree.” Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  for the four-item scale is .84.

### 2.2.2. Threats

Symbolic and realistic threats were adapted from Stephan et al. (1999, 2000, 2002). All threats were measured on a five-point scale ranging from (1) “strongly disagree” to (5) “strongly agree.”

*Realistic threats* were measured using five items addressing economic and political threats from Islam and Muslims

(including “The welfare system in Germany is increasingly burdened by the presence of Muslims”; “The Muslims in Germany threaten our economic wealth”; and “Islam threatens security in Germany”). Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  for the scale is .93.

*Symbolic threats* were measured using seven items, including: “I am worried that ...” (a) “... German norms and values are threatened by the presence of Muslims”; (b) “... our rights and freedom are threatened by the presence of Muslims”; and (c) “... German identity is threatened by the large numbers of Muslims in Germany.” Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  for the scale is .95.

### 2.2.3. Dependent Variable

*Islamophobic conspiracy stereotypes* were constructed using formulations similar to those of Kofta and Sedek (2005) and were measured using four items: “Muslims are secretly plotting to achieve an Islamization of Germany”; “Actually, Muslims are striving to establish sharia in Germany”; “Islam is conspiring against the West”; and “Muslims are planning to Islamize the West step by step.” on a five-point scale ranging from (1) “definitely false” to (5) “definitely true.” Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  for the scale is .95.

### 2.3. Analysis

The aim of this study is to test the revised integrated threat theory (ITT; Stephan and Renfro 2002) for explaining Islamophobic conspiracy stereotypes. The results will be presented in four sections. First, descriptive results for the measured scales (additive) will be presented. Second, the results for the confirmatory factor analyses, which assess the fit of the observed variables to their respective latent constructs, will be given. Third, the findings regarding the relationships between the different constructs and model fit of the structural model will be shown. Fourth, the results of the mediation analysis will conclude. Following the procedure of Gonzales et al. (2008), the measurement and structural model were fitted by maximum likelihood, assuming multivariate normality using Amos (Version 22). Any surveys with missing values were removed from the sample. The resulting final sample ( $N = 355$ ) included no missing values.

<sup>3</sup> See the results section for detailed information.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Descriptive Results

The mean scores, standard deviations, and intercorrelations among all the variables are shown in Table 1. Overall, the mean scores for all scales were below their respective neutral mean values. The mean scores varied slightly by gender, with male participants showing significantly higher mean scores than female participants for both threats and ambiguity intolerance. When age was used as a control variable in the statistical analysis, no significant difference was found for any variable. Overall, symbolic threats showed higher mean values than realistic threats. Higher education is sig-

nificantly and negatively related to both threats and conspiracy stereotypes. As expected (H1), political orientation towards the right (1 = left / 5 = right) is positively related to conspiracy stereotypes ( $r = .35, p < .01$ ) and to symbolic ( $r = .35, p < .01$ ) and realistic threats ( $r = .34, p < .01$ ). Furthermore, in line with H2, clash of civilizations was significantly related to in-group identification ( $r = .49, p < .01$ ).

Overall, the mean scores for threat perceptions and belief in conspiracy theories suggest that the sample subjects show a low level of threat perception and belief in conspiracy stereotypes.

**Table 1: Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations among the variables (N= 355)**

	<i>M</i>	<i>(SD)</i>	<i>(Scale)</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. In-group identification	2.48	0.93	(1-5)	-						
2. Clash of Civilizations	2.03	0.73	(1-4)	.49**	-					
3. Ambiguity Intolerance	2.00	0.60	(1-5)	.40**	.32**	-				
4. Political Orientation	2.14	0.75	(1-5)	.49**	.35**	.22**	-			
5. Education	5.35	1.29	(1-8)	-.09	-.14**	-.23**	-.06	-		
6. Symbolic Threats	1.52	0.82	(1-5)	.55**	.67**	.49**	.35**	-.23**	-	
7. Realistic Threats	1.34	0.68	(1-5)	.49**	.55**	.53**	.34**	-.28**	.79**	-
8. Conspiracy Stereotype	1.67	0.97	(1-5)	.52**	.67**	.44**	.35**	-.27**	.77**	.66**

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ .

All the measures show significant intercorrelation in the expected direction (Table 1). High intercorrelations can indicate multicollinearity. Variance inflation factor (VIF) analyses yields 3.20 as the highest VIF value. According to Myers (1990), VIF values smaller than 10 indicate that there is no serious problem with regard to multicollinearity.

#### 3.2. Measurement Model

A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed including all the proposed constructs (with Amos 22.0), to assess the construct validity<sup>4</sup> of the individual variables and model fit indices for the proposed measurement model.<sup>5</sup> The convergent validity and discriminant validity

4 The validity of the clash-of-civilizations scale, which was adapted and modified for this study, was analyzed during the CFA analysis. Acceptable discriminant validity is indicated by factor correlations  $< .80$  (Brown 2006) and convergent validity by factor loading values  $> .60$  (Garson 2010). The results show good discriminant validity (factor correlations ranging between .50 and .76) and good convergent validity (standardized regression weights for the factor loadings ranging between .62 and .84,  $p < .001$ ).

5 The results of an initial CFA revealed that the In-group Identification scale (Luhtanen and Crocker 1992) and Tolerance of Ambiguity scale (Budner

1962) did not fit the data well. Therefore, a series of confirmatory factor analyses (AMOS) were conducted to shorten the scales.

The full Tolerance of Ambiguity scale, consisting of sixteen items, did not fit the data well,  $\chi^2 (584) = 1313.556, p < .01$  (CFI = .93, SRMR = .05, RMSEA = .05). The items were analyzed for their factor score to uniqueness ratio, and the six items with the highest ratio were selected. The final six-item scale (two items for each of the three subscales) fits the data well,  $\chi^2 (289) = 753.373, p < .01$  (CFI = .97, SRMR = .04, RMSEA = .05). The chi-square difference test was significant, indicating that the short scale is a

better fit to the data,  $\chi^2_{diff} (295) = 699.429, p < .001$ . The full In-group Identification scale, consisting of five items, did not fit the data well,  $\chi^2 (289) = 693.587, p < .01$  (CFI = .96, SRMR = .04, RMSEA = .06). The items were analyzed for their factor score to uniqueness ratio, and the three items with the highest ratio were selected. The final three-item scale fits the data well,  $\chi^2 (241) = 571.405, p < .01$  (CFI = .97, SRMR = .04, RMSEA = .05). The chi-square difference test was significant, indicating that the short scale is a better fit to the data,  $\chi^2_{diff} (48) = 122.182, p < .001$ .

(CFA) of the constructs are verified when the results indicate a good model fit (Brown 2006). Following the suggestions of Hu and Bentler (1999), the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) and the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMS) were employed as absolute fit indices, and the Comparative Fit Index (CFI) was employed as a comparative fit index. Conservatively speaking, a good fit of the data is indicated by an RMSEA value of less than 0.05, an SRMSR value of less than 0.08, and CFI values of 0.95 or higher (Hu and Bentler 1999). Table 2 shows that the CFA with a six-factor oblique solution, in which all constructs were allowed to correlate with each other, showed an acceptable absolute and comparative fit to the data. The six-factor oblique model had a significantly better fit to the data than the six-factor orthogonal model, with independent constructs [ $\chi^2_{diff. (9)} = 434.939, p < .001$ ] or the one-factor model [ $\chi^2_{diff. (15)} = 1697.939, p < .001$ ].

**Table 2: Comparison of Fit Indices of the First Model (Six-Factor Oblique), the Second Model (Six-Factor Orthogonal), and the Third Model (One Factor)**

Models	Fit Indices				
	$\chi^2$	df	RMSEA	SRMR	CFI
Six-factor oblique	763.487	362	.050	.044	.96
Six-factor orthogonal	1.198.426	371	.070	.070	.91
One factor	2.461.282	377	.111	.248	.78

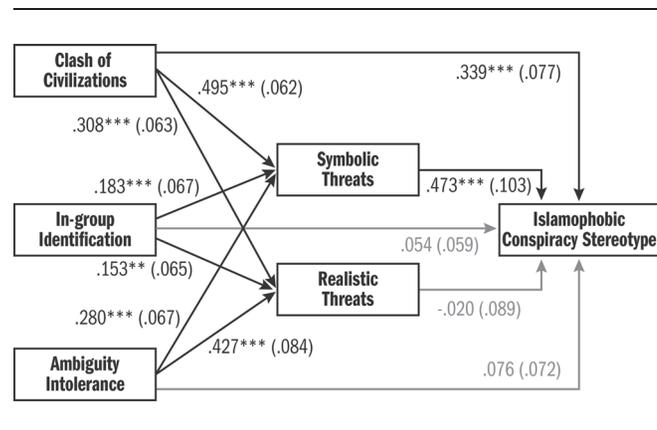
In order to improve the model fit indices for the final six-factor oblique model, error items of the same latent constructs, but not between items measuring different latent constructs, were allowed to covary, resulting in the respecification of nine parameters in total: one residual covariance for symbolic threats; three residual covariances for realistic threats and three for ambiguity intolerance; one residual covariance for in-group identification and one for conspiracy stereotypes. The model  $\chi^2$  of 565,225 indicates a lack of an absolute fit ( $p < .001$ ), which is not uncommon for larger sample sizes. However, all the other fit measures indicate that the model has a good model fit:  $\chi^2/df = 1.64$ ; CFI = 97; SRMR = .044, and RMSEA = .041 and 90% CI = .035 – .047. The z-statistics obtained for all the factor load-

ings were statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ), and the standardized factor loadings were between .40 and .95.

**3.3. Structural Model**

The proposed structural model shows a good fit to the data ( $\chi^2 = 622.427; p < .001; df = 379; \chi^2/df = 1.64; CFI = 97; SRMR = .044$  and  $RMSEA = .043$  with 90% CI = .037 – .049). Figure 1 shows the results of a saturated model, in which all pathways, direct as well as indirect, were estimated simultaneously. Education was entered as a control variable. The figure depicts the estimated standardized coefficients of the direct pathways. As expected, in-group identification had a significant effect on symbolic threats, and a smaller, but also significant effect on realistic threats (H3). However, unexpectedly, in-group identification had no significant direct effect on conspiracy stereotypes (H3). As hypothesized, clash of civilizations had a significant positive effect on both types of threats and on conspiracy stereotypes (H4).

**Figure 1: Path diagram model with estimated standardized coefficients with bootstrap standard errors in parentheses**



\*p < .05, \*\*p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001.  
 Note: Non-significant paths are marked grey.

Thus, as predicted, the endorsement of the existence of a clash of civilizations was associated with higher levels of threat perceptions and conspiracy stereotypes. Ambiguity intolerance also showed positive significant effects on both types of threat, as expected (H5). However, no significant effect on the dependent variable was found (H5).

To assess the mediating role of the threats on the relationships between the three predictor variables and the dependent variable, the total effects of the predictors were further decomposed into direct and indirect effects. Table 3 shows that for clash of civilizations, the direct and indirect pathways

are significant, indicating partial mediation through symbolic threat. Partial mediation through symbolic threat is also suggested for education. The indirect pathways of in-group identification and ambiguity intolerance through symbolic threat are significant, thus suggesting full mediation.

**Table 3: Decomposition of unstandardized and standardized direct and indirect effects on conspiracy stereotypes, with bootstrap standard errors in parentheses**

	Total Effects		Direct Effects		Indirect Effects	
	Unstandardized	Standardized	Unstandardized	Standardized	Unstandardized	Standardized
Education	-.111 (.033)	-.146 (.043)	-.081 (.027)	-.106 (.035)	-.030 (.016)	-.040 (.021)
In-group Identification	.150 (.078)	.138 (.070)	.059 (.065)	.054 (.059)	.091 (.040)	.083 (.036)
Clash of Civilizations	.994 (.143)	.567 (.067)	.594 (.146)	.339 (.077)	.400 (.093)	.228 (.050)
Ambiguity Intolerance	.490 (.195)	.200 (.070)	.186 (.188)	.076 (.072)	.304 (.115)	.124 (.045)
Symbolic Threats	.559 (.118)	.473 (.103)	.559 (.137)	.473 (.103)		
Realistic Threats	-.030 (.137)	-.020 (.089)	-.030 (.118)	-.020 (.089)		

The explained variance of endogenous variables is indicated by the squared multiple correlations value. The path model of the full model accounts for 71 percent [.71, 95% CI (0.628, 0.768)  $p = .003$ ] of the variance in Islamophobic conspiracy stereotypes.

#### 4. Discussion

The main objectives of this study were threefold: First, to test the revised integrated threat theory as an analytical framework for predicting belief in Islamophobic conspiracy stereotypes. Second, following the suggestions of Stephan et al. (2009), to test whether the personality characteristic ambiguity intolerance (Frenkel-Brunswik 1949; Budner 1962) had an influence on threat perception and/or conspiracy stereotypes. Third, to test the clash-of-civilizations intergroup conflict as an additional antecedent to threats and conspiracy stereotypes. It was proposed that symbolic threats will mediate between the relevant antecedents (in-group identification, clash-of-civilizations intergroup conflict and ambiguity intolerance) and Islamophobic conspiracy stereotypes.

On the basis of previous findings (Wagner-Egger and Bangerter 2007; Abalakina-Paak et al. 1999), I predicted ambiguity intolerance and right-leaning political orientation to

be predictors of belief in conspiracy theories. The results of this study confirm that political conservatism is statistically related to Islamophobic conspiracy stereotypes. Furthermore, on the basis of theoretical assumptions (Budner 1962) and previous empirical findings (Bardi et al. 2009), I expected a direct effect of ambiguity intolerance on threat perceptions. The results suggest no direct effect of ambiguity intolerance on conspiracy stereotypes. As expected, ambiguity intolerance was directly related to both types of threat perception and, via symbolic threat, to conspiracy stereotypes. This confirms the role of ambiguity intolerance in explaining conspiracy theories as an intergroup outcome. As expected, individuals with high ambiguity intolerance appear to be more open to intergroup threat perceptions and, via symbolic threat, to believing that Islam and Muslims represent a collective enemy with a secret plan to harm the in-group. Therefore, this study supports considering personality characteristics in explaining the inter-individual differences in threat perception and subsequently, the different intergroup outcome variables for conspiracy stereotypes, as suggested by Stephan et al. (2009).

Furthermore, following the findings of Mashuri and Zadaquisti (2013, 2014), in-group identification (ethnic) was

expected to be statistically related to conspiracy stereotypes. Building on previous research (Riek et al. 2006), in-group identification was further expected to relate primarily to symbolic threat. The results of the structural equation model confirm that in-group identification is significantly and primarily related to symbolic threats. However, no direct effect on conspiracy stereotypes was found. The reason for this may be that religious in-group identification (as described by Mashuri and Zadaquisti 2013; 2014) has been found to be related to threat perceptions and different intergroup outcomes (Verkuyten 2007) more often than to national or ethnic in-group identification (for a general overview, see Ashmore, Wilder, and Jussim 2001). Moreover, in-group identification had a significant indirect effect on conspiracy stereotypes via symbolic threats, thus confirming the assumptions of the revised ITT, which proposes in-group identification as antecedent of intergroup threat.

Moreover, the perception of an intergroup conflict involving a clash of civilizations was proposed as an additional antecedent to threats and conspiracy stereotypes. Earlier studies employing a clash-of-civilizations perspective as an explanatory framework for intergroup bias and support for violence showed that the perception of an intergroup conflict rooted in a clash of values is significantly related to negative intergroup outcomes (Kinder and Sears 1981; Lewis 1990; Huntington 1993; Sidanius et al. 2004). The results of this study contribute to a better understanding of this research by adding conspiracy stereotypes as a further consequence of a value-clash narrative, as well as by demonstrating that the clash narrative is significantly related to higher levels of threat perceptions and, via symbolic threats, significantly related to conspiracy stereotypes. As expected, the variable clash of civilizations was strongly related to symbolic threats. However, it also showed a significant yet weaker effect on realistic threats. Therefore, considering both types of threats simultaneously, as suggested by the integrated threat theory, is implemented in this study by examining the clash-narrative as a possible antecedent of threat.

In agreement with previous studies (Sidanius et al. 2004; Sidanius et al. 2015), the clash perspective was found to be significantly associated with in-group identification. The

results suggest that individuals with higher levels of in-group identification and a right-leaning political orientation are more prone to believe in Islamophobic conspiracy stereotypes. On the basis of previous findings suggesting a semantic similarity of Islamophobic conspiracy theories to clash-of-civilizations attributions (Benz 2011; Shomann 2014), I expected clash of civilizations to have a direct effect and an indirect effect (via threat) on conspiracy stereotypes. The results confirm both the direct effect and an indirect effect via symbolic threat, suggesting partial mediation.

Finally, the findings indicate that lower education is significantly and positively related to threats and conspiracy stereotypes. The negative effect of participants having a higher level of education still holds after controlling for mediation via threat, thus suggesting partial mediation. Belief in Islamophobic conspiracy stereotypes seems to decrease as the level of the participants' education increases.

Overall, the findings confirm the expectation that belief in conspiracy theories as an intergroup outcome is directly related to symbolic threat perceptions and the perception of a conflict involving a clash of civilization. Additionally, symbolic threat mediates between in-group identification, the perception of an intergroup conflict involving a clash of civilizations, ambiguity intolerance, education, and conspiracy stereotypes. In sum, the full model accounted for 68 percent of the total variance found in the Islamophobic conspiracy stereotypes. The overall results confirm that the revised ITT is appropriate for explaining belief in conspiracy theories.

#### **5. Limitations and Future Research**

Certain limitations of this study should be addressed in any future research. First, the relatively small sample consisted mainly of students, so the results are not representative of German society as a whole. Future studies could test the relationships in a more representative study. Another limitation is that data acquisition was conducted via an online survey, which is a relatively new method in the field of scientific research. The obvious advantage of online surveys is to reach respondents more quickly and cost-effectively than is possible using traditional methods.

Online surveys also have been shown to decrease social desirability, due to their anonymity (Kreuter, Presser, and Tourangeau 2009). On the other hand, online surveys must be kept very brief in order to ensure a high response rate (for an introduction to the online survey method and a discussion, see Dillman, Smyth, and Christian 2008). Finally, the high percentage of explained variance in the dependent variables (68 percent) may be inflated by the common method variance of the survey procedure.

Based on the findings of this study, future research could expand the scope of the antecedents to threats and different intergroup outcomes by assessing the effect of further potential personality characteristics (Stephan et al. 2009). Moreover, alternative explanatory frameworks for intergroup conflict, such as the counter-dominance perspective (Mostafa and Al-Hamdi 2007; Sidanius et al. 2004) and generalized personal ideologies (for example, the conspiracy mentality from Imhoff and Bruder 2014) could also be analyzed in the context of threats and conspiracy theories involving high-power outgroups (for example, in the case of system conspiracy).

Additionally, Islamophobic conspiracy stereotypes could be assessed with a broader scope than was done in this analysis (four items only). Finally, future studies should explore the relationships between Islamophobic conspiracy stereotypes, anti-Islamic and anti-Muslim prejudices, and Islamophobic behavioral intentions.

## 6. Conclusion

To sum up, the findings indicate that participants have relatively low adherence to Islamophobic conspiracy

stereotypes, which is an encouraging finding. Nevertheless, approximately 9 percent of the respondents indicated that they were not certain that an Islamophobic conspiracy did not exist and approximately another 8 percent indicated that they believed in an Islamophobic conspiracy to some degree. While this is certainly not an alarming amount, we must keep in mind that the sample in this study consisted mainly of well-educated respondents and does not necessarily reflect the views of the general population. Future studies with a more diverse sample may provide different results.

The results imply some possible practical actions to reduce intergroup tensions. In the context of integrating Muslims and Islam into German society, the results suggest that a predominantly culturalistic perspective on intergroup relations with essentializing and monolithic social categorizations (for example, “culture clash between the West and Islam”) in conjunction with a low tolerance for ambiguity (“*The sooner we all acquire similar values and ideals, the better*”) and strong in-group identification (“I am proud to be a German”) explained much of the variance in intergroup threat perceptions as well as in adherence to Islamophobic conspiracy stereotypes. In light of these results, public policy and public debate on the subject would be well advised to avoid the pitfalls of reductionist, black-and-white explanations of intergroup relations and should instead support more inclusive in-group narratives (Muslim and German), with an emphasis on the positive aspects of cultural diversity in an immigration country. This should help mitigate intergroup conflict perceptions and subsequently, support the integration of Muslims and Islam in Germany.

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