

Skepticism in the Arab World

The Base of Conspiracies

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WHAT IS CALLED “SKEPTICISM” or “casting doubt” is one of the most prevalent forms of conspiracy-centered thinking in the Arab world. It has come to be a widely used means of interpreting events in its own right, and is employed in dealing with all sorts of affairs, whether major or minor, and could be said to form a holistic worldview penetrating deeply into Arab public consciousness.

Skepticism as employed in Arab public discourse hints at hidden conspiracies lurking behind the course of events, though without resolving the ambiguity of such claims or offering better explanations. Such an approach is often based on a logic and culture of suspicion and trepidation towards the “other,” who is different in ideology and civilization. Thus it is usually based on a black-and-white worldview recognizing only two opposing sets of values, and is controlled by a unifying, integrationist mentality unable to break down either the self or the “other” and acknowledge of the contradictions inherent to each. In reality, of course, neither side is monolithic and homogeneous, as conspiracy theorists would have it.

Thus, those following this model rely on several mechanisms of disguise so as not to shock their readers from the first moment – or else they say what the reader is expecting to hear, so there is no need to prove the veracity of their statements. Here one can see the importance of Michel Foucault’s distinction between dogma and knowledge in analyzing such discourse. This distinction helps uncover the power that language has in penetrating the conscious and subconscious simultaneously, as dis-

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course in the end is an epistemological position, not merely words.

Thus, I do not agree with the argument that “the conspiracy-centered mentality is a way of emotional thinking.”¹ The phrase “conspiracy-centered mentality,” coined by Khaldoun Al-Naqeeb, gives the impression that this mechanism is unlikely to have a role in the ideology

and identity-based foundation of the nation and state’s conceptions. Conspiracy theories are not a product of emotion, but rather are a rational mechanism in Arab debate between different ideologies and schools of thought. It is a thoughtful strategy, as one of our contemporary writers said while calling for an alternative strategy,² and a tree always thriving in our Arab world according to another writer.³

This article seeks to offer a more detailed understanding of skepticism in Arab political mentality. First, I introduce the sources spreading skepticism in Arab political thought since the foundation of an Islamic and Arab epistemological framework in the first four centuries after the Prophet until the present, and the functions of skepticism in Arab political thought. Second, I will cover the mechanisms of skepticism, and third, its features.

Sources of skepticism in the Arab-Islamic mind

Constant apprehension towards the “other” is the womb in which conspiracy-centered skepticism developed, relying on a number of sayings that took hold in general Arab consciousness, some of which have become as sanctified as numerous Quranic verses calling for loyalty to Islam and disassociating oneself from unbelievers. Despite the centrality of these verses, holistic rules in Islam like “Be good to all people” and “Push for what is best,” avoiding prejudice, and other principles of behavior, actions and morals rejecting the idea of unqualified hostility towards the “other,” labeling hostility appropriate only at times of open conflict and war, are paramount. Some, however, have reversed this order, turning the exception into the rule by making suspicion of the “other” an immutable constant. Skepticism and suspicions about the “other” comprise the most widespread and broadly accepted interpretation of political and

1 Khaldoun Al-Naqeeb, *The Controversy of Ethnicity, Nation, and Class for the Arabs* (Beirut: Dar Al-Saqi, 1997), 177.

2 Siyar Al-Jameel, “When Will a Thoughtful Arab Strategy be Achieved?” *Al-Bayan* (UAE), August 24, 2005.

3 Abdul Hameed Al-Ansari, “Why Does the Conspiracy Tree Thrive in Our Land?” *Ash-Sharq Al-Awsat*, December 13, 2003.

ideological strife, major or minor, or of the rise and fall of nations.

Skepticism in Arab and Islamic culture can be traced back to when intra-Islamic factional conflict was developing not long after the growth of the Islamic state and the development of rhetoric. The relations between factions were based on two main principles:

1. The assertion of every faction that it belongs to the true Islam and that others are wrong, with each providing evidence from the Quran, Sunna and elsewhere to prove that their understanding of Islam was correct.
2. Every group discussing the sayings and conceptions of other groups and casting doubt upon their arguments to rebut them and assert that their adherents had all gone astray.

As a rhetorical tool, then, skepticism goes back deep into Arab-Islamic history, and it was enough to provide a scrap of evidence to prove the existence of a conspiracy, ignoring any other objective or structural reasons which could justify the emergence of differences. Generally supporting the growth of skepticism during an early stage of the Islamic state was the deeply rooted problem of the Imamate or Caliphate, which was a main point of contention within the Islamic state. As Shahrestani said in *The Book of Sects and Creeds*, “No doctrine in Islam has caused more bloodshed than the Imamate.”⁴

Thirty years after the death of the Prophet, strife broke out between those who had been his companions. The third caliph, Othman, was killed in 656 by rebels who rejected what they saw as his departure from the path of the previous two caliphates. In particular, Othman’s nepotism was criticized, particularly towards his kinsman Marwan Bin Al-Hakam, who unlike Othman had been late to convert to Islam.⁵ Then there was discord between Ali Bin Abi Talib and Muawiyah Bin Abi Safyan until Ali

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4 Shahrestani, *Kitab Al-Milal Wa Al-Nihal* (The Book of Sects and Creeds) (Beirut: Al-Maktaba Al-Asriya, 2005). Written in the 12th century, this text is generally considered to be the first scientific survey of religions in human history. All of today’s main social and hard sciences were present in Islamic heritage at the time, except for political science and sociology, which did not appear until Ibn Khaldoun in the 14th century.

5 For more details from a 12th century Sunni perspective, see Abu Bakr Bin Al-Arabi’s, *Al-Qawasim Min Al-Awasem* (Preservation from Destruction).

was killed in 661. The conflict which saw the emergence of the main Islamic factions: Sunnis, Shias, Kharijites, and Murjiites, and later on the Mutazilite faction at the beginning of the 8th century. Then these groups were divided further into what

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12th century scholar Ibn Al-Jawzi called “the 73 factions,” in reference to a saying of the Prophet, and it could even be said that some of these factions themselves split into another 73 splinter groups, each one naturally seeing itself as representing the true Islam.⁶ After that, the splintering process of ideas and beliefs continued, with every faction claiming to possess the sole truth and to deserve the Caliphate.

Many Muslim historians had to interpret these controversies and the overall fragmentation of the Islamic world, and seized upon the name of Abdullah Bin Saba, a Jewish convert to Islam who died in 658 or 659. They attributed the entire conspiracy to him, especially the killing of Othman and the corruption of the Caliphate, of which they clear Othman. From the date of Abdullah bin Saba’s death, however, it is clear that he died at least two years before Ali, which raises the obvious question of how he could have corrupted Ali, who outlived him? Even ignoring this glaring historical question, how could one man have created all these ideological, philosophical, historical, and even armed conflicts? In the course of a few years, could this single person seriously have been responsible for leading a nation astray? Imagining that he had extraordinary influence made the explanation easy, since everything that took place became part of a conspiracy concocted by a Jew who had infiltrated the Muslims and sought to lead them astray, without the Muslims having any active role or responsibility.

This is only one example of the conceptual choice that Muslims made in interpreting the divisions, conflicts and wars that the Islamic state witnessed. From the conspiracy-minded point of view, our entire history is a single conspiracy in which we are always the victims, and conspiracy theories can always explain the course of historical events. As a contemporary intellectual asked sarcastically, “When will Ibn Saba die?”⁷

Perpetual suspicion of the “other” is a distinguishing feature of Arab explanations of historical periods of decline. There are numerous events that many Muslims across the ideological spectrum take as proof of an ongoing conspiracy against Islam. For in-

6 Shahrestani, *Ibid.*

7 Shaker Al-Nabulsi, *Asilah Al-Hamqa* “The Fool’s Questions,” (Beirut: Arab Foundation for Studies and Publishing, 2005).

stance, nationalists believe that Persians and other races have not left the Arabs alone since the Persian slave Abu Luluah assassinated Umar Bin Khattab, the second caliph, in 644. This explanation is adopted without the slightest hint of shouldering responsibility for undertaking a scholarly, methodical examination rather than a superficial reading that applies absolute texts to a complicated, inherently relative human reality. Many also take the former approach when looking at the Arab-Israeli conflict.

In addition to the sources of skepticism mentioned, another important source cannot be ignored, which is exclusionist identity. Perhaps the most important characteristic of the Arab world is its need to always distinguish itself from the “other,” which from its point of view is evil and needs to be confronted by preserving Arab self-identity against outside threats, while standing up to the agents created by this malicious “other.” These conspiracy theories continued to dictate the Arab-Islamic mindset and rhetoric for long periods of time, with many ideological currents retaining them.

For example, Arab nationalist thought is extremely critical of ethnic minorities, blaming downturns in Arab history on them. The sharp dispute now taking place between Arab Sunnis and Kurds in Iraq over the constitution and federalism, for instance, is partly caused by Arab Sunni suspicion of the Kurds’ intentions and objectives. From the Arab Sunni perspective, the Kurdish minority is trying to take away Iraq’s Arab identity,⁸ and the same applies for the Shias, who from a pan-Arab Sunni point of view are more loyal to their sectarian identity than the Arab nation and collaborated with the United States against Saddam Hussein’s regime. Meanwhile, pan-Arabists have a sympathetic tone towards all the terror that took place under Saddam, and which is being waged now in the name of resistance, while criticizing non-Arabs as being undying enemies of Arab nationalism. This isolationist tendency of Arab identity is based on hostile suspicion of the “other” and its intentions, whether overt or covert.

In recent history, various Arab and Islamic ideological trends have relied upon conspiracy theories to interpret history and the present, especially in light of the Arab-Israeli conflict, then the Iraq war and the fall of the Iraqi Baathist regime in 2003.

Skepticism in ancient and modern Arab thought

There are two basic functions of the aforementioned mindset:

Pan-Arabists have a sympathetic tone towards the terror that took place under Saddam, and which is being waged now in the name of resistance.

8 Fahmy Huweidi, “Iraqi Kurds Playing with Fire,” *Ash-Sharq Al-Awsat*, March 30, 2005.

1. To justify failures, defeats and strife. This may be deemed preferable to holding those in charge accountable according to an objective analysis of the reasons behind a given failure.⁹ Whatever the ruling ideology may be, a systematic approach reveals that conspiracy theories are false, since one always bears at least a share of responsibility. An Arab nationalist scholar backs this by saying:

The only reason for the founding of the Israeli state on Arab land and the military defeats inflicted upon the Arab regimes was strategic incompetence on the part of these regimes, particularly the military leadership, not because of a so-called conspiracy promoted by pro-military coup, anti-democratic thought.

The same writer goes on to expound on the failure of Arab unity experiments, saying: “The reason for the failure to achieve Arab unity is the inability of Arab military thought to put forward a successful unifying strategy, not because of a so-called conspiracy.” The same applies for the Palestinian issue according to the writer, who says:

The loss of Palestine and formation of the Israeli entity on Arab soil goes back to the ignorance and superficiality of the Arab elites in the early 20th century, and to the fact that this elite was at the peak of strategic ignorance and ignored the most basic principles of conflict management and political science.

The author then refuses to label the defeat in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war a result of an American-Israeli conspiracy, because the physical mechanism carrying out conspiracies by nature is hidden to the victim. This is completely incompatible with the way events unfolded before June 5, 1967, where an assault was expected for months before the war started; and moreover, it was Gamal Abdel Nasser who a month before the war started announced his readiness for war with Israel and declared that his forces would be victorious.¹⁰

2. To distort opposing movements by portraying them as agents of the outside world and its perpetual conspiracy against the Arab and Islamic world. In a chaotic scene, each political current tries to make its accusations stick to its opponents, especially the reliable charge of being a foreign agent, as if a single ideological current

9 Othman Al-Othman, *Naqd Nadhariyat Al-Muaamira Fi Tafsiir Al-Hazaaim Al-Qaumiyya Wa Al-Islamiyya (Critiquing the Conspiracy Theory in Interpreting National and Islamic Defeats)*, (Damascus: Sinbad Foundation for Printing and Arts, 2003).

10 Ibid.

monopolizes patriotism. For example, we hear the Egyptian neo-liberals referred to derogatorily as “The American Party in Egypt,” questioning their reformist goals. We also read about the current leader of the Muslim Brotherhood flirting with the United States since announcing his reform initiative in 2004, which also reflects suspicion of the Muslim Brotherhood’s reformist intentions, as if the initiative had the lone objective of turning over a new page in relations with America.

Spaces where skepticism is used

The seriousness of skepticism within conspiracy theories is that it utilizes a tool of scholarly discourse, namely skepticism or doubt, but yet those employing conspiracy theories are always adept at slipping away from the topic at hand and blaming the “other” for everything under the sun. The scope of a conspiracy theory is like that of a crime, in that specific results often cannot be completely ascertained, but there are always linkages that suggest a certain possibility more than others. In this case, skepticism towards all the possibilities is acceptable until one becomes most likely, based on objective clues. However, conspiracy theorists relentlessly favor a conspiracy-based explanation regardless of the evidence surrounding a particular event, and so skepticism becomes an entire school of thought, not a method. Doubt is inevitably cast upon all the non-conspiratorial possibilities, brushing aside any clues, yet without clearly explaining the conspiracy itself. Here we can see that Khaldoun Al-Naqeeb’s characterization of the “conspiracy-centered mentality” as over-emotional thinking or even as an ideological, unscientific mindset is misleading.¹¹

The Islamist writer Zaghlool El-Nagar, for instance, dismisses the suggestion that radical Islamist groups could have a role in the 2005 London bombing, blaming instead “Zionism and Israeli intelligence.”

Contemporary conspiracy-based, skeptical thought can be found in the following ideological and political spaces:

1. International relations, where many Arab analysts regularly interpret events under the umbrella of the struggle with the “other,” and hence are prone to skepticism.
2. Discerning intentions in general provides fertile soil for skepticism. Even though only God knows our true intentions, conspiracy theorists also ap-

¹¹ Khaldoun Al-Naqeeb, *The Controversy of Ethnicity, Nation, and Class for Arabs*.

appropriate for themselves the ability to uncover the alleged true intentions of their political opponents and those who disagree with them.

Mechanisms of skepticism

There are numerous mental and linguistic mechanisms that conspiracy-based doubt-casting employs in contemporary Arab discourse, the most important being simple denial. Doubt-casting conspiracy theorists in the Arab world usually start by denying or casting doubt on the story put forward by the “other,” regardless of the available evidence, leaving interpretation open for conspiracies.

Among prominent examples in this regard is the way in which authors have handled terrorist incidents in Iraq, or the bombings in London in 2005. The Islamist writer Zaghlool El-Nagar, for instance, dismisses the suggestion that radical Islamist groups could have a role, blaming instead “Zionism and Israeli intelligence,” saying that “there are no Islamic organizations or groups undertaking these acts, and the figure Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi and others do not exist among those killing, beheading, shedding blood, kidnapping hostages, and negotiating ransoms, and this is all the result of other forces, specifically Zionism and Israeli intelligence.”¹²

As for the writer Galal Amin, he summed up his perspective in the headline, “No one is telling the truth.”¹³ He went on to accuse London and Washington of lying, questioning whether al-Qaeda was actually behind the London attack and asserting that many Arab writers and analysts were also lying, dividing them into three categories:

- a. Those not telling the truth because it would badly hurt their interests;
- b. Those working for the first group and unwilling to jeopardize their jobs;
- c. Those whose are repressed by this second group.

Such writers refuse to say that al-Qaeda or sympathetic groups are responsible and express extreme skepticism about the authenticity of videotapes from al-Qaeda, and Ayman Al-Zawahiri in particular, expressing as much. For these writers, anyone taking this evidence as damning must either be an enemy agent or afraid of the consequences of speaking out.¹⁴ Any rapprochement with the “other” must be part of the conspiracy which one writer says she believes in more every day, unable to explain the American media’s interest in the Arab world’s discourse except through the lens of this

12 Hassan Shabakashi, “Debilitation and the Fall,” *Ash-Sharq Al-Awsat*, July 24, 2005.

13 Galal Amin, “No One is Telling the Truth,” *Al-Hayat*, August 10, 2005.

14 Ibid.

conspiracy – specifically referring to the meeting of the American ambassador with an Egyptian opposition leader.¹⁵

Cursory substantiation

This doubt-casting analysis of political phenomena usually is distinguished by either a total absence of substantiation or only the sketchiest information. Some writers even have no qualms about presenting outright rumors and unsubstantiated stories as fact, while it is commonplace to deny the disseminated story about an event and claim the existence of a parallel, true story, even if it is incomplete and without evidence. The most obvious example is Sept. 11, 2001, the attacks over which al-Qaeda leadership is plainly bursting with pride. Nonetheless, many Arab writers have gone to great lengths to question the authenticity of the evidence available, absolving al-Qaeda and accusing the Americans (whom one would think are the victims) of carrying out these attacks, so as to clear the way for subsequent wars on Afghanistan and Iraq. One Arab writer has labeled this distortion of logic “the discourse of nonsense.”¹⁶

These Arab writings usually rely on irresponsible Western accounts published by non-specialists who did not so much as leave their homes, much less go to the Pentagon or World Trade Center sites, to write their stories, such as Sept. 11: “The Big Lie” by Frenchman Thierry Meyssan, which used a selection of pictures to argue that American agencies launched the attack themselves. Meyssan also told Al-Jazeera, one of the Arabic-language satellite channels to welcome him, that Osama Bin Laden is a CIA agent, as well as other claims that no rational mind could accept, but which resonated among many Arab audiences.¹⁷

These dime novels have no credibility with serious scholars, but they are exploited by conspiracy theorists in justifying continued hostility despite accumulating evidence in the form of videotaped announcements and the like that al-Qaeda was in fact behind Sept. 11 and various other attacks.

The same mechanism was employed in addressing the fall of Saddam Hussein, with writers alleging that he was betrayed by some of his guards and backers. Likewise, when Saddam was captured we heard conspiracy theories in the Arab press claiming that it was not the real Saddam, but rather one of his many doubles who was captured.

This is no more than imaginative interpretations that change nothing on the ground, either ignoring, very briefly mentioning, or twisting the facts available and questioning their credibility, in order to offer an alternative story based on sketchy or

15 Safinaz Kazim, “Have the Americans Hijacked Our Heads?” *Ash-Sharq Al-Awsat*, December 7, 2004.

16 Mohammed Al-Ramihi, “Conspiracy Discourse and the Absence of Rationality.”

17 Thierry Meyssan, interview by Faysal Al-Qasim, *Al-Jazeera*, December 12, 2002.

distorted information. In short, those following this type of conspiracy theory give priority to dogma over knowledge and consistently cast doubts upon the action, the actor, and his intentions.

Going off-topic

Hostility towards the “other,” or the West, or Israel’s cultural, technological and military superiority, is instilled in all the topics which these conspiracy theorists discuss, from the dialogue of civilizations to peace agreements, economic cooperation deals, and what they label as undermining agriculture and the economy. These subjects will routinely be worked into an opinion article, even though they have nothing to do with the given topic at hand.

While veering off topic, historical plots are invoked (such as Sykes-Picot, the Tripartite aggression against Egypt, or the Balfour Declaration) as proof of the alleged conspiracy. This also serves to divert the reader or viewer from the actual problem at hand or the analytical logic used in the article. In other cases, select vocabulary is employed that has a hostile, isolationist tone, paving the way to accusing the “other” of conspiracy. At other times, conspiracy theorists go off topic on purpose, changing the subject mid-sentence and attacking American policy in the Middle East, which is usually characterized as bent on American and Israeli domination of the region.

All these different mechanisms may be brought out simultaneously, betraying what Ahmad Bishara has revealed as deeply-rooted mistrust and condescension towards the “other;” a culture based on hearsay while the place afforded to reading and studying declines; the penetration of metaphysical thought and the weakness of scientific culture; and the control of preachers of ideologues over Arab media.¹⁸

Features of conspiracy-centered skepticism

Every discourse has features that define its approach and objectives. Key among the characteristics of doubt-casting is its tendency to incorporate a language dominated by holistic and sanctified expressions restating the existence of the conspiracy, followed by mention of the challenges facing the writer and the reader in order to convince the latter of the conspiracy’s existence.¹⁹

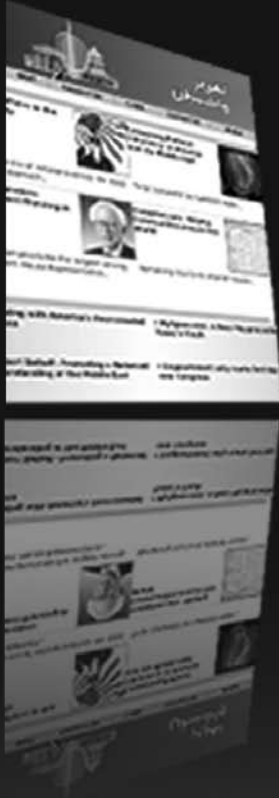
Meanwhile, doubt-casting discourse is characterized by heavy reliance on shaky logic and symbolic violence, while there is a lack of a scientific and objective epistemological approach that avoids biases or prior beliefs. Oversimplifying logic controls

18 Ahmad Bishara, *Al-Qabas*, October 24, 2002.


19 Hassan Sati, “With or Without a Conspiracy ... Farewell to the Devil,” *Ash-Sharq Al-Awsat*, March 11, 2005.

this mindset, adopting fixed settings for the self and the “other,” according to the dichotomy of good and evil, innocence and conspiracy, and where we, whether rulers or ruled, are innocent of any wrongdoing.

The third feature is the inability to put forward a vision of the future. Despite their condemnation of the status quo on the domestic, regional and international levels, doubt-casting writers almost never offer any strategy to escape our current predicament but merely strengthen hostility towards the “other” without making any attempt to create a more natural, healthier relationship with the outside world, culturally, ideologically and politically, and removed from the dominant logic of conflict. ■



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