

Teaching Fiction?

Conspiracy Theories in Arab Public Schools

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AMONG THE SEVERAL SOURCES OF CONSPIRATORIAL THINKING in the Arab world, the educational system has special significance. Firstly, it serves as the foundation of an individual's experience outside family life, playing a vital role in formulating the individual's general culture. Education molds the individual's knowledge and understanding, shaping his value system as well as how he views and analyzes events taking place around him. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, education plays a crucial role in empowering an individual to use scientific thought based on causality, rather than unsubstantiated myths. Considering the vital function education plays in an individual's development, this article seeks to outline the extent to which some curricula in Egypt use conspiracy-centered explanations in addressing certain historical events. It also explores the role that these curricula might play in promulgating conspiracy-based patterns of thinking.¹

Important methodological notes

To determine the significance of education in establishing conspiratorial thinking among Egyptian students, sample curricula were taken from middle school social studies classes (which covers both geography and history) as well as from some high

¹ Dr. Abdel Salam Nuweir, *Teachers and Politics in Egypt* (Cairo: Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, 2001).

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school history classes. Social studies were selected for a number of reasons. Firstly, and most importantly, history curriculum is crucial to an individual's political growth. Secondly, it is critical for developing the student's understanding of various historical relationships, including one incredibly pertinent in the Arab world – the relationship with the Western, or “other” world. Social

studies curricula in Egypt are closely tied to a number of important political values as well, including political identity. Geography meanwhile plays the important role of synthesizing students' knowledge of Egypt's place in the world, and the impact of Egypt's location – as part of Africa, the Mediterranean, and the Arab world – on the country and its relationship with the rest of the world.

In analyzing the content of these curricula and the extent to which they foster conspiracy theories, it was necessary to rely on a number of measures. The presence of one or more of the following in the texts indicates encouragement of conspiracy-based thought:

- Misinformation aiming to portray the Arab world as a weak victim in a conspiracy in order to justify its failings.
- Vague or ambiguous expressions that pave the way in students' minds for a reliance on metaphysical thought patterns. These curricula do not explain many historical events, and they employ phrases that give the impression that the region is being targeted by the West without clarifying the reasons.
- Absolute value judgments that every intervention by the Western “other” is negative and suspicious.
- Drawing a negative image of the Arab world, illustrating it as passive and helpless, even stating there are hidden hands controlling the region's destiny.
- Abridging historical events and removing them from their historical and international context so that Arabs and the West appear to be operating in a vacuum. For instance, any negative behavior by the West appears to be directed at the Arabs simply because they are Arab.
- Transferring historical experience into the present. The classic case is the use of the colonial experience, seen as a grand conspiracy, to excuse most of the region's present shortcomings.
- Overblown self-praise and exaggerated achievements, utilized to explain why the Western “other” would single out the Arab world.

Before addressing the features and motivations of conspiratorial thinking in Egyptian secondary school curricula, it is necessary to touch upon two important observations. First, by no means can the presence of conspiracies in history in general be denied, as conspiracies are a means of protecting interests and achieving goals. However, it should be noted that the entirety of history is not one encompassing conspiracy, nor is the West always the conspiring party with the Arabs and Muslims the constant victims. Arab parties have often been behind conspiracies when it was in their own interests. Similarly, Islamic history, as a conflict of opposing interests, is full of what can be labeled Islamic-Islamic conspiracies and Arab-Arab conspiracies. Thus, while many conspiracies have involved the West against the Arab and Islamic world, many conspiracies in the Arab world have simply involved the Arab and Islamic world as the source of discontent and both the instigator and the victim of conspiracies. It is also important to note that there is no complete absence of objective thought and analysis within the curricula examined. Some historical events are indeed portrayed objectively in the texts. However, the examples that will be discussed are among those sections of the text that have conspiracy-minded interpretations of historical events.

Patterns of conspiratorial thought in Egyptian curricula

The social studies and history curricula examined included many expressions and explanations to which a number of our measures could apply: The textbook, “My Country Egypt: Place and Time,” for seventh graders, states:

We, the sons of Egypt, are required to be fully awake and preserve the country’s borders, unity of the ranks, and cooperation with the armed forces and the police for the sake of protecting the country’s borders from those coveting it, and maintaining its stability at home.²

This paragraph seeks to deepen the feeling that Egypt is being targeted, especially by employing vague phrases such as “coveting it” – never explaining or specifying who those covetous people or nations may be. A similar idea is reiterated, but in more detail, in one of the paragraphs in a textbook for eighth grade students: “Looking at the importance of the Arab nation’s strategic and economic location,” the text states, “the colonial powers competed to control most of its parts beginning in the eighteenth century, dividing it into numerous countries varying in size and population.”³

² Egyptian Ministry of Education, *My Country Egypt: Place and Time*, 38.

³ Egyptian Ministry of Education, *Social Studies, Eighth Grade*, 4.

Colonialism left us several problems, including the problem of Southern Sudan ... some foreign powers still aspire to dismantle the unity of the Sudanese territories, and Egypt stands for preserving the unity of the Sudanese territories.

Social Studies, Eighth Grade textbook

This excerpt indicates that the Arab world's strategic position made it an object of colonial strife throughout history – an observation that holds some merit, but is essentially too biased. For instance, the reasons for Arab countries being exposed to colonialism are restricted to a single cause, namely strategic and economic location. While geopolitical strategy was undoubtedly a factor, labeling it as the only cause for colonialism is an exaggeration and completely ignores other

valid reasons that pushed the great powers to colonize the Arab world. For instance, a more nuanced and complete portrayal of Egypt's colonial history might discuss the nature of the historical era that Europe was experiencing, the ramifications of the Industrial Revolution and an insatiable appetite for raw materials as well as the desire to expand export markets. In addition, this curriculum failed to mention the weakness of the Ottoman Empire and its inability to stand up to the great European powers. Furthermore, the textbook characterization removes the historical event from its international context. When the colonial powers moved into the region, they did not only target the Arab world. Instead, colonialism was part of the framework of international relations, which was based on the primacy of military power and the competition among the great powers to control huge swathes of the world in order to maintain a balance of power. Thus, colonization in the Arab world was part of a larger strategy related to the nature of the world system at that time. Most crucially, the excerpt gives students the impression that as long as the Arab world has its critical strategic and economic location, it will be vulnerable to foreign powers. Such an idea could pave the way for uncritical student acceptance of conspiracy-based explanations for the region's failures.

A similar interpretation of Egypt's colonial past can be seen in another paragraph from the same book:

Colonialism left us several problems, including the problem of Southern Sudan ... some foreign powers still aspire to dismantle the unity of the Sudanese territories, and Egypt stands for preserving the unity of the Sudanese territories, not dividing them, and rejecting foreign intervention.⁴

⁴ Ibid., 24.

The paragraph asserts the foreign targeting of Sudan's unity in a vague context, deeming it sufficient to state that "foreign powers aspire to dismantle the unity of the Sudanese territories," without defining these powers, their goals, or referring to the internal factors of the Sudanese problem. The absolute judgment that "Egypt stands for ... rejecting foreign intervention" suggests that any "foreign intervention" is bad, ignoring the role which some great powers and international organizations have played in solving many regional problems in the developing world. Furthermore, rejecting any and all foreign intervention without outlining the reasons for various interventions ignores the nature of the international system and the role which international powers and institutions play in managing regional conflicts.

While discussing a separate issue, the second part of the same book blames colonialism for the underdeveloped state of Egyptian industry, stating:

Industry provides some of the manufactured products the Arab world needs, and colonialism was careful to not encourage the Arab countries to industrialize, so that it could exploit their various raw materials for export to Europe at cheap prices, manufacture them in country, then return them as manufactured products to be distributed in the Arab markets.⁵

This excerpt suggests that there is a foreign plan to prevent Arab progress and an Arab industrial renaissance. Even though the colonial powers have been out of the region for nearly half a century, the above paragraph condenses the explanation for Arab underdevelopment into a single historical factor. Though it is true that one goal of colonialism during this historical stage was to keep Arab industry underdeveloped, the excerpt does not attempt to address current Arab industrial backwardness, nor does it take into account that the Arab world is rich in primary resources and raw materials, which are a necessary but insufficient precondition to building an industrial base. In other words, this excerpt blatantly ignores national responsibility for Egypt's present industrial underdevelopment. The fact that goods made in China, not America, England, or France, dominate the Egyptian market, despite the lack of Chinese investment should give a hint of how imprecise the textbook's explanation remains.

Analysis of this sort is not restricted to Egypt alone, and tends to extend across the African continent as well. Similarly, it is not confined to industrial backwardness, but rather includes the breakout of civil wars. The textbook "World Geography and Studies in Modern Egyptian History," for ninth graders in their first semester, states:

5 Egyptian Ministry of Education, *Social Studies, Eighth Grade*, 9.

Industry does not claim a large portion of the economies of the African continent, despite their possession of many raw materials that are industrial inputs, because most of [the raw materials] are exported to the great industrial powers, before being returned either as manufactured materials, such as transportation equipment, textiles, and others, or else as destructive weapons. These weapons are used to provoke unrest, wars between the continent's countries, or civil wars between a single country's sons, in order to bleed dry these countries' fiscal revenues and impede them from a development and progress plan.⁶

Once again, this excerpt oversimplifies the many causes of African underdevelopment on the economic and political security levels, using an external factor as the culprit while disregarding the internal factors in this underdevelopment. The paragraph above attempts to demonstrate that the goals of the industrialized countries in general, not only the colonial powers, go beyond maintaining African industrial underdevelopment or turning African countries into a market for European goods to include interfering with continental security by exporting weapons intended to stir up civil wars.

In addition to conspiratorial thought being promulgated in texts about Egypt's colonial past and underdeveloped economy, it also often emerges in texts for children that discuss the historical personage of Mohamed Ali. Regarding Mohamed Ali, "World Geography and Studies in Modern Egyptian History" says: "Mohammed Ali aimed to build a modern state adopting Western civil methods, but the European states, especially England, sought to weaken Egypt, and this is what happened toward the end of Mohammed Ali's rule."⁷ The above excerpt reemphasizes that the outside world is targeting Egypt. Though many Egyptian writings mention European responsibility for the collapse of Mohammed Ali's mission to build a modern state, the noteworthy feature in this textbook is that it ignores many key internal factors. Most prominent is Mohammed Ali's repression of the only social class able to catalyze such sweeping changes, the national bourgeoisie. Instead of protecting and depending on this class as a leading partner in his developmental project, he relied on the state bureaucracy, which had a military bent. If he had allowed this nascent bourgeoisie to grow, flourish, and take part in the economy fully, Mohammed Ali's project might have succeeded even if his regime itself collapsed.⁸

European powers are again blamed for the collapse of the Egyptian-Syrian unity

6 Egyptian Ministry of Education, *World Geography and Studies in Modern Egyptian History*, 18.

7 *Ibid.*, 94.

8 Fawzy Mansour, *The Arab World: Nation, State, Democracy Departure from History*, trans. into Arabic Zarf Abdullah and Kamal El-Sayyid (Cairo: Madbouli Bookstore, 1993).

experiment at the beginning of the 1960s, with Part II of the textbook stating:

The Arab countries were aware of Israel's expansionist ambitions in the Arab region, and Egypt and Syria were the most aware of these ambitions, so the two countries unified under the name of the United Arab Republic in 1958, and this unity remained standing until colonialist conspiracies succeeded in bringing it down in 1961.⁹

The collapse of the Syrian-Egyptian unity experiment is explained by "colonialist conspiracies." Once again, the text fails to mention the multifaceted, domestic causes for the UAR's breakup, which lie in the fact that true unity was never achieved and that various fundamental differences remained between the Egypt and Syria. Despite the talk of unity between the two countries, it was not preceded or followed by a currency union, a unified legal code, or economic, administrative, or military unity. Apart from that, some of Abdul Nasser's policies, such as the dissolution of political parties and their incorporation into the National Union organization, agricultural reform, and the socialist laws that damaged Syrian bourgeoisie interests, on top of the shortcomings tarnishing the process of removing the Syrian army from politics, led to a number of Syrian political forces changing their stances on unity.¹⁰ To quite the contrary of the textbook's claims, internal factors served the most important role in causing the collapse of Egyptian-Syrian unity. These contributing causes are left unmentioned in the textbook, making it seem as if the fates of Arab affairs are completely in the West's conspiratorial hands.

The same logic is also applied to the teaching of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, with a twelfth-grade history book explaining:

... and Israel seized the opportunity and worked to lure the Arab countries into war unprepared, and when Egypt proceeded to carry out its obligations according to the collective security and joint defense agreements, and announced in face of the armed Israeli threat that it was supporting Syria against any aggression, the Egyptian government announced the closing of the Gulf of Aqaba to Israeli shipping. Thus, the situation grew threatening and Israel directed its most powerful blow at Egypt, with its air force on June 5, 1967, undertaking surprise raids on Egyptian airfields.¹¹

9 Egyptian Ministry of Education, *World Geography and Studies in Modern Egyptian History*.

10 Magdy Hamad, "Abdel Nasser's Management of the Separation Crisis," *Forty Years since Egyptian-Syrian Unity* (Cairo: Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, 1999).

11 Egyptian Ministry of Education, *History, Twelfth Grade*, 278.

Here the textbook interprets the setback of 1967 as a result of Israel's efforts to draw the Arabs into the war. In reality, many historians and analysts have rejected this idea, considering Egypt to have initiated the hostilities by closing the Straits of Tiran to Israeli shipping. Egypt had seized the opportunity presented by reports of Israeli forces amassing in order to demand the withdrawal of the UN Emergency Forces and close the Gulf of Aqaba. These sources also argue that there had been no buildup of Israeli forces, as Israel had announced before the UN that these claims were false, and the UN passed on this statement to the other Middle Eastern countries.

The UN secretary-general also gave his annual report to the Security Council on May 19, 1967, stating that UN truce observers had confirmed that there were no troop buildups on either of the two sides. A number of former Egyptian military officials, who were in the army at the time of the 1967 war, have also corroborated this fact. The main source for reports of troop buildups was the Soviets, since the Egyptian Minister of Defense at the time, Shams Badran, has stated that the Russians informed the Syrians of Israeli troops amassing on their borders, a report which both Syria and the Russians then conveyed to Egypt. However, the Soviets had concocted this information based on intelligence reports of an Israeli action to take revenge on Syria for the fostering Syrian-backed Palestinian guerrilla activity. The Soviets worried that the Syrian regime would be overthrown, and decided to bring Egypt into the equation as a deterrent against Israel. Even though the Soviets were not imagining Israeli troop buildups without some basis, they exaggerated the reports to the extent that the regional course of events went out of control. Egypt began massing its forces in the Sinai and closed the Gulf of Aqaba to Israel, since Egyptian political leadership was hoping to benefit from the situation to reclaim its right to control the

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Straits of Tiran and prevent Israeli shipping in the Gulf of Aqaba. The Egyptian closure of the straits on May 22, 1967, represented a declaration of war. Nonetheless, it is important to keep in mind that Egypt did not launch the first strike, despite Abdul Nasser's warning in a meeting on June 2, 1967, that an enemy attack would take place within a few days. Despite this alert, the Egyptian military was unprepared, and the first Israeli attack wiped out 85 to 90 percent of the Egyptian air force.¹²

12 Abdul Azeem Ramadan, *The Smashing of the Gods: The Story of the June 1967 War* (Cairo: Madbouli Bookstore, 1985).

Thus, many facts indicate that the defeat of 1967 was not a result of Egypt being drawn into war by Israel. Instead, Egypt itself began the escalation, trying to exploit the emerging social and political climate to reclaim control over the Gulf of Aqaba. Even assuming that Egypt and the Arab countries were actually lured into the war, it does not necessarily follow that they would have been defeated. Rather, the cause for the defeat itself was primarily the difference in military capabilities. Because of this disparity, the war ended with Egypt and other Arab countries being defeated, and new Arab lands being occupied.

Resorting to conspiracy theories is even more common in textbook explanations of the July 1952 Revolution, which gave rise to the Egyptian Republic. This excerpt is from a twelfth-grade history textbook:

The revolution faced what no similar revolution in the 3rd world had faced with international conspiracies and foreign attacks aiming to eliminate it. Thanks to the support of the people, however, the revolution was not killed by the storm of foreign attacks, nor was it rattled by the malicious conspiracies and attacks coming from hateful hearts and ossified minds that had lost their psychological balance and saw nothing with their weary eyes except for faults and negative aspects.¹³

The same twelfth-grade history textbook states under the heading “European Colonial Policy in the Arab Nation in the Interwar Period (1918-1939)”:

- 1) Colonialism stirred up local sentiments to eliminate the idea of unity and pan-Arabism, instigating Pharaonic leanings in Egypt, Phoenician leanings in Lebanon, and giving the Arabs different names: Iraqis, Syrians, Lebanese, Palestinians, and Sudanese.
- 2) Colonialism worked to make diverse political, governmental, and economic systems and diverse laws in the Arab countries, with Syria and Lebanon following the republican system and Iraqi, Egypt, and Jordan following the monarchic system. Thus colonialism worked to dismember the Arab world physically into distinct parts, and that led to weakening Arab nationalism and separation between the Arab peoples for the time being.¹⁴

¹³ Egyptian Ministry of Education, *History*, Twelfth Grade, 234.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 256.

The textbook argues, using words such as “dismember” and “weakening”, that the failure of Arab unity resulted from conscious colonial policies aiming to undercut attempts at unity. According to the textbook, these policies ranged from stirring up “local sentiments” to creating disparate political and economic systems in the Arab world. The so-called “local sentiments” (such as the Pharaonic and Phoenician movements) are actually complete civilizations that continued for thousands of years, rather than simply narrow-minded local sentiments. Furthermore, the two excerpts assume the existence of a structural contradiction between national diversity (political and economic) on the one hand, and integration on the other. However, having a spectrum of political and economic systems does not deny the possibility of successful regional integration, as long as the necessary political and economic conditions are available. There are important historical experiments in this respect, the success of which the textbook was uninterested in presenting an objective analysis. Most importantly, the interpretation offered by the textbook for the failure of attempts at Arab unity generally ignores the responsibility of the Arab world and Arab policies.

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Conclusion

The continued focus in Egyptian secondary school curricula on external factors in interpreting the collapse of Arab revivals and industrial progress, foreign colonialism, and civil and regional wars, while clearly ignoring domestic and inter-Arab factors, unquestionably increases the importance of the West in the formation of a narrative around Egypt’s crises, problems, and even history. This single-minded approach naturally leads to the spread of conspiracy-based interpretations.

These curricula tend to focus on the negative period of Arab-European relations, especially the Crusades and colonization of the Arab world,¹⁵ whereas only the scantest mention is made of either the current cooperation between the Arab world and Europe or the positive outcomes of Arab interaction with Europe and the West at large. In other words, these curricula tend to paint Arab-Western relations as being a zero-sum game, such that the West can only protect its interests by conspiring to damage the Arabs.

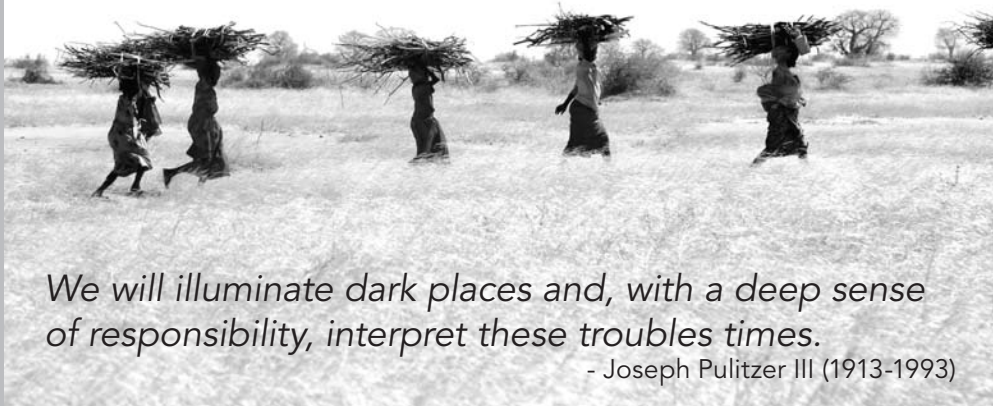
15 Abdul Muniam El-Mashat, “Political Orientations in Social Studies Books,” in Kamal El-Monoufie, ed., *Education and Political Growth in Egypt* (Cairo: Center for Political Research and Studies, 1994).

In this context, the above curriculum materials tend to portray the world as being comprised of only Arabs and the West, as if the international community has these two actors and no others. Thus, international interaction appears to be a simple flow from the West to the Arab world only.

Furthermore, these curricula often show the West as a single, monolithic entity, with the unified, perpetual goal of breaking up the Arab world and preventing the Arabs from succeeding or progressing. This portrayal is obviously unrealistic, as the West contains a diverse range of political currents and interests that often conflict. By the same logic, the Arab and Islamic countries are treated as a single unit with common interests, completely ignoring the reality of Arab-Arab or Arab-Islamic relations.

Undoubtedly, the elements discussed above tend to preserve negative Arab attitudes toward European countries by affirming the West's hostility toward the Arab world. These curricula paint the Arabs as always being the helpless victim of external actors, which may cause students to believe that conspiracies against the Arabs are inevitable. The flip side of this is that the role of domestic and local factors in Arab crises, problems, and failures are openly disregarded, which increases the likelihood that these conspiracy theories will spread and that no self-reflective critical analysis regarding the Arab world's responsibility for its current situation will take place. Such conjectures assume that Arabs play no part in their own problems, which are a creation of Western plots. Without a doubt, pointing out foreign and domestic factors alike in a balanced and objective way would greatly reduce the feeling that foreign powers are targeting the Arab world, and that, in turn, would allow rational, balanced thought about the reality of the Arab situation to develop. ■

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