

Preaching Fiction?

Conspiracy Theories in Religious Institutions

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THIS ARTICLE AIMS TO ASSESS THE EXTENT of conspiracy-centered thinking within the religious establishment in Egypt, focusing on how that establishment views the “other” (non-Arabs and non-Muslims), what its relations with the “other” are, and how these two aspects affect its overall attitude towards the “other.” I analyze material published in the monthly *Al-Azhar Magazine*, the oldest periodical – established in 1931 – of the Islamic Research Academy, the highest Islamic scholarly body in Egypt. The article also aims to specify what types of conspiracy-centered thinking are prevalent, before concluding with an examination of contradictions that appear within the establishment’s discourse when it approaches events from a conspiracy-centered perspective.

The issues of *Al-Azhar Magazine* that I chose to examine were published between January 2001 and March 2006, a range carefully selected to cover the period after Sept. 11, 2001, which marked a turning point in U.S.-Arab relations, while also including nine issues from the pre-Sept. 11 era, thus permitting a comparative analysis. I focus primarily on material centered on the relationship between Arabs or Muslims and the “other.” This article does not directly address the religious texts that writers used to substantiate their positions, but rather looks at the way these texts are read or interpreted, and the writers’ analytical logic.

The article also assesses the theses and views incorporated within the magazine, gauging whether they are based on reason or conspiracy-centered thinking.

Furthermore it assesses if the writer contradicts either himself or the obvious facts this discrepancy indicates that the opinion he is presenting has a faulty basis. By “obvious facts” I mean those that are broadly accepted as being true and reasonable, and that are contested only by circumstantial speculation, not hard evidence.

The material is divided into three main sections. The first assesses the extent to which conspiracy-centered thinking has spread in the magazine’s issues during the specified time period. Next, I outline the types of conspiracy-centered thinking that are most prevalent in the magazine. Finally, I look in detail at examples of logical contradictions within conspiracy-centered thinking.

Extent of conspiracy thinking in *Al-Azhar Magazine*

This study covered 64 issues of *Al-Azhar Magazine*. Within those issues were some 304 articles addressing relations with the “other,” whether in articles, book reviews, or news from the office of the Sheikh of Al-Azhar. These can be categorized into five main groups regarding conspiracy-centered thinking:

1. Conspiracy-centered articles

Sixty of the articles (about 20 percent of the total within the study) adopted conspiracy-centered thinking. In the second section of this article I will address their content and the types of conspiracies that they support.

2. Stereotypical depictions of the “other”

Seventy articles addressed perceptions of the “other.” These articles differ from the first group in that their main task is painting a broad picture of the “other.” The nature of the “other’s” behavior towards Arabs/Muslims is of secondary concern, whereas in the first category of articles this interest is paramount. Examination of this second group shows four main elements in stereotyping the “other”: the West is morally reprehensible, especially in its behavior towards Arabs and Muslims; nonetheless, its interaction with Muslims is not without some level of cooperation; Jews are the most immoral religious or ethnic group in history; nonetheless, there are exceptions among Israeli Jews who behave fairly towards Palestinians.

Nearly half of the articles drew on the stereotype of the West as drowning in materialism, moral decay, mercilessness, and hypocrisy.

Regarding the first element in the depiction of the “other,” nearly half (34) drew on the stereotype of the West as drowning in materialism, moral decay, mercilessness, and hypocrisy. The second element appeared in eight passing

references, limited to four specific subjects: the large numbers of Westerners converting to Islam; other Westerners starting to read more about Islam; Western authorities taking measures to cooperate with the Muslim minorities in their countries; and the publishing of studies on the legitimacy of the Islamic hijab (headscarf).

The third component of stereotyping, the alleged unprecedented immorality of Jews, crops up 27 times, whereas the caveat that constitutes the fourth element above appeared in only a single, lackluster article showing some Israeli Jews in a good light (specifically discussing a new generation of historians within Israeli universities who condemn Jewish crimes against Arabs and support the Palestinians' right to an independent state and to compensation for their suffering).¹

3. Reasoned and objective articles

Some 164 articles were largely reasoned, with objective, systematic presentation of information and precise analysis. This included 26 articles that could be categorized as academic essays, covering the media, globalization, the dialogue of civilizations and politics. This group also included several book reviews.

4. Articles rejecting specific conspiracy theories

Eight articles either explicitly or implicitly rejected the idea of a Western conspiracy against Islam and Muslims. This included three articles refuting conspiracy theories on specific issues and five attacking conspiracy theories in general. Four of the eight were news pieces on statements made by Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Muhammad Sayyid Tantawy, the first denying rumors that there was pressure on the Egyptian religious establishment to develop its religious discourse, with Tantawy saying that Egypt never accepts intervention in its religious affairs.²

The second statement was when Tantawy gave his opinion on the law banning religious symbols, including the *hijab*, in French public schools. This was on the occasion of Tantawy receiving then-French Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy on Dec. 30, 2003, in the middle of the *hijab* debate. Tantawy acknowledged France's right to pass whatever legislation it deemed appropriate, thus implicitly agreeing that the law was not aimed at Muslims, or part of a conspiracy, but rather simply a measure – perhaps excessive – intended to preserve French secularism.³

1 Salah Abdel Raheem Mohammed, "New Voices in Israel: The Phenomenon of the New Historians," *Al-Azhar Magazine* (November 2003).

2 Amr El-Bastaweisi, "News from the Sheikh of Al-Azhar's Office," *Al-Azhar Magazine* (November 2003).

3 Amr El-Bastaweisi, "News from the Sheikh of Al-Azhar's Office," *Al-Azhar Magazine* (February 2004).

The third statement came after a meeting with Austrian Foreign Minister Benita Ferrero-Waldner and her accompanying delegation.⁴ The final statement was issued when Tantawy received the prime minister of the Spanish province of Catalonia and his delegation. Both of these statements were general speeches on friendship and cooperation in which Tantawy said that Islam and Muslims favored dialogue between – not a clash of – civilizations.

As for the four articles rejecting conspiracy thinking, two were opinion pieces, one of which refuted rumors that the Egyptian government, on instruction from a foreign country, had decided to remove Quranic verses about the Children of Israel from Ministry of Education curricula and Al-Azhar's K-12 schools. Tantawy said:

Religious education books in the 1960s and '70s, when the conflict with Israel intensified, contained only the shortest chapters from Amma and Tabarak,⁵ which do not discuss the Children of Israel. However, after the signing of the peace treaty with Israel, Egyptian television began to broadcast Sheikh (Mohammed Metwalli) El-Shaarawi's lectures on the Holy Quran, which included episodes in which he brought up the Children of Israel and what the Lord said about them. Israel demanded repeatedly that the lectures be stopped, but Egypt refused, and they are now published on videotapes and CDs, printed by a national press institution whose chairman is appointed by the president of the republic.⁶

The other opinion article stood aloof from then-current rumors that foreign actors were seeking to modify Islamic ideas to fit the West's regional agenda. The writer not only rejected these rumors but also asserted that renewal was necessary in order for religious dialogue to remain modern. However, while rejecting conspiracy, the writer affirmed, in a paragraph that seems almost out of place, that,

“Despite the beauty of such words as development, modernization and renewal, as well as the urgency felt by some of the faithful regarding the need for development and renewal, what we disagree with and strongly reject is that this development and renewal may come from parties without bona fide or good intentions, because that would mean brazen intervention in the most private affairs of Muslims.”⁷

4 Amr El-Bastaweisi, “News from the Sheikh of Al-Azhar's Office,” *Al-Azhar Magazine* (November 2001).

5 Two of the 30 parts of the Quran.

6 Ahmad El-Sayyid Taqi El-Din, “They Don't Deserve It,” *Al-Azhar Magazine* (February 2003).

7 Hamdi Fatouh Wali, “Pointed Suggestions: Between the Missionary and the Preacher,” *Al-Azhar Magazine* (February 2005).

Of the other two articles, one discusses the document of religious rights signed between Al-Azhar and an American delegation by the name of the Peace Ambassadors Organization; a document that included a number of articles urging full freedom for followers of every religion to spread their religion as they wish without being opposed by the followers of other religions. Al-Azhar agreed to sign the full document without reservations.⁸ Here we must distinguish between the event itself and news coverage of the event, for although the discussion and signing itself showed a positive attitude by the religious institution's leadership, *Al-Azhar Magazine's* coverage portrayed the document as an American attempt to entrap Al-Azhar into refusing to sign, which would have strengthened the image of Muslims as intolerant and rejecting dialogue. The article suggested that the American plot would fail and that the tables would be turned, citing the Quranic verse, "Those who do wrong will come to know by what a reverse they will be overturned!" (26: 227).

Along the same lines, the second article discussed Al-Azhar's stance towards brotherhood between the "divine religions"⁹ (i.e., the three main monotheistic faiths). Once again there was a difference between the event and its subsequent coverage. The occasion was Al-Azhar's announcement on cooperation between the "divine religions" to better spread justice and peace in the world, which would seem a rejection of the idea that one religion is conspiring against another. News coverage, however, included the following:

"What we see today in the inability of various international institutions, first and foremost the UN, to perform their mission fully, and their loss of relevance in the eyes of many, goes back to their distance from the divine religion, and their pursuit of the objective and passion of pleasing the desires of some great powers that control them."
This passage clearly alludes to the existence of a conspiracy against Muslims.

5. General criticism of conspiracy-centered thinking

Two articles openly criticized conspiracy-centered thinking in the Arab and Islamic world. The first article stated,

"The Arab world is living under the weight of exceptional circumstances that have imposed a type of culture and behavior pattern serving objectives other than those

⁸ Sadiq Bakr Aita, "Is There Anything New in the Proselytizing Issue?" *Al-Azhar Magazine* (August 2005).

⁹ Fawzi El-Zifaf, "The Honorable Al-Azhar from Islamic Missionary Work to Brotherhood and Solidarity between the Divine Religions," *Al-Azhar Magazine* (July 2005).

of the Islamic community, creating a society overcome by humiliation and disgrace, and surrendering command over itself to others.”¹⁰

As a result of this, according to the writer, there are many who argue that the only path to renaissance is if pressure from global powers is lessened. These powers supposedly want the peoples of the Third World to stay downtrodden, which leads those peoples to “lose confidence in their ability to be independent, believe that there is no point in challenging, and lean towards a truce.”

The article concludes that if these feelings, which cannot coexist with an acceptance of responsibility, spread through the community, two further maladies arise in turn: impotence and a lack of awareness. The author continues:

Undoubtedly shirking self-responsibility and persisting in making others responsible is one of the world’s social diseases ... we often find the children of an impotent society complaining of everything except for themselves, casting responsibility on foreign peoples, the regime, the government, nature, and everything except for their own failures of responsibility.

The author of the second article harshly criticizes what he calls “the deficiencies of the Arab mind.” The worst of these, the author claims, is an obsessive focus on extolling past glories without undertaking any action in the present:

Most articles proceeded directly to interpreting various phenomena as the natural results or indicators of the West’s policy of targeting Muslims and Islam.

Because we are a nation given the gift of verbal eloquence, talking about the glory and greatness of our heritage has come to fill the world around us, as if, when we are talking about the exploits and greatness of our forefathers, we feel the euphoria of one who has done his duty and felt relief after doing so. It is a kind of mental deception that has bequeathed us

this painful reality with its frailty, shallowness, inferiority and humiliation, bringing down upon us the derision of the nations around us, since they have realized that our genius, glory and civilization are mere talk.¹¹

10 Mohammed Ibrahim El-Fayoumi, “Philosophy of Arab Media Discourse between Justification and Change,” *Al-Azhar Magazine* (October 2001).

11 Hamdi Fatouh Wali, “The Islamic Nation and the Absent Role,” *Al-Azhar Magazine* (October 2004).

Patterns of conspiracy thinking in *Al-Azhar Magazine*

The 60 articles based on conspiracy theories can be divided into the six patterns of conspiracy-centered logic, which are: feeling targeted; charges of infiltration; theories of entrapment; systematic incredulity; resorting to asking “Who benefits;” and out-right delusion.

1. *Special targeting*

The most widespread grounding for conspiracy thinking in the sample was feeling targeted; that the Islamic world is being singled out by the West to the degree that the veracity of this claim is taken for granted by many writers without their feeling any compulsion to present evidence for it. Hence, most articles proceeded directly to interpreting various phenomena as the natural results or indicators of the West’s policy of targeting Muslims and Islam.

It was possible to identify some 24 topics from the study that were consistently treated as part of the West’s targeting of Islam and Muslims, the most important being:

- a. Orientalist studies of Islam and Muslims, which the magazine generally described as being an integral part of colonialism, with one writer depicting Orientalists as “a civilian army, born and raised in the colonial powers’ countries, serving their interests, paving the way before them for occupation, supporting them during occupation, and praising their impact after occupation.”¹² This suggests that Orientalists are actually an output and extension of Western policy towards the Islamic world, that of imperialism, which in turn, according to this conspiracy-minded explanation, arose because the West was targeting Muslims.

A second writer argued that Western intelligence agencies backed certain academic studies on Islam, especially in the United States, and accused those studies of being biased and unscholarly.¹³ The intended meaning is that Western targeting of the Islamic world became a permanent structural policy, pushing Western countries to force researchers on Islam to take instructions from intelligence and security agencies.

Meanwhile, a third author struck a different note, arguing that the West employs the principles of reason, objectivity and scholarly integrity

12 Abdel Azeem El-Mataani, “Mohammed (Peace Be Upon Him) in the Orientalists’ Writings,” *Al-Azhar Magazine* (March 2001).

13 Mustafa Ragab, “What is Said about Islam: Islam in Western Academic Studies,” *Al-Azhar Magazine* (November 2001).

when it comes to understanding issues relating to the Third World, but that it employs the logic of imperialism when it wants to build military bases in these countries.¹⁴ The point being that Western imperialist policy, not scholarly objectivity, dictates what actions the West takes in the Third World, inclusive of Islamic countries.

- b. The spread of pornography and atheist literature, with one author writing on this topic citing “The Protocols of the Elders of Zion” to claim that pornography and atheism were elements of a plot hatched by Jews to corrupt mankind, especially the Islamic world, and to usher in Jewish world domination.¹⁵ Another claimed that anarchism, atheism and immorality were being encouraged by Masonic lodges, but that even though they had succeeded in subjugating religion to their order in Europe by exploiting the French Revolution slogan of “Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité,” they would not succeed in the Islamic world.¹⁶ It should be noted that the writer, even if he is saying that anarchism and atheism will fail in the Islamic world, also appears to believe in the actual existence of plots to spread these ideologies concocted by Western intelligence agencies. Another writer also took “The Protocols of the Elders of Zion” at face value, believing it to be the writings of Jewish leaders recording their plots for world domination, particularly over the Islamic world.¹⁷
- c. Differences within the Islamic nation, with one writer asserting that “the enemies of our [Islamic] nation” are responsible for sowing the basis of disagreements between Muslim youth on the one hand and preachers and ruling regimes on the other.¹⁸ Another writer concludes that ongoing sectarian conflict in Iraq is but the execution of an old colonial plan previously adopted by France in North Africa. Thus, the two writers explain these phenomena as an extension of longstanding Western policy of targeting Islam and Muslims.

14 Ibrahim El-Fayoumi, “Faces of the West in the Hall of Mirrors,” *Al-Azhar Magazine* (February 2002).

15 Ibrahim El-Dusouqi, “No Life Without Religion,” *Al-Azhar Magazine* (April 2001).

16 Abdel Halim Owais, “Islam and Its Moral Structure in Facing Freemasonry and Atheism,” *Al-Azhar Magazine* (April 2004).

17 Mohammed Hassan Abdel Khaliq, “The Protocols of the Elders of Zion,” *Al-Azhar Magazine* (May 2001).

18 Ahmad Amr Hashim, “Calling Islam to Unity,” *Al-Azhar Magazine* (April 2001).

- d. The fall of the Ottoman Caliphate, for which one writer blames Jews – specifically those who migrated to Turkey after 1492, when Andalus fell and the Spanish Inquisition began. Some of these Jews, the *dönme* (the Turkish meaning of which is “turned”), announced their conversion to Islam, allegedly formed the most dangerous secret Jewish organization (with its headquarters in Thessaloniki) and plotted to overthrow the Caliphate.¹⁹
- e. The “Greater Middle East Project,” which one writer suggested was just another in a long line of measures, from Mohammed Ali in the early 19th century to Hosni Mubarak at present, aimed at “targeting” Egypt.²⁰
- f. The caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), stirred up by the Danish press. After the Islamic Research Academy held an emergency session Dec. 8, 2005, *Al-Azhar Magazine* conveyed the organization’s condemnation of the disrespectful attack on Islam and the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) by some Danish newspapers. The Academy also denounced the refusal of the Danish government to press the newspapers to apologize to Muslims around the world, as the government maintained that what the newspapers published was within the bounds of free speech.²¹ One writer suggested that Zionists were behind the episode, whether they planned it or were merely reaping the benefits.²² In general, it was assumed that the episode was but an extension of the West’s permanent policy of targeting Islam.

2. Infiltration

Infiltration was the most pronounced type of conspiracy theory, present in about 18 articles, and was employed to explain a wide range of events – not merely political but also social, economic and cultural. As a result, the alleged local agents for foreign powers varied widely, including the following:

19 Ibrahim Oudayn, review of “*The Role of the Dönme Jews in Overthrowing the Ottoman Caliphate*,” *Al-Azhar Magazine* (May 2001).

20 Ahmad El-Sayyid Naqi El-Din, “What Freedom Are They Talking About?” *Al-Azhar Magazine* (July 2004).

21 Amr El-Bastaweisi, “In Emergency Session of Islamic Research Academy: Al-Azhar Condemns Danish Newspapers’ Impudence Against Islam,” *Al-Azhar Magazine* (November 2006).

22 Adil Rifaie Khafaga, “Forgiveness, Oh Prophet of God, Peace Be Upon Him,” *Al-Azhar Magazine* (March 2006).

- a. Organizations and individuals demanding gender equality, human rights groups,²³ and academics that call for using European numerals in writing, claiming that they are the original Arabic numerals.
- b. The Ibn Khaldun Center, its director Dr. Saad Eddin Ibrahim,²⁴ and even Osama bin Laden, al-Qaeda and terrorist groups in general, were labeled by some writers as agents of the West infiltrating the Muslim world. With regard to the latter in particular, writers based their claims on the argument that the West had created these extremist groups, “and they [the West] were the ones who prepared them [the terrorist groups] to infiltrate the ranks of the Islamic nation and tear apart its unity, and when their role outlined by the intelligence agencies (the CIA and Mossad) was done, they [the West] finished them off.”²⁵
- c. Selected journalists, politicians, and other public figures. One writer claimed that the West had originally sought to distort Islam using two groups: missionaries targeting the public at large; and Orientalists targeting intellectuals. He suggested that the West had eventually succeeded in forming a third group, consisting of Muslim agents, and that care had been taken to recruit such agents within sectors influential in forming public opinion. These sectors included the media, the literary world, publishing, the art world, academia, political circles, charities, and foreign medical institutions, all of which became essential tools in infiltrating the Islamic world after the colonial era supposedly ended.²⁶
- d. Some Arab countries that supported the U.S. invasion of Iraq,²⁷ and certain Iraqi political forces.²⁸

23 Abdel Azeem El-Mataani, “Women’s Affairs and the Paralyzing Pounce on Islam,” *Al-Azhar Magazine* (May 2001).

El-Tahir El-Hamdi, “Ramadan in the Country of the Americans: Fertile Soil and Petty Problems,” *Al-Azhar Magazine* (February 2002).

24 Ahmad El-Sayyid Taqi El-Din, “Between the Magazine and the Reader,” *Al-Azhar Magazine* (August 2004).

25 Ismael Ahmad Abu El-Haytham, “Ramadan and Modern Challenges,” *Al-Azhar Magazine* (January 2002).

26 Abdel Azeem El-Mataani, “Who’s the Terrorist?” *Al-Azhar Magazine* (January 2002).

27 Ahmad El-Sayyid Taqi El-Din, “In Memory of the Beloved (Peace Be Upon Him): A Useful Blow,” *Al-Azhar Magazine* (May 2003).

28 Ahmad El-Sayyid Taqi El-Din, “Iraq Will Never Be Lost,” *Al-Azhar Magazine* (June 2003).

Ahmad El-Sayyid Taqi El-Din, “Between the Magazine and the Reader,” *Al-Azhar Magazine* (April 2005).

- e. Those calling for giving colloquial Arabic dialects more official status as opposed to *fusha* – a proposal that treads upon issues of religion and Arab unity. One writer stated: “Hostility towards *fusha* did not arise only from the colonizer, but also from those trumpeting the colonizer’s opinion.”²⁹
- f. Those calling for a return to Pharaonic Egypt or opposing the application of Islamic law. One writer accused a number of Egyptians of varying affiliations of being American agents. Without naming names, he detailed the political and ideological beliefs of three of the supposed infiltrators, one of whom was pro-Pharaonic and thus against Egypt having pan-Arab and Islamic identities, since according to such ideas Muslims are only conquerors. The second prominent Egyptian founded a party proposing the removal of any reference to Islamic law from the constitution. A third was said to have presided over a conference in Cairo that suggested teaching youth about pre-marital sex. The author linked the three seemingly unrelated stances by labeling all of these public figures as agents of the United States.³⁰
- g. Pro-democracy activists in the Egyptian opposition. Two presidential aspirants in the 2005 elections were accused by one writer in *Al-Azhar Magazine* of being U.S. agents, namely Ayman Nour from Al-Ghad Party and Mohammed Farid Hassanein, who announced himself as a write-in candidate. To affirm this accusation, the writer began the article with a Quranic verse which states: “O ye who believe! Take not the Jews and the Christians for your friends and protectors: They are but friends and protectors to each other. And he amongst you that turns to them (for friendship) is of them. Verily God guides not an unjust people” (5: 51). Another writer described members of an unnamed political movement (a clear allusion to the Kifaya Movement) as agents of a fifth column aimed against Egypt, organizing

Two presidential aspirants in the 2005 elections were accused by one writer in *Al-Azhar Magazine* of being U.S. agents, namely Ayman Nour from Al-Ghad Party and Mohammed Farid Hassanein.

²⁹ Abdel Moniam Younis, “The Impact of Language on the Nation’s Progress,” *Al-Azhar Magazine* (April 2004).

³⁰ Ahmad El-Sayyid Taqi El-Din, “University Culture in the United States,” *Al-Azhar Magazine* (April 2004). Mahmoud Imara, “Not Reformers...but Squanderers,” *Al-Azhar Magazine* (July 2004).

demonstrations without any popular support from Egyptians. A third writer compared Ayman Nour's relationship with the United States to that between the United States and the Solidarity Movement in Poland, which enjoyed American support against communist rule.³¹

3. Entrapment

The use of entrapment in interpreting the relationship between the West and Arabs and Muslims was restricted to six articles. For instance, one author labeled U.S. comments and promises during its war on Afghanistan an attempt to "sedate" Arabs and Muslims and entrap them in silence until the end of the war. Taking the opposite tack, another writer labeled the famous statement of George W. Bush a few days after Sept. 11, in which he called the war on al-Qaeda and the Taliban a "crusade," as an attempt to draw Arabs and Muslims, as well as the peoples of the West, into war. A third writer – the magazine's editor-in-chief – labeled the Israeli campaign against the Palestinians in 2002 as a failed effort to lure Egypt into war against the United States.

Meanwhile, a fourth article recalled two failed attempts to trick the Ottoman sultan into agreeing to establish a homeland for Jews in Palestine. The first of these attempts began with a memo written by British Foreign Minister Henry John Temple, the 3rd Viscount Palmerston, to the British ambassador to Turkey on Aug. 11, 1840. Temple requested that the ambassador work to persuade the Ottoman sultan to sanction Jewish immigration to Palestine, exploiting the repercussions of the conflict that had broken out between Mohammed Ali and the Ottomans. The second conspiracy began with a letter sent by the founder of Zionism, Theodor Herzl, with a friend to the Ottoman sultan, Abdul Hamid II, in which he offered to solve Turkey's financial crisis in exchange for Palestine, a proposal that the sultan unequivocally rejected. A fifth article described the U.S. announcement that it was aspiring to revive the roadmap, and demand that Israel accept it, as a plan to lure Arabs into peace negotiations that would lead nowhere. In this view, the United States would have achieved two goals: diverting attention away from the U.S. occupation of Iraq and allowing Israeli occupation forces to continue their geographic dissection of the West Bank and Gaza Strip.³²

31 Ahmad El-Sayyid Taqi El-Din, "Between the Magazine and the Reader," *Al-Azhar Magazine* (March/April-June 2005).

Ahmad El-Sayyid Taqi El-Din, "For a Handful of Dollars," *Al-Azhar Magazine* (April 2004).

32 "Between Newspapers and Magazines," December 2001; Ibrahim Oudayn, book review, *Identity of the Crusades*, by Qasim Abdu Qasim, *Al-Azhar Magazine* (January 2002); Mohammed Ragab El-Bayoumi, "Israel Draws Us into War with America," *Al-Azhar Magazine* (May 2002); Ahmad El-Sayyid Taqi El-Din, "Tomorrow the Stones Speak," *Al-Azhar Magazine* (May 2002); Salah Abdel Rahim Mohammed, "Between Israel and America in the War on Iraq," *Al-Azhar Magazine* (May 2002); Mohammed Hassan Abdel Khaliq, "Iraq Under the American Mandate," *Al-Azhar Magazine* (July 2003).

4. *Incredulity*

Even though this type of conspiracy-centered thinking is common in Arab writings, only four articles here can be clearly categorized as such. The reason is that the articles often begin on a skeptical note, questioning whether the prevalent interpretations of a certain issue can be trusted, and then utilizing one of the five other conspiracy patterns.

The events of Sept. 11 are regularly handled using skepticism. Doubts are frequently cast upon the U.S. version of who carried out the attacks. One article questioned how it was possible to be certain that a particular party committed the attacks, expressed skepticism about the facts surrounding Osama bin Laden, and described the attacks as “a script produced and recorded in Hollywood.” To justify his doubts, the writer loosely tied together a number of threads which together hardly support his conclusion.³³

Another article strongly denies that Sept. 11 was carried out by Muslims, claiming that it was a “treacherous Zionist plot to trap Muslims in a net of hostility and hatred,” and that the whole world knows of this Jewish conspiracy that “has been proven by newspapers and magazines”, but that “the Americans, their allies, and all the forces of evil and repression” have not listened to what was said.³⁴

A third article raised questions about the true goals of the invasion of Iraq and the objectives behind Washington’s revival of the roadmap plan, asserting that Israel and the Zionist lobby in the United States pushed the administration into war against Iraq.³⁵ A fourth was skeptical about studies of Islam and Islamic civilization conducted by Orientalists, about the goals behind them, and requested more precise results.³⁶

Three articles discussed the U.S. invasion of Iraq in terms of an Israeli role within Iraq, while arguing that Israel was the major beneficiary of the invasion.

5. *“Who benefits?”*

This pattern of analysis is characterized by asking the question “Who benefits?” to find the perpetrators behind any act. Such thinking was applied in seven articles focusing on two events, the first being Sept. 11. These analyses usually accuse the CIA and Mossad of involvement by claiming that the United States and Israel are the major

33 Ahmad El-Sayyid Taqi El-Din, “Human Rights ... an American Vision,” *Al-Azhar Magazine* (July 2002).

34 Sadiq Bakr Aita, “What is Happening Now?” *Al-Azhar Magazine* (May 2003).

35 Salah Abdel Rahim Mohammed, “Between Israel and America in the War on Iraq,” *Al-Azhar Magazine* (June 2003).

36 Ibrahim El-Fayoumi, “Rodinson and the Mutual Understanding Discourse Project to Arab Intellectuals,” *Al-Azhar Magazine* (June 2003).

beneficiaries of the attacks.³⁷ The second event is the U.S. invasion of Iraq, which three articles discussed in terms of an Israeli role within Iraq, while arguing that Israel was the major beneficiary of the invasion.³⁸

6. *Delusion*

Outright delusion would be the best way to classify one article that interpreted the blackouts in much of the northeast United States in August 2003 as divine retribution for American crimes against Muslims. The article started with several verses from the Quran in which God warns oppressors of the fate they will face, as demonstrated by the fortunes of the Pharaoh and the people of Ad (89: 6-14).³⁹

Logical and analytical contradictions

In this section, I will discuss how the use of conspiracies in analyzing Arab/Muslim relations with the Western/Jewish “other” fails to conform to the accepted rules of logic. These logical fallacies can take one of two forms: either parts of the article are self-contradictory, or the writer denies truths that are universally accepted.

In a March 2001 article on how Orientalists have dealt with the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), Abdel Azeem El-Mataani described Orientalists as:

a civilian army, born and raised in the colonial powers’ countries, serving their interests, paving the way before them for occupation, supporting them during occupation, and praising their impact after occupation, [their] weapon the pen, [their] ink the deep hatred of Islam, [their] shells words, and [their] objective to eliminate pan-Arabism and Islam if possible, or to distort the facts of Islam with all [their] malice and cunning. Many of them [the Orientalists] ought to leave academia and become comedians, since they are good for nothing but farce.⁴⁰

37 Mohammed Ibrahim El-Fayoumi, “The Philosophy of Arab Media Discourse between Justification and Change,” *Al-Azhar Magazine* (November 2001). Mohammed Hassan Abdel Khaliq, “Zionist Terrorism in Hebrew Literature,” *Al-Azhar Magazine* (November 2001). Mohammed Hassan Abdel Khaliq, “The Golden Age for Global Zionism in Facing Islam,” *Al-Azhar Magazine* (January 2002). Ahmad El-Sayyid Taqi El-Din, “Kashmir, a Nation Looking for Self-Determination,” *Al-Azhar Magazine* (February 2002). Ahmad El-Sayyid Taqi El-Din, “Human Rights ... an American Vision,” *Al-Azhar Magazine* (July 2002).

38 Salah Abdel Rahim Mohammed, “Technical Industrial Activity in Israel,” *Al-Azhar Magazine* (January 2003). Mohammed Hassan Abdel Khaliq, “Without an Address,” *Al-Azhar Magazine* (February 2003). Salah Abdel Rahim Mohammed, “Between Israel and America in the War on Iraq,” *Al-Azhar Magazine* (June 2003).

39 Ahmad El-Sayyid Taqi El-Din, “It is a Divine Warning for the Oppressors of the Earth,” *Al-Azhar Magazine* (September 2003).

40 Abdel Azeem El-Mataani, “Mohammed (Peace Be Upon Him) in the Orientalists’ Writings,” *Al-Azhar Magazine* (March 2001).

El-Mataani defends his position by saying that some Orientalists told “lies or fairy tales that Muhammad (peace be upon him) invented the Quran in the Cave of Hira,” singling out (and pointing out the Jewish origin of) Maxime Rodinson, who authored a biography of the Prophet, as well as condemning Charles Doughty, an English traveler and writer born in the mid-19th century. El-Mataani also mentions Washington Irving, “who argued that the Meccan revelations were truly divine, but that after fleeing to Medina, the Prophet (peace be upon him) became a worldly leader and made up the Quran as suited his personal ambitions.”⁴¹

Here we find that the writer begins his article with general accusations against Orientalists at large, and then, when forced to provide details, gives only three names. Perhaps it would have been more fitting if he had directed his charges against a smaller group, or those three specific Orientalists, instead of generalizing about an entire group. Countering his own original claim, the writer goes on to concede that there are some moderate Orientalists who have disproved the “slander” written by the previous three, mentioning seven by name, including Karen Armstrong, Alexis Carlyle, Lamartine and Leo Tolstoy. In other words, after claiming that Orientalists constitute an army against Islam, El-Mataani offered more than twice as many examples of balanced, fair scholars than of allegedly biased ones serving the needs of imperialism.

In an article entitled “Faces of the West in the Hall of Mirrors” from February 2002, Ibrahim El-Fayoumi writes:

The American West (the US and the West) were in agreement that the rising power after the Soviet Union would be Islam, and former US President Richard Nixon authored a book entitled *Seize the Moment*, meaning to hit Islam, which is nothing new for the West. What is new is that the zero hour that he saw as having come is specified. The American West seized the moment and waged a brutal attack on Bosnia-Herzegovina in depravity and conspiracy, brushing aside all moral and religious values and proceeding to commit all types of torture and merciless killing.

Here Dr. El-Fayoumi makes an obvious mistake when he lumps “the American West” and the Serbs together as one party, ignoring the fact that it was U.S.-led NATO forces that eventually waged a military campaign to stop Serb attacks on Bosnian Muslims, and that the West labeled the Serbs’ acts against Bosnian Muslims “war crimes,” later trying Serbian leaders in a specially constituted international court.

41 Abdel Azeem El-Mataani, “Mohammed (Peace Be Upon Him) in the Orientalists’ Writings,” *Al-Azhar Magazine* (March 2001).

In an article in April 2001, former Egyptian Minister of Religious Endowments Sheikh Ibrahim El-Dusouqi wrote:

The Jews in their documents agreed to write a book called “The Protocols of the Elders of Zion”, in which they say that they thought long and hard about how to corrupt mankind, and that they arranged the success of Darwin, because his theory would corrupt religion and morals, since it speaks of evolution, including the evolution of morals and religion. They were the ones who arranged for the success of Nietzsche, who said that God is dead, and that there is no Resurrection, no Reckoning, no virtue, no vice, no *haram* (forbidden), and no *halal* (permitted), but rather enjoyment. They are the ones who arranged for the success of Freud, who said a person would have to be stupid to believe that he is moving in this world according to ideals or virtues, and that what sets him in motion is sexual instinct. They are the ones who arranged for the success of every person who has corrupted for humanity its religion and morals through frivolous films in which the women are naked, because [the Jews] have a dream of controlling the whole world.⁴²

Here we find numerous blatant historical errors. Firstly, “The Protocols of the Elders of Zion” have been shown by various serious and impartial studies to be spurious. Jews are portrayed as possessing incredible influence, controlling world affairs and events from behind the scenes, including the minds of scholars and philosophers, to the benefit of “global Zionism”, without the slightest shred of evidence as to how these manipulations take place.

Furthermore, does it make sense for members of any religion to encourage atheists to wipe out all religions, their own religion among them? If their own religion were exempted, this would be another story, but history shows that most of the materialist and positivist philosophers from the onset of the Renaissance until the present have focused on criticizing the Old and New Testaments of the Bible.

Ahmad Amr Hashim in an April 2001 article on unity within the *umma* (Islamic nation) stated:

The colonial powers (the “enemies of the *umma*”) applied the “divide and conquer” policy in all of the lands they controlled, not only Muslim countries, as is seen in the constitution of political borders between modern countries, which were established under colonialism. The question, then, is why this policy succeeded in prolonging

42 Ibrahim El-Dusouqi, “No Life Without Religion,” *Al-Azhar Magazine*, (April 2001).

the underdevelopment of the Arab world while other peoples were able to overcome its impact. Any objective answer would have to point to the responsibility of internal factors. Splits between Muslim youth groups, and between them and the religious and political establishment, cannot also be blamed on “the enemies of our *umma*.” Differences in perspective between different generations, within a single generation, or within humanity at large, are hardly a new development, and if there is a failure to deal with such differences of opinion, or even talk about them, it is little surprise that they turn into disagreements.

It must be added here that the failure of most Arab and Islamic regimes to manage the dialogue process with their constituents is apparent. Thus, there is a coherent, logical explanation for the “rifts amongst Muslim youths, and between them and the preachers and regimes” without making claim to foreign conspiracies that are unsupported, at least in this article.

Conclusion

On the bright side, the conspiracy-centered thought still produced by the Egyptian religious establishment (20 percent of the survey total) is still relatively limited compared to elsewhere in the Arab world

These examples of conspiracy theories show how conspiracy-centered thinking can lead to completely illogical, self-contradictory, and untrue conclusions, and even an inability to specify the nature of the issues being analyzed. Consequently, writers using this approach cannot outline effective plans to confront present problems. Despite a complete lack of evidence, such authors accuse certain parties of responsibility for present ills. Not only are these articles libelous, they also negatively affect the chances of national consensus on pressing issues.

On the bright side, we can say that the conspiracy-centered thought still produced by the Egyptian religious establishment (60 articles, about 20 percent of the survey total) is still relatively limited compared to elsewhere in the Arab world. However, if we add the articles that present a negative stereotype of the “other” (67 articles total, 34 of which are on the West at large and 27 of which are about Jews), then the total percentage of negative attitudes towards the “other” rises to over 40 percent. This strongly negative view of the “other” makes it likely that conspiracy-centered thinking will continue to spread. ■