

The Modes of Arab Conspiracy Theories

MOHAMED ABDEL SALAM

Head of the Regional Security and Arms Control Program, Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, Egypt

IN CONTRAST TO SCIENTIFIC THOUGHT, which relies on logic, causality, observation, experimentation, and methods or theoretical frameworks that assist in the study of various phenomena, markedly non-scientific modes of thought prevail throughout the Arab world. These modes of thought take many forms, one being metaphysical thinking that employs religion to explain phenomena, even when they can be understood by scientific thinking that does not offend religious thought. Another common mode of non-scientific thought is superstition-based thinking, which relies on myths and hearsay. The most prevalent, however, and perhaps the most damaging of the modes of non-scientific thought, is conspiracy-centered thinking. Such thinking is based on nothing more than general frameworks that suggest there exist overarching plans and hidden – or even visible – forces that direct the world as if it were theater. This essay categorizes such conspiratorial thinking into six types, in order to assess the overall impact of conspiracy-based thinking in the Arab world.

1. Direct targeting

Conspiracy-centered thought in the Arab press, in academia and public opinion frequently promotes the notion that Arabs or Muslims are “targeted” by outside powers, preventing Arab nations from becoming politically influential, economically developed, technologically advanced, or militarily powerful.

Adherents to this view often rely on specific historical events for support. The

most important of these is the clash between European armies and Mohammad Ali in Egypt in the 19th century, which ended in the collapse of Mohammed Ali's rule in 1840. Another is the clash between President Gamal Abdel Nasser and the West, including the United States, during the 1950s and 1960s. Recent events in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as Western rhetoric and policy toward Iran and Syria are interpreted as contemporary examples of the same kind of targeted attack on the Arab world from the West. This mode of thinking interprets the ultimate goal of the occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq, and perceived preparations for similar scenarios in Iran and Syria, as nothing more than the manifestation of the American and Western goal of blocking the transformation of Arab and Islamic states into economically advanced or politically and militarily influential powers.

This type of conspiracy theory rests on the idea that there are external forces lying in wait for Arab states, always planning to attack them, or stab them in the back at the first available opportunity, with or without justification. This attack may be aimed

at foiling Arab experiments in unity, weakening national economies, reducing Arab military abilities, curtailing regional power or even invading Arab states.

Conspiracy-centered thought in the Arab press, in academia and public opinion frequently promotes the notion that Arabs or Muslims are “targeted” by outside powers.

The perpetuation of blaming the West depends on several clear assumptions, which are a nexus of nationalist and religious thought, expressed in their traditional and oftentimes Salafist forms used to build narrow

perceptions of the nature of the world. Some of the most pernicious and prevailing of these assumptions are the following: the world is in a continuous state of war in which each party's sole goal is wiping out or controlling the “other.” There is no end to this war and there is no real possibility of lasting peace. Another assumption constructs a worldview in which there are two sides, “us and them,” or the Arab-Islamic world and the West. In the jihadist lexicon, this same assumption is expressed by concept of two houses, Dar Al-Islam (House of the Faithful) and Dar Al-Kufur (House of the Infidels).

Arab analyses and interpretations of political phenomena and international relations using this framework rely on observations stemming from historical experiences specific to the colonial era and their continuing effects, certain readings of the lessons of Palestine, a concern for documents on state strategies and long-term planning, in addition to all politically extreme statements, reports, recommendations and research specific to the Arab-Islamic region, and finally analysis of events and policies in

Western countries. All such thought conspires in a way that leads to the same conclusion: namely, that “they are targeting us.”

Based on prevailing thought in the study of international relations, the problems of this mode are as follows:

- a. It ignores the idea that each state works to achieve its national interests and not the interests of others, and that each state identifies and defines these interests as it sees them. The conspiracy viewpoint fails to see that this is the usual trend in international relations, and is a product of the interaction of state interests and balances of power among concerned parties.
- b. It ignores any frameworks concerned with cooperation or competition – or with peaceful or non-violent politics – based on common interests, compromise and agreement. As such it ignores the interactive patterns of relations among nations, which represent 90 percent of international relations.
- c. It deals with the “other” first as essentially the West, and second as a uniform entity where differences among Western powers are explained as merely a distribution of roles, as in theater, without a similar approach afforded to other powers in Asia, Africa and Latin America.
- d. It explains history with a logic that asserts that Arab-Islamic parties have been completely peaceful; that they never committed any wrongs against the “other,” and that they have – all of them – been the victim of attacks or targeting on a broad scale throughout history.
- e. It ignores the acute conflicts history has witnessed among and within various Arab and Muslim states because of critical contradictions and destructive tendencies. These conflicts led to grave human and material losses no smaller in size and scope than the conflicts that have taken place between Arab and Muslim states and European and Western States.

Although it seems that this mode of thought is simple, it carries enormous complexities. It is the most widespread mode of conspiracy-centered thinking in the Arab world and appears sometimes to be used to mobilize the public or attract votes and amplify negative sentiment towards the “other.” It also has solid foundations in the history of colonialism and wars such as the Suez War of 1956, as well as in prevailing

interpretations of many recent wars. These wars are usually used as further examples that appear to confirm the veracity of any given analysis. Moreover, the current international climate – characterized by a real clash of cultures – also supports it. There is a targeting of extremist currents in both the Western world and the Arab world towards each other. Therefore examination of this mode of thinking is particularly important.

2. Subtle luring

Common to conspiracy-centered thinking is the idea that Arab and Muslim states have often been “lured” into misadventure. This mode of thinking is linked to pivotal events that turned Arab politics upside down, like Egypt’s defeat in the Arab-Israeli War of 1967 and Iraq’s defeat in 1991. This mode of thinking is relied upon heavily in the analysis of many major events that often end in national – or nationalist – disasters. However, analysis according to this framework usually comes after the fact, or retroactively. Generally, current crises (such as the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri with regard to Syria’s alleged role, or with the uranium program with regards to Iran) are not dealt with according to the same logic, but rather as if they are acts of targeting. After the crisis or disaster is over, the process of re-analyzing and reinterpreting begins.

Current crises, such as the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri with regard to Syria’s alleged role, are dealt with as if they are acts of targeting. After the crisis or disaster is over, the process of re-analyzing and reinterpreting begins.

The idea behind this pattern is that there is a “blueprint” usually prepared by a great power to put a Muslim or Arab party that stands against its higher interests in the Arab region in a difficult position. In other words, to “lay a trap” according to a set of steps meant to drag the given Muslim or Arab party into a situation where it can be “hunted down” or finished off.

Of the models that form the basis of this mode of thinking, we can refer to two. The first is what in some influential writings is called “turkey hunting,” used against President Nasser when he was lured into the 1967 war. The second is illustrated in the meeting that took place

between U.S. Ambassador to Iraq April Glaspie and Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, through which Saddam Hussein was lured – allegedly – into invading Kuwait as an essential step to ready the regional theater to strike Iraq.

Underlying this type of conspiracy-centered thinking are three basic assumptions:

1. There is a perpetrator and a target, and the interactions between them move in the direction of either the perpetrator or the target at all times. Thus, there is a sender and a recipient, and no third parties (or there may be, but not acting in concert). These roles never change.
2. The “target” is completely unaware of its role. It does not have free will to act or to manage the situation according to its own assessment. At the very least, it has no choice throughout the interaction, and is compelled to act as it does.
3. The “target” party (which of course is the Arab party) did not commit any wrongdoing. The entire issue is precisely and deliberately concocted long before it is carried out, according to documents that become available, to place the target in the “trap,” a process that is carried out flawlessly.

The analytical method applied by those who believe in this mode of thinking is largely simple and the same in each case. Meanwhile, the international relations environment is fraught with high-level complexities, especially related to conflict and crisis management, which makes it difficult to imagine that matters all move along conspiratorially. Thus, such analyses ignore that there are more realistic interpretations of the events they aim to explain, tied to decision-making processes, incorrect assessments and the constraints of the allegedly targeted party’s situation. The predominant style of Arab thinking, however, makes this mode of thought attractive, despite that it is used to interpret events of great consequence.

3. Raising suspicion

Suspicion-based thinking has seen noticeable growth in recent years across all Arab circles, including within educational centers and social studies colleges, or more precisely among practitioners who work in such institutions. This growth has occurred especially in the period since Sept. 11, 2001. This event is associated with all major developments of that period, which involved issues related to acts of terrorism, weapons of mass destruction and the Iraq war, and particularly with regard to U.S. policy.

The content of this pattern is that there is another explanation for what is happening or what they say happened. There is an attitude of disbelief towards explanations offered for an unimaginably large number of events, even if there are specific indications and evidence for these events, and even if the party that suspects has no contrary information of any value to add.

This pattern is based on two complementary assumptions:

1. Things are not as they seem – there is necessarily something else that explains what is going on; that what happened (or is happening) could not be as it is presented to be.
2. The other party is a liar; what it decides or says should not be believed because it has goals that differ from those it claims. Hence, what it says publicly is not the truth.

Perhaps this mode is also based on a value judgment that the other party has no morals of any kind. This judgment supports the broad legacy of statements in the Arab world linking progress to immorality; a scenario that portrays Arabs as moral while others are not.

There are many examples associated with this mode of conspiracy-centered thought in recent years, but the most prominent are:

- a. Rejection of the idea that al-Qaeda (or Osama Bin Laden) carried out the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks.
- b. Popular belief in the veracity of statements Iraqi Minister of Information Mohammed Saeed Al-Sahaf made during the invasion of Iraq.
- c. Doubt that Saddam Hussein was actually the person who was arrested in December 2003, and intense controversy over the account of his arrest.

In light of the inability of suspicion theorists to present a coherent alternative explanation or account about a particular event or phenomenon, they usually rely on a set of tools as follows:

- a. Circumstantial evidence used to cast doubt on given incidents, such as referring to the timing of the incident (“Why at this time?”), or the synchronicity of certain facts related to the event, or comparing given incidents to others in different contexts.
- b. Refuting disseminated accounts by highlighting inconsistencies and using these inconsistencies as de facto evidence of alternative interpretations

that in themselves are left unsubstantiated.

This pattern finds support in two interrelated factors that have raised the suspicion-based mode of thinking to its current prevailing position: a culture of “no confidence” on the one hand, and a culture of denial on the other. Amid the flood of misinformation and deliberate propaganda attendant to the contemporary era, it is alleged that there are “justifiable reasons for doubt”, in addition to a number of previous events that provide “objective” foundations for suspicion (such as the issue of Iraqi nuclear weapons after 1998). These are matters that pose serious analytical issues. The problem of this type of conspiracy-centered thinking, however, is that it has reached the point of doubting obvious and uncontroversial facts without proposing alternate logical scenarios.

(There is) doubt that Saddam Hussein was actually ... arrested in December 2003.

4. Cui bono?

Asking the question, “In whose benefit” is one of the most common modes of conspiracy-centered thinking in the Arab world in recent years. This is especially so in attempts to interpret major events in the region, such as the Karbala attacks in Iraq, the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in Lebanon, and the Sinai bombings in Taba, Egypt.

This mode is based on a particular logic that seems quite reasonable and consistent, which is that there is a beneficiary of each operation, development, incident, or crime. It is a logic usually associated with the perpetration of a crime, but whose general applicability has spread.

This type of conspiracy-centered thinking relies on two main assumptions:

1. Every party has a particular interest that it seeks to achieve by all means, legal and illegal, and that the “interest” is usually powerful enough that it could drive given actors to commit crimes.
2. Every party that is a beneficiary in some way from a certain incident is a suspect on principle; or more accurately is convicted in the context of the incident because it is logical that the beneficiary would have done it, or contributed in executing it.

Thus, the beneficiary mode of conspiracy-based thinking usually does not recognize the existence of rules that govern the interactions among the interests of given parties because departure from these rules is a basic presumption. The definition of power adopted by this mode of thinking focuses on its primitive aspect, related only to the use of direct intervention to achieve goals.

The problem with this mode of conspiracy-centered thinking is demonstrated in the following:

- a. Those who think according to this pattern most often use it to explain events or developments, and not just crimes. However, dealing with events within the logic of criminal analysis leads to incorrect conclusions because such theorists ignore the existence of general factors, complex reasoning, and particular decisions related to given events.
- b. Even for criminal incidents, there are two aspects to every story. The first is related to prior (intentional) motive and the second to the actual act. Adherents to this mode of thinking simply focus on motives, not specific information related to the act. The mere existence of certain parties' motives is enough to explain the incident from their point of view.
- c. It does not solve the problem of multiple beneficiaries for all events. Usually what prevails is widespread analytical confusion over this issue, leading to a proliferation of accusations. This provides opportunity for the working in of biases or "stereotypes," far from actual facts or the complexities surrounding the activity of all possible actors. The interests of potential beneficiaries may even be contradictory.

According to Arab penchant, often the same parties – such as the Israeli Mossad or the CIA – are accused in every incident, as they are the stereotypical beneficiaries of everything that happens in the Arab region even though the real actors may be completely different.

Analysis has shown the presence of enormous contradiction in the logic of this theory in many cases where it was used to interpret events. The general idea, assuming the maximum hold of logic, is that it is possible the usual suspect perpetrated the given event, though this should not be relied upon in practice. In practical terms, however, the beneficiary may or may not perpetrate the event, just as there are multiple beneficiaries (free riders) in every situation. Any given action may also backfire

on those who think, by miscalculation of the reaction to it, they will benefit from it.

Moreover in the case of complex actions, in the end it may become clear that the perpetrator is a distant party that is not benefiting in any definable way. This party may have other motives, very different from the logic of this mode of thinking (motives that are religious, revenge-motivated, or random), and the act may even end up damaging the party in the final outcome.

The proper logic in dealing with events should be focused on the “probable actor” and not the “perceived motivation” of suspect actors, except when based on hard information available, so that analysis develops hand-in-hand with available information. There is certainly room for questioning who benefits, but analysis should not be characterized by fanaticism that often dictates who is suspect and who is not.

5. The fifth column

The charge of infiltration is one of the oldest forms of conspiracy-centered thinking in the Arab region. It is a form that is prevalent on all levels, first and foremost within Arab leftist parties but also firmly established in the writings of key opinion shapers and used to explain numerous issues.

The idea is that persons, groups or even states fall under the influence of outside actors in such a way that they begin acting in accordance with the objectives, interests, will or instructions of those actors, akin to a “fifth column.” This mode of thought, in fact, is responsible for many negative aspersions cast throughout Arab culture and political life, not only among secular political groups but also among and by religious and fundamentalist movements.

This type of conspiracy-centered thinking has taken many forms that have shaped currents of thought and analysis over long periods of time. Though situations change, this type of conspiracy-centered thinking is deeply rooted, its most important forms include:

- a. Accusations that were circulated in leftist parties about the recruitment of members as “informers” for the police, or who were acting as agents for the CIA, all for flimsy reasons. To this day such accusations still exist on a large scale.

According to Arab penchant, often the same parties – such as the Israeli Mossad or the CIA – are accused in every incident, as they are the stereotypical beneficiaries of everything that happens in the Arab region.

98 Reality Check: Conspiracy Theories in the Arab World

- b. Accusations that were, and still are, directed against some Arab political systems, accusing them of being agents of Western countries, the United States in particular. Current flagrant cases include the governments that came after Saddam Hussein in Iraq and after the Taliban in Afghanistan.
- c. Accusations that were, and still are, directed at Arab leaders and politicians accusing them of being Western agents or being in contact with Israel, or being “puppet governments.” Such accusations persist, for example regarding Saad Al-Hariri in Lebanon and Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan before her assassination.
- d. Accusations directed at groups of intellectuals, activists or journalists in Arab countries saying they are “agents for the outside” working from the inside, a common tone in Egyptian and Syrian writings.
- e. Accusations of cultural penetration, or so-called “foreign presence” – American or foreign funding in particular – are often brought up in anti-globalization analyses. These accusations are a fixture in the vocabulary of several political currents in the Arab world.

In the Arab world, this conspiracy-centered thinking is one of the worst patterns of such thinking because it is linked to moral accusations raised in seemingly everyday contexts. In general, the logic of this type of thinking contains a number of problems, the most important of which are:

1. Lack of complete understanding of the nature of highly complex political relations among states, the manner in which relations among intelligence services are run, or of negotiations, communications or secret deals that sometimes occur among these services or between two state actors, as well as other forms of interaction.
2. Those who think in the infiltration mode cannot imagine the possibility of a declared or undeclared agreement among given parties on matters of mutual interest, and particularly between Arab countries and the so-called great powers. They also do not conceive of the possibility that local actors can take independent if complementary positions with such powers based on real assessments or convictions.

3. This mode of thinking is tied in most cases to the absence of any information of value regarding given events or interactions. This is often because relevant information is classified, or there is an agreement not to disclose or delve into it. Typically it is difficult for the accused parties to defend themselves because often much of what is questioned falls under umbrella of “state interests.”

The dilemma of this mode of conspiracy thinking is that there are crimes of high treason or espionage, but the relation of these crimes to the infiltration mode of thinking resembles the relation of conspiracies to conspiracy-centered thinking. As long as matters do not enter under stipulations or laws regarding treason or espionage, or under blatant overstepping of the rules of special relationships among nations, they enter the scope of conspiracy-centered thinking.

6. Wild assertions

Sometimes conspiracy-centered thinking at the public level enters into a field that can only appear characterized by delusion. Despite that it is presumed to be the mode of thought of the unsophisticated, by virtue of its lack of even a minimum of logic, delusion-based conspiracy thinking is being widely distributed in some tabloid newspapers in the Arab world that have come to be called the “yellow press,” as well as via some Internet sites. It is sometimes even evident among students and the educated, and repeated in the Arab media.

This type of thought is linked to a complete avoidance of sound, normal thinking based on the precepts of logic. It even runs to hallucinating or imagining things that do not exist, or baselessly attributing given things to a person assumed to be behind the events in question. It may be based on relationships



Figure 1.

One of the most notable cases of this mode of thinking that has spread in Egypt through different periods and has escalated in recent times had to do with reversing the words “Coca Cola.” Some people put the logo of the soft drink in front of a mirror and read it as it appeared in reverse, finding that it had become: “No Muhammad, No Mecca.” This is one of a long list of other such cases, including chatter about the effects of “Pokemon” on children, “Mossad crafts” and “Mossad belts” said to cause infertility, the appearance of the Virgin Mary in some churches, words of the Quran formed by trees, a verse in the Quran that is said to predict the events of Sept. 11, 2001, a genetic bomb created by Israel, and other waves of hysteria that recur every so often.

that do not exist at all, behaviors imagined through a state of hysterical suspicion, misinterpretations related to nontraditional ways of looking at things, or situations of collective derangement affecting individuals.

This mode is not based on specific assumptions. It is likely a particular “condition” that affects large segments of people in societies during periods of pressure, leading to a kind of temporary inability to make sound judgments. Thus they imagine things that are difficult to believe under normal circumstances. The whole issue is linked to prevalent popular culture in various Arab countries, where some of the roots of this pattern can be found in prevailing metaphysical or superstitious thinking.

The main features of this type of thinking are as follows:

1. It assumes (or sees, or realizes or believes) things that do not exist and that are difficult to believe are real, based on relationships, similarities, hearsay, or rumors that completely lack logic when analyzed.
2. It shows the maximum suspicion by the concerned party toward the “other,” whether the “other” is an internal group that differs culturally, or an external power that conspires against it, manipulates it, or is allegedly working to hurt it.


Usually there is no serious evidence upon which to base such judgments. Most of the time it is not possible to prove what has been alleged. Such thinking takes the form of patterns that appear from time to time, in certain quarters, and are escalated and spread through modern means of communication, particularly the Internet, before subsiding by themselves because of their shortcomings or reactions to them.

The interpretations seen in various writings stemming from this mode are tied to the effects of major defeats, the degradation of popular culture, the effects of popular newspapers, increased pressure on the standard of living, the rule of religious extremists, or national waves of irrationality. All cases that link such conspiracies with the “other,” rather than a force of nature, are tied to a lack of familiarity with the “other.”

Conclusion

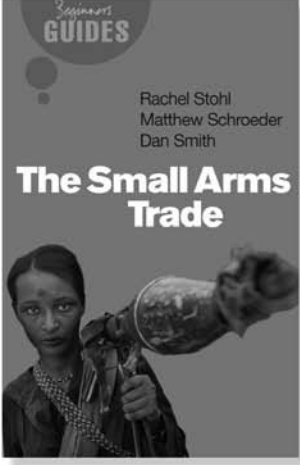
The above-mentioned modes represent coherent stereotypes that are tied to and drive the spread of conspiracy theories and conspiracy-centered thinking in the Arab world. Conspiracy-centered thinking is a serious problem, reflecting a deterioration of thought in general. More importantly, numerous parties instrumentally employ such thinking in an effort to win the favor of public opinion at the expense of scientific

analysis and objectivity. This political employment is not just a cultural phenomenon, but is conscious, distinguishing it from other forms of non-scientific thinking in the Arab region. ■



ONEWORLD

WEAPONS OF INDIVIDUAL DESTRUCTION



The Small Arms Trade

Rachel Stohl
Matthew Schroeder
Dan Smith

The Small Arms Trade

A Beginner's Guide

RACHEL STOHL, MATTHEW SCHROEDER & DAN SMITH

The proliferation and misuse of small arms and light weapons is one of the most pressing security threats of the 21st century. Loaded with fascinating anecdotes and disturbing statistics, this guide provides a gripping overview of the global impact that these cheap and easily obtainable weapons have had, the extent of their proliferation, the threat they pose in the wrong hands, and strategies for reining in this deadly scourge.

Covering everything from gun-toting militias to child soldiers to terrorists armed with shoulder-fired missiles, this is required reading for anyone who wishes to fully understand one of today's key threats to international peace.

1-85168-476-X | £9.99/\$14.95 | Nov-2006

Coverage includes

- A basic introduction to firearms technology and its evolution,
- A rich history of the AK-47 assault rifle and the Stinger missile,
- The politics involved as governments try to curb the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons.

- RACHEL STOHL is Senior Analyst at the Center for Defense Information at the World Security Institute in Washington, DC.
- MATT SCHROEDER is the Manager of the Arms Sales Monitoring Project at the Federation of American Scientists.
- COLONEL DAN SMITH is the Senior Fellow on Military Affairs at the Friends Committee on National Legislation.

Available from all good bookshops or order direct from Oneworld Publications and receive 30% discount by quoting reference OW30SP07

For US/Canada orders - Phone: 1-800-462-6420 or 1-717-794-3800; Fax: 1-800-338-4550 or 1-717-794-3803; Email: custserv@nbnbooks.com
(Subject to estimated P&P - \$4.00 for first book, \$1.00 for each additional book, within US and \$5.00 for first book, \$1.00 for each additional book.
For orders from other countries please email marketing@oneworld-publications.com or visit www.oneworld-publications.com.