ArabInsight

Bringing Middle Eastern Perspectives to Washington

Vol. 2 | No. 2 SUMMER 2008 | ISSN 1936-8984

EMERGING FINANCIAL & ECONOMIC TRENDS

Gulf Investments in the United States
Unwelcome Money
JASSIM AL MANNAIE

Islamic Banking
Myths and Facts
SARAH S. AL-RIFAEE

Egyptian Islamists and Nonviolence
Views from the Prison Cell
DIAA RASHWAN

China in the Middle East
Perspectives from the Arab World
MOHAMED BIN HUWAIDIN

Arabs and the 2008 American Election
Hopes and Predictions

ALSO INSIDE »

Reality Check: Conspiracy Theories in the Arab World -
in the media, religious institutions and educational curricula

PUBLISHER
Bruce G. Blair

EDITOR IN CHIEF
Mohamed Elmenshawy

MANAGING EDITOR
Mohamed Farahat

EDITORS
Elizabeth Broadwin
Summer Marion
Judith McClintock
Kathleen Miles
Deniz Ozdemir

TRANSLATION
Paul Wulfsberg

WEB APPLICATION DEVELOPER
Mohamed Elkafoury

DESIGN
Freerayn Graphics

MEDIA INQUIRIES
Contact our press office: (202) 797-5273
info@worldsecurityinstitute.org

SUBSCRIPTIONS
To request a hard-copy subscription, write to us at:

WSI – Arab Insight
1779 Massachusetts Ave. NW, Ste. 615
Washington, D.C. 20036
Tel: (202) 332-0900
Fax: (202) 462-4559

Or e-mail: info@worldsecurityinstitute.org.

Sign-up for a free electronic subscription at www.arabinsight.org

WSI CAIRO
Mohamed Elmenshawy, Director
40 A Mohamed Mazhar St. Suite #32
Zamalek
Cairo, Egypt 11211

ISSN 1936-8984

World Security Institute

Bringing Middle Eastern Perspectives to Washington

Arab Insight, an innovative journal that features authoritative analyses from Middle Eastern experts on critical regional issues, seeks to improve the relationship between the United States and the Arab world by cultivating a better understanding of the complex issues facing the Middle East among Western policy-makers and the public at large.

Articles in *Arab Insight* do not represent any consensus of opinion. While readers may agree or disagree with the ideas set out in these articles, it is our purpose to present a diversity of views rather than identifying with a particular body of beliefs.

The analyses, interpretations and conclusions expressed in ***Arab Insight*** articles are solely those of the individual authors and should not be attributed to the World Security Institute or any other individuals or organizations in the Middle East or the United States.

ADVISORY BOARD
Jon B. Alterman
Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, D.C.

Sajed Ahmed Abul al-Rikabi
School of Law and Politics, University of Basra, Iraq

Haila al-Mekaimi
Euro-Gulf Research Unit, University of Kuwait, Kuwait

Michele Dunne
Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, D.C.

Amy Hawthorne, Executive Director,
Hollings Center, Washington, D.C.

Abdel Moneim Said
Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, Egypt

Salama Ahmed Salama
Al Ahram Daily, Egypt

ArabInsight

Summer 2008

Editor's Note

ONE CANNOT DENY THAT CONSPIRACIES EXIST in political and international relations, but it would be a mistake to explain or interpret politics – domestic or international – as only the product of behind-the-scenes machinations. This conspiracy-orientated thinking ignores the theories, concepts and literature of political science that can help us understand these phenomena.

Conspiratorial thought tends to arrive at monolithic, airtight conclusions, and proposes easy explanations that avoid the toils of real research. In the Arab world, the spread of conspiratorial thought contributes to the perpetuation of major dilemmas in Arab life.

Many factors have made Arab thought ripe for the introduction of conspiracy theories; most important have been successive Arab crises that seem to have no end in sight. We have witnessed ongoing failure to put a practical end – or even lay the theoretical basis for an end – to many major problems in the Arab world, whether on a regional or national level.

This issue of *Arab Insight* devotes several articles to understanding conspiracy theories in the Arab world. The articles focus on analyzing different types of conspiratorial thought, examining their individual and shared features. An essay by Hani Nasira of the Al-Mesbar Center for Studies and Research in Dubai deals with the most prevalent model – endemic skepticism – in greater detail. Other articles address the spread of conspiratorial modes of thought within select fields, such as the media, academic curricula and Islamic religious institutions.

Two observations are pertinent here:

First, the fact that we are looking at conspiratorial thought in the Arab world does not mean we believe that Arab culture possesses a monopoly on conspiracy theories. Most, if not all, cultures know various forms of conspiracy thinking; the important distinction, however, is the degree to which such modes of thought prevail.

Second, the fact that we are addressing conspiratorial thought in the Arab world does not mean that we believe Arab culture is devoid of scientific or rationalist modes of thought. These modes certainly exist, including among religious movements.

Change in the Arab world

Changes underway in Arab societies, within economic, social and religious realms, remain hot topics of discussion. Despite the relatively slow pace of political reform, perhaps due to the control of ruling regimes over the process, profound and comprehensive transformations have taken place and may have a far-reaching impact on democratic reform in the medium term.

We can distinguish between two major types of socioeconomic transformation. The ***first*** began largely in the early 1990s with the process of privatization and transition to a market economy which, particularly in the Arab world, did not coincide with political transformation. This raised important questions about the way in which Arab states managed this process. After more than 15 years, have these programs led to real economic liberalism or given rise to a liberal reform agenda? Using the Algerian experience, Dr Mohamed Ratoul, professor of economics at Al-Shalaf University, addresses some of these questions.

The ***second*** set of transformations is more recent. They are linked to changes in political Islam, and are consequences of the current oil spike in the Arab Gulf and the spread of the internet.

We can isolate three strands within these transformations:

First is the revisionism currently underway within militant jihadi Islamist movements. Some of these movements are engaging in a two-fold process: they are offering a profound, fundamental critique of their past practices while also creating a new ideology that is based on a renunciation of violence and a rethinking of their discourse vis-à-vis the "other." Diaa Rashwan, head of the Islamist Movements Program at Cairo's Al-Ahram Center for Strategic and Political Studies, examines the future of religious violence in Egypt and the state of international jihadism, most importantly al-Qaeda. His article offers an analytical reading of the content of recent revisions, an examination of the nature of the changes these groups have undergone, and some thoughts on the reasons for the transformation.

Another aspect is the spread of electronic media in the Arab world, particularly blogs and online forums. Despite their relative novelty, the fact that broad segments of the Arab public – particularly the youth – are making political use of this new media gives us reason to inquire about the potential consequences for democratization, particularly in light of increasing Internet penetration and availability. Electronic media has also become a means of political and social mobilization, as seen in the April 6 and May 4 strikes in Egypt where the Internet became an organizational tool.

Kuwaiti Researcher Afraa Albabtain offers an analysis of political blogs in the Arab Gulf, in which she concludes that despite their positive contributions, they will not necessarily play a large role in fostering democratization over the short term. There remains a sizable gap between virtual political activism and traditional street activism. And despite being widespread, she argues that internet penetration has not yet reached the levels necessary to have a tangible impact.

The final aspect of recent changes in the Arab world is the phenomenon of sovereign wealth funds, based largely in the Gulf. These have played a prominent role given recent oil spikes and are expected to have important consequences for the Gulf states' relations with the global economy. They may even have consequences in the political domain as well, given moves by some funds to acquire large Western companies that are national symbols in their homelands. This may spark Western reservations about these funds, based on security fears, and spur Western countries to restrict Gulf investments.

In light of this, Jassim Al-Mannai, chairman of the board of the Arab Monetary Fund, asks a question: What can be done on both the Arab and Western side to overcome this crisis of trust?

For the Western world, Al-Mannai suggests changing the negative image of sovereign wealth funds fostered by Western media, which portrays them as seeking to invade and control Western economies though they hold no more than 2 percent of the $165 trillion traded assets worldwide. In addition, Al-Mannai notes that Gulf sovereign wealth funds are long-term investments prepared to bear short-term market fluctuations, making them a stabilizing factor.

These transformations are so significant that *Arab Insight* may devote future issues to exploring them in detail. ■

ArabInsight
Bringing Middle Eastern Perspectives to Washington

CHANGE IN THE ARAB WORLD

Gulf Investments in the United States: Unwelcome Money 11
Jassim Al Mannaie, United Arab Emirates

Islamic Banking: Myths and Facts 19
Sarah S. Al-Rifaee, Iraq

Arabs and the 2008 American Election: Hopes and Predictions 31
Arab Insight staff

Egyptian Islamists and Nonviolence: Views from the Prison Cell 43
Diaa Rashwan, Egypt

Downloading Democracy: Bloggers in the Gulf 53
Afraa Ahmed Albabtain, Kuwait

China in the Middle East: Perspectives from the Arab World 67
Mohamed Bin Huwaidin, United Arab Emirates

Economic Reform and Political Openings: Lessons from Algeria 77
Mohamed Ratoul, Algeria

REALITY CHECK: CONSPIRACY THEORIES IN THE ARAB WORLD

The Modes of Arab Conspiracy Theories 89
Mohamed Abdel Salam, Egypt

Skepticism in the Arab World: The Base of Conspiracies 103
Hani Nasira, United Arab Emirates

Inventing Fiction? Conspiracy Theories in Arab Media 115
Hamdy Hassan Abdul Ainien, Egypt

Teaching Fiction? Conspiracy Theories in Arab Public Schools 127
Hoda al-Bakr, Egypt

Preaching Fiction? Conspiracy Theories in Religious Institutions 139
Nezar Eltahawy, Egypt

Gulf Investments in the United States

Unwelcome Money

JASSIM AL MANNAIE
Director-General and Chairman of the Board, Arab Monetary Fund, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates

DESPITE THE FACT that Arab Gulf investment abroad is nothing new, recent developments have given these investments unforeseen dimensions. As Gulf investments abroad – and specifically in the West – have come into focus, economic and even political relations for countries of the Gulf region have been affected. The first experiment in the field of foreign investment for Gulf countries occurred in the 1970s when monetary surpluses from oil exceeded their ability to absorb the increased revenue. The majority of these investments took the shape of indirect investment via the buying and selling of stocks and bonds in Western countries, specifically in the United States and Europe. This occurred especially because Arab economies at the time were culture-oriented and largely unfriendly to outside investments, whether Arab or foreign.

Gulf investment trends

With the impact of the new oil boom at the beginning of the 21st century several factors have emerged that have markedly changed the nature of Gulf investments abroad. The first of these developments is that growing fiscal surpluses led to a significant increase in the volume of investments in general, and foreign investment in particular. Similarly, the recent increase in fiscal surpluses encouraged most countries in the region – if not all – to create what is known as "financial stability funds," aimed primarily at diversification of sources of income to ensure continuing revenue for future

generations. Ultimately, these funds represent large sums earmarked for investment, especially foreign investment.

Also among the factors changing the nature of Gulf investments abroad is an improvement in the investment climate in Arab countries as a result of economic reforms undertaken during the 1980s and '90s. These reforms have encouraged Gulf countries to direct an increasing proportion of their investment to projects within Arab countries, whether in real estate or tourism, or in direct and indirect financial investment.

Globalization and the growing interdependence of economies have clearly impacted on the distribution of Gulf investments abroad.

Likewise, globalization and the growing interdependence of economies have clearly impacted the distribution of Gulf investments abroad. Despite that Western countries have retained the lion's share, developing regions, especially Arab and Asian countries, have begun to attract more Gulf investment. According to relevant international institutions, Gulf investments abroad today are distributed geographically as follows: approximately 55 percent in American investment tools; approximately 19 percent in European investments; approximately 11 percent in Arab countries; 11 percent in Asian countries; and an estimated 4 percent in other regions.

In addition, the preferred investment tools for Gulf investments have changed over the past few years. There is now an increasing tendency toward direct investment, rising to a rate of more than 15 percent of investments compared with approximately 11 percent only four to five years ago. At the same time, there has been a noted decline in the rate of bank deposits in the Gulf investment portfolio, from 45 percent in 2001 to approximately 27 percent at the end of last year.

Yet the most important development related to Gulf investments abroad, particularly during the past few years, is the new trend of Gulf acquisition of large global companies and organizations. Such acquisitions have recently provoked rancor among Western countries, often based on unjustified fears and arguments. Indeed, the conservative attitude of Western countries towards the investment of "sovereign wealth funds," in particular from the Gulf, seems inconsistent with the call by said Western countries for the free movement of capital and the opening of markets. By the same token, it also appears contrary to Western calls for petroleum-rich states to increase their investments to help resolve the fiscal imbalances that plague key Western economies.

That said, media outcry and Western conservative attitudes might be attributed to the latest trend in Gulf investments of focusing on a number of companies that are national symbols in some Western countries. There are, of course, other arguments

put forward by Western countries to justify their reservations about these investments, including the fact that these investments come from governments and therefore may not be purely investment-driven. Other contentions include that such investments lack transparency, as there is neither sufficient data on them nor information about their policies and strategies. This, critics believe, could affect the state of financial markets in the case of a sudden shift in investments, considering the magnitude of these investments. Regardless of whether or not such arguments are justified, such attitudes and their potential impact on Gulf investments cannot be underestimated.

Media outcry and Western conservative attitudes might be attributed to the latest trend in Gulf investments of focusing on a number of companies that are national symbols in some Western countries.

The not-so-free investment market

In this context, the approval of such investments within the United States is subject to strict procedures and extraordinary review. Within the European Union, regulators are currently setting controls – where once there were no restrictions – on the movement of this money. This is in addition to the tasking of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to set laws that govern such investments.

Overall, Western countries appear keen to limit the acquisition of what they consider strategic foundations or sectors. In particular, they are moving towards disallowing, for this type of investment, greater than 20 percent ownership of any company or institution absent a special permit. In all cases, these Western states will try to ensure that these investments do not buy the right to vote in a way that can influence the management of companies they seek to own.

In other words, Western countries seek to attract the funds of Gulf investments but without necessarily affording Gulf countries the right to choose the kind of companies to invest in or have a voice in the management of these companies.

What, therefore, can be done with Gulf investments? In general, with the steady accumulation of monetary surpluses, states in the region will not have many options but to invest abroad, especially in Western states. But to avoid any problems with Western countries, it might be wise to study how best to not incite rancor in these countries relative to Gulf investments. What follows are some modest observations on this matter.

The first question that may be asked: Is the acquisition of large international companies that have become national symbols the most profitable option for Gulf in-

vestors, not only in terms of the high costs associated with such acquisitions but also in terms of the political sensitivity of such acquisitions? Answering this question is the first step on the part of the investor.

Diversifying sources of income, which Gulf countries seek to achieve through investment abroad, must take into account the need to create vertical and horizontal linkages among firms Gulf countries seek to invest in, in addition to the needs of their region's economies. Such an assessment may make investment in large Western companies, which often raise the sensitivity level of Western public opinion towards investments by certain countries, unfavorable.

In addition, as long as many investments will not be permitted to translate to votes commensurate with their share in the company, why insist on having a number of shares significant enough to raise the fears of Western countries?

Further, at a time when the region suffers from a lack of qualified personnel, it is necessary to inquire about the feasibility of guaranteeing proper management of these large investments, especially in the case of possessing significant portions of companies and global institutions that have complex and intricate markets and operations.

In general, with growing fiscal surpluses for the Arab Gulf, it seems that the subject of Gulf investments abroad will continue to attract the world's attention, which may generate reactions that may not be in the interest of the countries of the region. This calls for moving quickly to set an appropriate strategy for dealing with global trends, to preserve the interests of Gulf countries on the one hand, and ease negative attitudes towards Gulf investments abroad on the other.

Western attitudes: revisions and fears

Despite continued Western fears towards sovereign wealth funds, recent developments in the global economy – especially in the aftermath of the mortgage crisis in the United States and enormous resulting losses for many American and European financial institutions, as well as the trend toward general recession – seem to have led to a revision of Western attitudes toward such funds. Hopefully this is neither a temporary revision nor an opportunistic effort to save Western financial institutions in difficult circumstances.

Recently, large Western banks have been exposed to huge losses estimated at hundreds of billions of dollars because of the mortgage crisis, including Citigroup, Merrill Lynch and recently Credit Suisse. Sovereign wealth funds moved quickly to save these Western banks, even in comparison with IMF movements to save poor nations in crisis. Some might say that these funds were not acting to save the banks, but to achieve large returns as a result of reduced costs of shares amid the crisis. Of course,

achieving investment returns must be, in the end, the aim of these funds. However, the reality is that sovereign funds have suffered losses in saving these banks, although these losses are so far only on the books. It is the hope of investors that these losses turn into profits soon.

To picture the size of the sacrifices incurred by sovereign funds from investments in Western countries, some examples follow. Citigroup saw a sovereign fund investment input estimated at $7.5 billion but whose value today is not more than $6 billion. Similarly, sovereign fund investments in Merrill Lynch, estimated at about $6.6 billion, have now decreased in value by eight percent. This scenario also applies to a third case, that of Credit Suisse, where sovereign fund investments have already lost the equivalent of eight percent of their value in only a few weeks.

Fears of Western countries towards sovereign wealth funds do not stem from rational justification; rather they often seem to be affected by political protectionist tendencies, which may unintentionally work against the interests of these countries themselves.

While it is true that investments are exposed to temporary market fluctuations, it is also true that economic indicators in the American economy in particular and the global economy in general do not appear optimistic. Investments, therefore, may suffer greater degradation before they are able to turn profitable or even recover their original value.

It is important to emphasize here the necessity of changing the negative image painted by Western media of Gulf investment funds, which have been portrayed as an attempt to invade Western economies – as indicated recently on the front cover of one of the most important Western magazines – though the funds have gone to significant lengths to rescue some Western financial institutions. Such a revision of attitudes would serve the interests of both sides and underline the positive aspects of such funds, which without a doubt represent, at least in cases such as those mentioned, common interests.

Until now, unfortunately, acceptance of sovereign fund investors appears at best forced. Experience in both Western and Eastern states shows that attitudes towards sovereign funds are not fixed but are governed by conditions that may be temporary, attitudes changing when and if circumstances change. It is the author's assessment that the fears of Western countries towards sovereign wealth funds do not stem from rational justification; rather they often seem to be affected by political protectionist tendencies, which may unintentionally work against the interests of these countries themselves.

Certainly these fears become more surprising after recognizing the many distinguishing characteristics associated with sovereign wealth fund investments. First, there have not been any negative ramifications in the record of these funds so far. Therefore, prevailing fears seem mostly based on expectations rather than on actual experience. Second, what these funds represent at the present time does not amount to more than two percent of the approximately $165 trillion that make up the volume of shares traded globally. In other words, even assuming that these funds wanted to move their investments suddenly, it would have little influence. Thus fears of such a move are exaggerated to a great extent.

Fears of Western countries towards sovereign wealth funds do not stem from rational justification; rather they often seems to be affected by political protectionist tendencies, which may unintentionally work against the interests of these countries themselves.

In fact, there are many benefits to these funds, the most important of which is that long-term investors appear willing to bear the costs of short-term market fluctuations, which acts as a stabilizing force in financial markets, in addition to being benign investors who provide substantial funds without insisting on having influence over the management of given companies and institutions, either in the medium or long term or in their daily operations.

In addition, the funds, in that they represent substantial monies, are a helpful factor in addressing fiscal imbalances at the global level through the transfer of funds from countries with surpluses to countries suffering from fiscal deficits and that require such funds. This is in addition to being an important factor in increasing the integration of the world economy in increased partnership and linking common interests.

For these reasons, the sensitivity and fears shown by Western countries toward these funds do not seem justified. Nor do Western countries need new restrictions or laws to govern the workings of these funds. Western states have enough laws to govern foreign investments. For example, there are limits on the ownership of banks by virtue of the fact that the state is often the guarantor of bank deposits. This limitation applies even more in the case of defense technology, and even utility companies. Therefore, there is no need to develop a new guide to determine the entry and movement of sovereign wealth fund investments. It is not necessary to discriminate against the activity of these investments since they will necessarily be subject to the same laws that apply to other investments without distinction.

The task of building trust

All this does not mean that sovereign wealth funds should be passive when it comes to aforementioned issues. Previously we indicated that these funds themselves should not underestimate the fear and sensitivity of Western countries, and must also work to take measures to alleviate these fears, demonstrate the positive aspects of the activity of these funds and promote them in a way that reinforces their position. By the same token, they should emphasize the common interests represented by the investment of these funds.

It appears that the first thing that must be done is to undertake a campaign to raise awareness of the positive role these funds play at the global economic level. Second, there must be an emphasis on transparency and disclosure in the workings of these funds. This does not mean that they must reveal details of investment deals; rather they should disclose objectives and general policies, not only in the broad plan but even at the local level. Obtaining support and assistance must be based on communication and disclosure.

Similarly in the interest of transparency, sovereign funds need to identify the responsibilities of partners and management. Disclosure and transparency on the part of the management of these funds would reassure and stabilize financial markets, in addition to creating the discipline required for effective management overall. Sovereign funds should also work to avoid outcry over companies that double as national symbols. Thus it may be safer to avoid owning strategic levels of shares by favoring modest investments in a greater number of companies and broader sectors, which will also achieve diversity of the investment portfolio and reduce the concentration of risk.

In reality, the issue of sovereign wealth funds has widened beyond investment-related or purely economic considerations. It has been politicized and become a phenomenon of international concern. Dealing with the issue, therefore, should not be limited to investment professionals, but include the best expertise available in the areas of international political and economic relations as well. ■

This article reflects the writer's personal views, not necessarily those of his institution or affiliation.

The stories that got them there...

When the dotted lines are signed and the last gun laid down, a story still exists. We're here to cover it.

THE DIPLOMATIC COURIER

Negotiations
Conflict Resolution
Peacebuilding
And More.

Log on to www.diplomaticourier.org to read more.

DC
A Global Affairs Magazine

DIPLOMATIC COURIER

Islamic Banking
Myths and Facts

SARAH S. AL-RIFAEE
Operations Officer, Inter-Arab Export Credit and Investment Guarantee Corporation, Kuwait

THE EMERGENCE OF ISLAMIC BANKING in recent years is one of the most important trends in the economic sector, and with the estimated 1.6 billion Muslims worldwide, it's ripe for growth potential.

There has always been a demand among Muslims for financial products and services that conform to Shariah (Islamic Law). The development of viable alternatives to conventional finance increasingly enables Muslims to participate in the financial world without violating their Islamic principles and without bearing the economic penalty that comes from non-participation, especially with the recent growth of oil prices.

Currently, the Islamic banking industry consists of several hundred billion dollars, and more than 300 financial institutions in and outside the Muslim world. According to Alexander Lis, managing director at the consulting firm Oliver Wyman, there is $300 billion in assets managed according to Islamic principles, ranging from commercial to investment banks and investment funds, all providing Islamic products.

Others estimate the industry to be even larger. Financial Services Authority, the financial services regulator in the United Kingdom, for example, recently suggested Islamic banking was as large as $500 billion. Standard & Poor's, a rating agency, estimates that the *sukuk* (deed) market has reached $70 billion, and will top the $160 billion mark by the end of the decade. Islamic financial services are now evolving from a niche market to the mainstream.

In addition to the sheer number of Muslims worldwide, global financial institutions are taking a strong interest in Islamic products since the industry is in its nascent stage. Products have yet to be commoditized from competition, therefore allowing profit margins to remain high.

What is Islamic banking?

Islamic banking can be considered banking with a conscience. Islamic banks each have a Shariah board made up of Shariah scholars as well as financial experts who are responsible for determining what activities are and are not Shariah-compliant.[1]

Islamic banking is based on two main financial principles. Firstly, investment is to be made in the private sector through interest-free financing. Secondly, the development of financial instruments is to be done on the basis of profit and loss sharing as well as sharing risks.

Further, Islamic banking is built around Shariah, mainly prohibiting the charging of interest. Because Islam considers interest an unjustified increase of capital, with no effort made to earn it, it is considered of false value, and therefore is prohibited. However, there are many arguments about the prohibition of interest in Islam. The first argument is that interest rates have no moral foundation. The second is that abstinence from consumption is not a justification of rewards. Lastly, some argue that there are risks to justify the supplement of payment for capital lending if the loan is guaranteed.

There has always been a demand among Muslims for financial products and services that conform to Shariah (Islamic Law).

In addition to the prohibition of interest payments, Islamic law treats money strictly as a medium of exchange. In other words, money, in itself, does not have any inherent value, and therefore it should not lead to the production of more money.[2] In Islamic banking, the creditor/debtor relationship is defined differently than in the secular financial world. The creditor, or provider, of funds who becomes a partner in a project assumes the risk activity with the entrepreneur and shares profits as well as losses. The creation of incremental wealth justifies the share of profit between the borrower and the lender of money, but does not guarantee a fixed return.[3]

1 Michael Silva, "Islamic Banking Remarks" *Law and Business Review of the Americas*; (Spring 2006).
2 Mondher Bellalah and Siwar Ellouz, "Islamic Finance, Interest Rates and Islamic Banking: A Survey of the Literature," *Finance India* (April/May 2004).
3 Ibid.

Some of the principle instruments involved in the aforementioned form of resource mobilization include the following:

- Trade financing and cost-plus mark-up on traded goods (*murabaha*).
- Profit-sharing (*mudarabah*) and equity participation (*musharaka*) in which cost-sharing among partners is also included.
- Rental on purchased equipment (*ijara*).
- Islamic banking portfolio using secondary financing instruments, such as shares and stocks revolving around the above-mentioned instruments.

	ISLAMIC BANKING	CONVENTIONAL BANKING
Main Principle	The customer shares the profit and loss with the bank. High degree of risk with variable returns.	The customer obtains fixed interest from the banks and does not share the loss.
Stability	Higher degree of stability.	Lower degree of stability.
Treatment of interest	Uses Profit and Loss Structure (PLS) accounts. Interest is prohibited.	Interest based on products.
Profitability	PLS is based on partnership (*musharaka*) or joint investment without participation in management (*mudharaba*). Based markup principle. Leasing contrast (*ijara*).	Higher concentration leads to higher interest rates which leads to higher profitability. Higher rates of inflation lead to higher profit margins.

Conventional vs. Islamic banking

An Islamic bank is similar to a modern Western bank in almost all functions which empower it to mediate any shortcomings or surpluses that may exist in a monetary exchange economy.[4] The Islamic bank requires a careful management team to balance the different levels of credit (personal credit, secured credit, letters of credit), and also functions as a specialist in estimating projects risks and estimated returns.

The main difference between Islamic and conventional banks lies in the fact that conventional banks charge and pay interest, whereas Islamic banks do not as they con-

4 Farhad F. Ghannadian andGautam Goswami, "Developing economy banking: the case of Islamic banks," *International Journal of Social Economics* (2004).

sider interest as *riba* (prohibition outlined in the Quran). Despite such, Islamic law does not require that the seller of a product be Muslim, or that its services also be Islamic.

How do Islamic banks work?

Since Islamic banks prohibit interests, the bank acts like an investment company, selling its stocks to the public. In this concept the bank does not have maturity-matching problem or duration gap management, which is a functional problem with Western banks in general.[5]

Islamic finance is fundamentally different from conventional finance as it is based on a profit and loss structure (PLS), which requires a financial institution to invest with a client in order to finance their needs, rather than lending money to their clients. By offering PLS accounts, banks and clients act as joint investors, and returns are handed out based on the profits earned by the bank or its investments. This risk-sharing is the key component of Shariah-complaint finance.[6] In order to assure customers that the structure of the Islamic products offered are complaint with Islamic law, Islamic institutions employ a panel of Islamic scholars as a Shariah board, who analyze and approve of a product's compliance with Shariah.

Islamic financial products

From the resolution passed at the Fifth Meeting of the Islamic Fiqh Academy, on Dec. 10-15, 1988, Islamic financial products are defined as follows:

> *Ijara:* Letting or lease is a sale of a definite usufruct of any asset in exchange of definite reward. It refers to a contract of land or other asset leased at a fixed rent payable in cash, a mode of financing which is also adopted by Islamic banks. It is an arrangement under which Islamic banks lease equipment, buildings and other facilities to a client against an agreed rental lease. The lessee generally also has an option to purchase the leased asset. *Ijara* is a contractual agreement comparable to a sale/lease back, where the bank buys and then immediately leases an asset to a customer for a fee. The duration of the lease and the fee is set in advance, and are in many terms comparable to the terms that may be applied to the loan.[7]
>
> *Mudaraba*: A form of partnership where one party provides the funds while the other provides expertise and management. Any profits accrued are shared be-

5 Ibid.
6 Silva, "Islamic Banking Remarks."
7 Ibid.

tween the two parties on a pre-agreed basis, while loss is borne by the provider(s) of the capital. *Murabaha* is a cost-plus sale type of arrangement, where a bank purchases an asset on behalf of a customer with the understanding that the customer will repurchase the asset back from the bank. The bank's price to the customer includes a stated profit known to both parties, and the payments are amortized across a payment period, similar to a secured loan.[8]

Salam: A contract in which advance payment is made for goods that will be delivered at a later date. The seller undertakes to supply specific goods to the buyer at a future date in exchange of an advance price fully paid at the time of contract. According to normal rules of Shariah, no sale can be affected unless the goods are in existence at the time the deal is made, but *Salam* sale forms an exception to that rule.

Istisna': A contractual agreement for manufacturing goods and commodities, allowing cash payment to be made in advance with a set date for future delivery, or a future payment and delivery. A manufacturer or builder agrees to produce or build a well-described good or building at a given price on a given date in the future. Price can be paid in installments, or as agreed between the parties. *Istisna'* can be used for providing the construction of houses, plants, projects, and building of bridges, roads and highways.

Musharaka: A relationship established under a contract with mutual consent of all involved parties that sharing of profits and losses will take place in a specified joint business venture. It is an agreement which the Islamic bank provides funds, along with funds from the business enterprise and others. All providers of capital are entitled to participate in management, but not necessarily required to do so. The profit is distributed among the partners in pre-agreed ratios, while the loss is borne by every partner strictly in proportion to respective capital contributions.

Wakala: A contract of agency in which one person appoints someone else to perform a certain task on his behalf, usually against a certain fee.

Commodity Murabaha: A sale of specified commodities, through a mutual exchange, on a cost-plus profit basis. If the customer wishes to invest money with the bank,

8 Ibid.

he or she will purchase commodities at "Cost X" from "Broker A" and sell them to the bank at "Cost X" plus "Profit Y," which equals the "Contract Price." The bank will repay the "Contract Price" over a period of time.

Tawarruq: The reverse form of *commodity murabaha*, where the bank sells commodities to the customer on deferred payment at cost-plus profit. The customer then sells the commodities to a third party on spot basis and receives instant cash.

Ijara wa Iqtina: A contract where an Islamic bank finances equipment, building or other facilities for a client against a rental agreement. There is a unilateral undertaking by the bank or the client so that at the end of the lease period, the ownership of the asset is transferred to the lessee. The undertaking or the promise does not have to become an integral part of the lease contract in order to make it conditional. The rental as well as the purchase price is fixed in such a manner that the bank receives back its cost price along with some profit, which is usually determined in advance.

Diminishing Musharaka: A practice where a financier and his client participate either in the joint ownership of a property or equipment, or any fixed asset. The share purchased on behalf of the financier is divided into a number of units, and it is understood that the client will purchase the share units one by one over a length of time until he is the sole owner of the property or asset.

Arbun Contract: A down payment; a nonrefundable deposit that a buyer makes to retain the right of confirming or canceling a sale.

Geographic distribution and economic power

More than 280 Islamic financial institutions now operate in over 40 countries around the world, ranging from commercial banks, investment banks, investment companies to leasing and insurance companies. The first Islamic financial institutions in the Middle East were Kuwait Finance House, Dubai Islamic Bank, Al-Rajhi in Saudi Arabia, and Faisal Islamic Banks in Egypt and Sudan. The GCC (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Oman) region currently remains the primary financier of Islamic finance world-wide.

In Saudi Arabia, for instance, the economy grew by 6.5 percent in 2005 – its highest growth rate since the oil boon of the 1970s. Growth was reflected in the in-

creased amounts of both personal and small business deposits in Shariah-compliant facilities. Across the Gulf in Iran, despite the country's political challenges, 2005 was a positive best year for the country's banks, which have been Shariah-compliant since 1983. Again, the boom in oil and prices lead to a gross domestic product increase of 6.1 percent. Bank Melli, Iran's largest bank and the leading Islamic bank worldwide in terms of assets, saw its total assets rise to more than $25 billion. Trade finance is especially important for Iran's Islamic banks, usually conducted on a *murabahah* basis. Many consumer imports enter Iran through the United Arab Emirates (UAE), where

Major Islamic Banks in the Middle East and Major Banks' Growth Rates

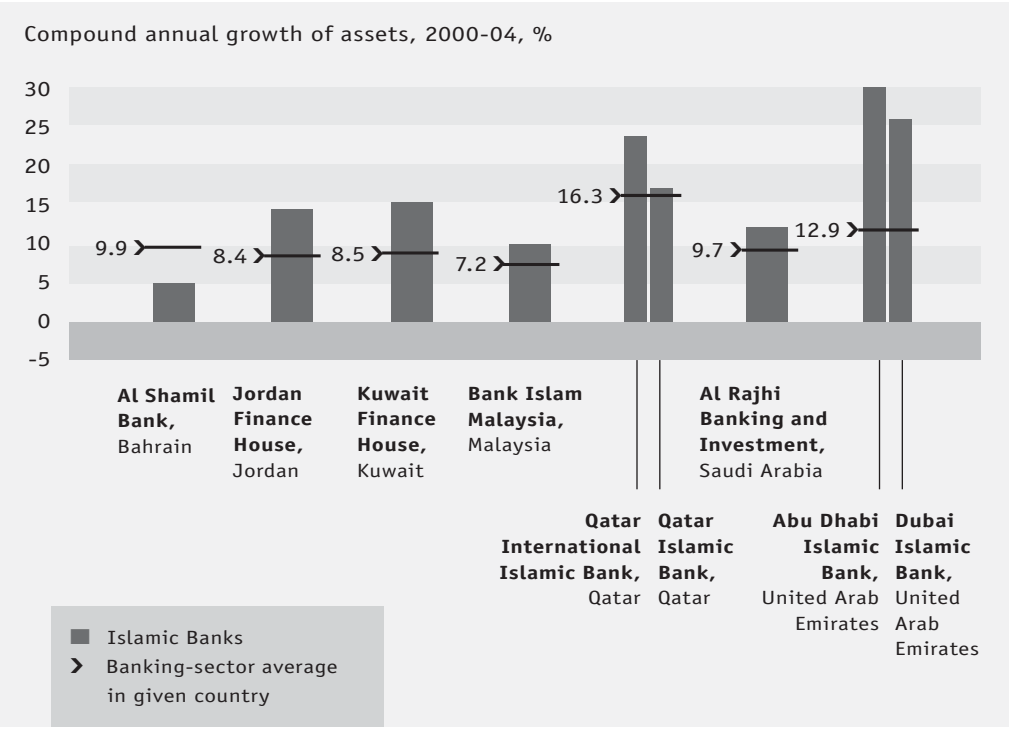
BAHRAIN	IRAN
Bahrain Islamic Bank	Bank Melli Iran
ABC Islamic Bank (E.C.)	Bank Sederat Iran
Shamil Bank	Bank Mellat
Noriba Bank	Bank Tejarat
Gulf Finance House	Bank Sepah
Albaraka Bank Bahrain	Bank Refah
Citi Islamic Investment Bank E.C.	Export Development Bank of Iran
First Islamic Investment Bank	Bank Sanaat o Maadan
Al-Amin Bank, Bahrain	Bank Keshavarzi
	Bank Maskan
	Karafarin Bank
	Saman Bank
	Bank Eghtesad-e-Novin
	Bank Parisian
JORDAN	**KUWAIT**
Jordan Islamic Bank	Kuwait International Bank (K.S.C.)
Islamic International Arab Bank	Kuwait Finance House
	Boubyan Bank (K.S.C.)
LEBANON	**QATAR**
Al-Baraka Bank Lebanon	Qatar Islamic Bank
	Qatar International Islamic Bank
	Qatar Islamic Insurance Company
Saudi Arabia	UAE
Islamic Development Bank	Dubai Islamic Bank
Al Baraka Investment & Development Co.	Abu Dhabi Islamic Bank
Al Rajhi Banking & Development Corporation	National Bank of Sharjah

all major Iranian banks have branches. More than 4,500 Iranian businesses are active in Dubai, but the movement is not all one way.

It was only a decade ago that there were no Islamic investment banks – a number that has grown to 10. The largest Islamic investment banks are the First Islamic Investment Bank of Bahrain, the Al Tawfeek Company for Investment of Saudi Arabia, the Gulf Finance House of Bahrain and the International Investor of Kuwait. All of these institutions expanded their investment banking business substantially in 2005, reflecting the booming economic conditions in the Gulf, which has primarily been driven by oil revenue. Further, this growth exemplifies how Islamic investment banking activity is much more pro-cyclical than standard commercial banking in this region of the world.

In addition, the years of late have shown an increase in the degree of professionalism across Gulf-based Islamic investment companies. Some companies even started to seek listing on the Alternative Investment Market in London, such as the Dubai-based

Growing Faster than the Markets



Source: Annual reports of Islamic banks shown; central banks for countries shown; Global Insight; McKinsey analysis.

Islamic complaint company Tejoori – the first Shariah-complaint investment company to gain international status.

The innovation of GCC Islamic financial companies has expanded Shariah-compliant investments across all financial sectors, including real estate, industry, information technology, media and advertising, and insurance coverage, particularly for political risks.

Implications and future

In the past decade, Islamic banking has matured from a niche market into a global finance industry. As western bankers and borrowers compete for the new funds pumping into the Gulf from high oil prices revenues, this growth can be expected to continue well into the future. In 1999, there were only a dozen Islamic-branded investment funds; now there are at least 240 worldwide. The Islamic finance industry is blossoming, and as a consequence it must offer a more diverse range of services and products for middle and low-income depositors. Additionally, it must train professional managers, helping them to become well versed in both theoretical concepts and practice.

The fact that the Islamic banking industry is growing cannot be neglected, and the size of surplus money that is fueled by the oil prices in the Middle East region has encouraged international banks to be involved in Shariah-compliant investment banking, notably HSBC, Citigroup, Deutsche Bank and UBS through its Bahrain-based subsidiary, Noriba Bank.

Usually the core business of investment banking is mergers and acquisitions, corporate financial restructuring and Initial Public Offerings (IPOs), where companies seek stock market listings. There is much less of this type of business in the Gulf and other Muslim markets than in major international markets, although the stock market boom throughout the Gulf in 2005 did result in a record number of IPOs. Rather, much of the Shariah-compliant investment banking business has focused on wealth management and mutual funds, although the latter also involves retail banks, most notably the National Commercial Bank of Saudi Arabia, the largest manager worldwide of such funds on a Shariah-compliant basis.

While a few Western banks, such as HSBC, BNP Paribas, Standard Chartered and Citigroup, have been running Islamic operations for almost a decade, they are now facing competition from a host of new names. These include Morgan Stanley, Barclays Capital and Deutsche Bank – as well as smaller players, such as WestLB, which last year alone arranged around a dozen Islamic deals, worth around $4 billion.

The fast growing demand for Islamic products is not only presenting its host

of rewards, but challenges as well. As the Islamic finance market begins to mature, banks and investors are demanding new products and new structures that are complaint with Shariah principles. But while the products must be often syndicated with Shariah scholars, English and American financial lawyers are finding ways of making Islamic products work. This syndication allows the Muslims who recognize Shariah law to use and benefit from the Shariah-compliant financial tools at Western banks or companies.

Other trends in the Islamic banking industry include the increase in bond financing by Islamic governments and government agencies, and project fundraising according to Islamic principles, which forbid *riba*, or unjust enrichment. Shariah-compliant financing have been included in recent fundraising for infrastructure projects across the Middle East. For example, in Abu Dhabi, a recent project worth $2.1 billion to expand water desalination and electricity generation included $540 million of Islamic financing. Landmark investments, such as the inclusion of $55 million of Islamic financing out of $255 million by Kuwait Finance House and the Islamic Development Bank for the Al-Hidd power project in Bahrain, have also occurred.

Conclusion

Islamic banking can be main tool with accordance to Islamic principles and laws, it is based on the principle of sharing risk, and profit/loss between financial institutions and individuals.

One major difference between Islamic banks and conventional banks is the prohibition of interest on loans (*riba*), given the fact that Islam does not allow unjustified capital increases, and also it emphasizes on deriving capital increase through investment and going through full economical cycle. Revenues and profitability is usually derived from several Islamic financial products, based on sharing risk and revenues with customers, like (*murabaha*, *musharaka*, *ijara*, *tawaroq*, etc.). And Islamic banks should always refer to Shariah boards formed of Shariah scholars to determine the level of compliance of their financial products with Islamic laws.

In recent years, the number of Islamic financial institutions has grown significantly, and the demand for Shariah-compliant financial products has increased in drastic manners. Driven by the boom in oil and gas prices revenue, Islamic financial industry had evolved from a niche market to a global financial market. That boom has led to a huge growth for local Islamic financial institutions and even led international financial institutions to enter and compete in the market.

This growth and increased demand requires innovation and product development of Shariah-compliant financial products, and increase the variety of offerings.

Although there have been innovative initiations by Islamic financial institutions in several fields, like information technology, industrial projects, and even providing insurance against political risk, the industry still needs more innovative and sophisticated financial instruments taking advantage of western financial experience to streamline and standardize Shariah-compliant products. ■

CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT
FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE
WASHINGTON DC ▪ MOSCOW ▪ BEIJING ▪ BEIRUT ▪ BRUSSELS

Arab Reform Bulletin
نشرة الإصلاح العربي

MICHELE DUNNE, EDITOR ■ SALMA WAHEEDI, ASSISTANT EDITOR

The ***Arab Reform Bulletin*** is a free online monthly journal of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace:

- **Timely and incisive analysis** by top experts from the Arab world, the United States, and Europe
- **Updates** on the latest political, economic, and social developments in Arab countries
- **Interviews** with Arab politicians and activists
- **Current debates** in the Arab media
- **Links to new publications** about the Arab world.

Arab Political Systems Baseline Information and Reforms

Provides easily accessible baseline information about the political systems of Arab countries, and is frequently updated to provide information about reforms being introduced.

All Carnegie Middle East publications available in English at:

www.CarnegieEndowment.org/MiddleEast

and in Arabic at:

www.CarnegieEndowment.org/Arabic

ALSO FROM THE CARNEGIE MIDDLE EAST PROGRAM

Rethinking Economic Reform in Jordan: Confronting Socioeconomic Realities
Sufyan Alissa
Carnegie Paper/Carnegie Middle East Center No. 4

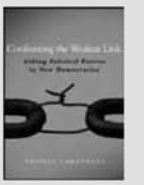
Kuwait: Politics in a Participatory Emirate
Paul Salem
Carnegie Paper/Carnegie Middle East Center No. 3

Egypt—Don't Give Up on Democracy Promotion
Michele Dunne, Amr Hamzawy, Nathan Brown
Policy Brief No. 52

Women in Islamist Movements: Toward an Islamist Model of Women's Activism
Omayma Abdellatif and Marina Ottaway
Carnegie Paper/Carnegie Middle East Center No. 2

The Peace Process Has No Clothes
Nathan Brown
Web Commentary, June 14, 2007

Confronting the Weakest Link: Aiding Political Parties in New Democracies
Thomas Carothers
2006 / 272 pp.
$22.95 / paper: 978-87003-224-0
$57.95 / cloth: 978-87003-225-7



Confronting the Weakest *is required reading for all interested in democracy promotion as well as those seeking to understand the vexing challenges facing political parties around the world.*

— LARRY DIAMOND
Hoover Institution, Stanford University

Visit www.CarnegieEndowment.org/pubs

Arabs and the 2008 American Election

Hopes and Predictions

ARAB INSIGHT STAFF

THERE IS NO UNIFIED ARAB OPINION regarding the impact of the upcoming U.S. presidential election on American foreign policy toward the Middle East and the Arab world. Rather, there are two main points of view: the first argues that the election will not significantly change U.S. foreign policy toward the Arab and Islamic world, whether a Democrat or a Republican wins, whereas the second point of view posits that a Democratic takeover of the White House would bring about real change. Among a key sector of scholars, writers and the Arab public, there is a discernible sympathy for Sen. Barack Obama, D-Ill., whether compared to Sen. Hillary Clinton, D-N.Y., or Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., and Arabs are clearly aware that there are real obstacles that could keep Obama from winning. Most Arab analyses have blamed these difficulties on deep-rooted prejudices within American society against the proverbial "other," whether that other is defined by religion or ethnicity, despite America's reputation for multiculturalism.

In this framework, Arab views of the election's significance range from those who give it no more importance than any other election; to others who argue that 2008 is crucial for putting a decisive end to the "Bushian" era. The George W. Bush regime has changed the face of the world over the last eight years in a way unlike any other presidency, even those of such leaders as Harry Truman, who authorized the first wartime use of nuclear weapons, or George H.W. Bush Sr., who presided over the end of the Cold War and the rise of what was called the New World Order.

This article offers an analysis of the leading viewpoints on the U.S. election found in the Arab press, and the election's expected influence on American foreign policy, by focusing on opinion articles, setting aside news coverage or academic analyses without a definite political orientation.

The elections will not bring about change

A distinct Arab trend sees the election results as not having a real impact on American policy toward Arab issues and this camp considers it a mistake to distinguish between the candidates' positions toward the Arab world. According to the writer of an article entitled "The US Elections and the Arabs' Future!" in the Qatari newspaper *Al-Sharq*:

> Arabs are aware of the truth, which is that whoever is in the White House will not change U.S. foreign policy. He or she will have no significant impact on Arabs' rights in Palestine, the Golan, Lebanon, Iraq and Sudan, and on the nature of the ongoing struggle in the Arab East.[1]

The justification for this attitude is that:

> The United States, as a modern state, has a global strategy, set interests, and a vision that no one working in the White House's Oval Office can abandon, whether they be Republican or Democrat, man or woman, black or white, and whatever their personal leanings, political tastes, or ideological affiliation may be.[2]

In addition, the argument continues, the final goal of any candidate is to achieve fixed, stable American objectives embodied in "supporting Israeli superiority, humiliating the Arabs, and seizing their legitimate rights."[3]

In another article entitled, "Our Arab Causes in Light of the American Elections," published on the "Arab Voice" website, the writer rejects the idea of distinguishing between the candidates, citing the existence of what he calls "historical constants" in U.S. foreign policy, specifically "American geostrategic hegemony" and "Zionist-American hegemony."[4] The first moves American policy on the broad international level, while the second shapes policy in the Middle East, in particular, where the United States guarantees the security of Israel and its people regardless of the orientations and po-

1 Buthaina Shaaban, "The US Elections and the Arabs' Future!" *Al-Sharq* (Qatar), Feb. 24, 2008.
2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
4 Mohammed bin Said al-Fatisi, "Our Arab Causes in the Light of the American Elections," www.arabvoice.com

litical affiliations of the American elite or ruling administration. Moreover, the author says, "Historical events have proven that the United States has clung to this prodigal son – Israel – even though the Israel has caused many domestic and foreign problems for it."[5] The article concludes by affirming that these constants:

> ... [W]ill remain as they have been throughout the course of U.S. history in its relationship with Israel, and consequently will remain the principal determinant of the future of the relationship between the Arabs on the one hand, and Israel and America on the other. Thus the victory of any of the current candidates for the American presidency – Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, or John McCain – will do little to alter the future of these Arab or Middle Eastern issues, especially the issues that touch directly upon the security and future of the Greater Israeli colony. In the end they [the candidates] will all aspire to court and pacify Israel.[6]

The writer goes on to cite many quotes by the various presidential candidates as evidence for his view.

Some sources, however, such as an article printed on the Iraqi Organization for Follow-up and Monitoring's blog,[7] acknowledge the existence of some theoretical differences among the candidates, especially regarding their positions on Iraq. Despite these distinctions, however, the article does not go so far as to say that there will be a clear practical difference in American policy in Iraq. The article argues that no matter the candidates' stances, practical and objective considerations shape this policy. It concedes that the Democrats are calling for the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq, but claims that both Clinton and Obama have adopted positions that are vague, distorted, and to a certain extent self-contradictory. While Obama has declared his determination to end the American occupation of Iraq, and has rejected holding permanent military bases there, he also voted to give unconditional funding for the war in Iraq in 2005 and 2006. He also voted in favor of Condoleezza Rice's appointment as secretary of

Arab views of the election's significance range from those who give it no more importance than any other election; to others who argue that 2008 is crucial for putting a decisive end to the "Bushian" era.

5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
7 The Iraqi Organization for Follow-up and Monitoring, "American Presidential Elections and the Iraqi Cause… Contradictory Platforms and an Unclear Future," March 2, 2008, http://alressd.maktoobblog.com/

state, despite her misleading testimony before Congress and poor handling of Iraq policy before, during and after the invasion of Iraq, during her tenure as national security advisor. The same applies for Hillary Clinton – despite her vow to bring back as many of the troops as possible, and as soon as possible, the article highlights that Clinton was one of the war's initial supporters in the Senate.

Based on the Democrats' voting record, the article argues that despite the apparent differences in the rhetoric of the Democrats and the Republicans, practically speaking, there will not be major changes made in American policy in Iraq. It then lists a number of other objective considerations that will negate the superficial differences between the two sides, especially regarding the American military presence in Iraq. For example, the article considers the huge oil reserves in Iraq to be significant, since "America is a country run by institutions, and when the American institutions are being controlled by individuals from the Zionist Right, the chances of American troops leaving Iraq are extremely low."[8] The author also declares that the Democratic candidates' statements on Iraq "are only for domestic consumption to win over the American voters and push them to back one candidate over the other. Reality asserts that a long-term military presence will remain in Iraq.[9]" He concludes that U.S. troops will not depart Iraq except at the hands of the Iraqi resistance.

In an article entitled "Firing on Obama" in the Omani newspaper *Al-Watan*, readers can sense the author's sympathy for Obama as he criticizes the smear campaign against Obama led by Clinton's team. The writer deplores the tactic of spreading pictures of Obama wearing traditional Somali garb while in Kenya, a barely veiled reference to the candidate's African and Islamic roots. Nonetheless, the writer bluntly notes that such a campaign could force Obama to "overcompensate for his history by pacifying Israel more and taking more hard-line stances toward the American situation in Iraq, namely by working to keep the American army there."[10]

Support for Israel is often cited in the Arab media as a constant principle of American foreign policy, affirming that there would be no significant difference between the Democratic and Republican candidates. In an article on the "Green Corner" website entitled "The American Electoral Rally," Ahmad Ibrahim Abdullah al-Hajj al-Hulahula points out that "all the candidates differ in their electoral platforms over all of the issues, whether domestic or foreign,"[11] but that:

8 Ibid
9 Ibid
10 Zohair Majed, "Firing on Obama," *Al-Watan* (Oman), February 27, 2008.
11 Ahmad Ibrahim Abdullah al-Hajj al-Hulahula, "The American Electoral Rally," Green Corner, February 14, 2008, http://www.grenc.com/show_article_main.cfm?id=11234.

> There is one issue in which all the candidates agree, and speak about in a clear, harmonious voice ... Each of the candidates speaks of the extent of his [or her] commitment to this objective, which represents the greatest common denominator for them: namely the US's strict, ironclad commitment to Israel's security and the necessity of preserving Israel's strength and giving it unlimited support by all means available.[12]

Al-Hulahula asserts that the candidates:

> … [C]ompete to make the sincerest statements most loyal to this role, as if it is a religious duty which cannot be belittled, distorted, or doubted … None of them dare call for a neutral, unbiased policy in handling the crisis between the Arabs and Israel, so how can we imagine or expect that any candidate will criticize Israel's policy towards peace in the region?[13]

The article then supports its claim by listing some of the pro-Israeli statements and actions made by each of the candidates, including Obama, before or during the primaries. Al-Hulahula explains that the headline, "The American Electoral Rally," refers to "the competitive race among the candidates, wherein they follow a single marathon course covering the ground of the first, pivotal Arab issue, that of Palestine. In the end, all the competitors reach the goal of maintaining Israel's security, which is a common objective for all." However, the writer states, the majority of presidential aspirants:

> … [A]re very much aware of the American interest in establishing a just peace in the region. They know well how much suffering the Palestinian people endure, and know of Israel's practice of organized, programmed state terrorism against unarmed Palestinians and the racial discrimination, which Israel applies in the Palestinian territories ... but at the same time they recognize that the path to the presidency passes through hypocrisy and favoritism for the Israelis and does not involve infringing in word or deed upon American-Israeli relations.[14]

Arab sympathy for Obama

Many Arab opinion articles have expressed sympathy for Obama, possibly because his experience in the primaries seemed to be a microcosm of American policies, domestic

12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.

and foreign, toward the "other." Obama's candidacy has also provided an important occasion for exploring the problems of discrimination within American society, and for reaffirming that the American model (on the level of society and the political system) is still afflicted by many shortcomings. In this context, most of the Arab opinion pieces discussing the U.S. election have singled out Obama and mentioned his personal background. Many of these have presented a very positive overall picture of Obama. In an article entitled "Barack Obama and Us," the author, Talhat Jibril, says:

> It is certain that Obama … is an attractive personality, with strong leadership skills and unusual rhetorical ability, brilliant, bold, and fearless. He brims with intelligence, surrounds himself with smart people, and respects intelligence. Distinguished by an abundance of integrity and depth, he is an organized tactician and inspiring strategist, not searching for the meaning of events, but giving them the meaning that he wants, speaking in tones burning with enthusiasm. He is cultured and quiet by nature, but he is unable to contain his amazing energy for endless work.[15]

Jibril concludes his characterization of Barack Obama by saying:

> The most important quality of Obama is his ability to bring people together around him, even if they have differing orientations and leanings … a liberal closer to the leftists, he stands at the far left of the Democratic Party and his economic platform is for the poor social classes and against the rich and the special-interest groups. He stands for an America of 'hope and change' and for an America of peace ... He has an idea for an Islamic summit with America … Obama is black but does not have the bitterness of black Americans that generation after generation have inherited from years of humiliating slavery, because his father is African.[16]

On an episode of "The Fourth Power," a satellite television show broadcasted by Al-Arabiyya, entitled "Democrats See Obama as Strongest Candidate," the presenter asked a guest: "*The Washington Times* mentioned that a large number of Americans have begun naming their children Barack Obama … in your opinion, does this reflect the influence of Obama's personality on American society, especially women?" The guest answered:

15 Talhat Jibril, "Barack Obama and Us," http://sacdo.com/web/forum/forum_posts.asp?TID=3122.
16 Ibid.

> Barack Obama will have made history whether he wins or loses the elections. As a man of African origin, whose father was Muslim, who challenged all those negative factors within American society, it will be said about him that he maintained his charismatic personality as well as his attractiveness, his grace, and his wonderfully fluent, spontaneous style. Obama is close to both hearts and minds, and I think that I salute him more than anyone else in the world of politics.[17]

When the presenter asked about Hillary Clinton, he drew a largely negative image of her, claiming that she has not reached the hearts of Americans in the way that Obama had.

In stark contrast, the Arab media has painted a picture of McCain as both harsh and unyielding. In an article on Al-Jazeera's website, McCain was described the following way:

> A self-confident person, hot-headed to a certain extent, having preferred violent sports such as boxing and wrestling in his childhood. Aging and married into a wealthy family, he is notorious for his erratic temper and his harsh criticism of the presidents, his colleagues in the US Senate, and the leadership of the religious right. Above all, he is known for being an independent figure, ready to stand against all the members of his party in the Senate if need be.[18]

Despite the positive image that many Arab opinion-makers have of Obama, many also feel that he will have difficulty being elected. In an article in *Al-Watan*, Abdul Malek Salman argues that there is no chance the world can escape from the despair it has experienced during the past eight years under the Republican administration.[19] Salman describes the two terms of President Bush as "the lean years," wherein:

> Hatred for American policy increased around the world, thanks to the policies of arrogance and haughtiness that the Bush administration, influenced by the neo-conservatives from the Zionist Christian Republican Right, followed, as well as imperialist military attacks launched under the banner of the war on terror … After all this, the world was looking forward to the end of this dark era in American policy with the

17 Program transcript at: http://www.alarabiya.net/programs/2008/02/28/46247.html.
18 Alaa Bayoumi, "Who Doesn't Like John McCain?" *Al Jazeera*, February 5, 2008, http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/22D7DE19-58D9-4BFC-81D0-17F132D0AA7F.htm.
19 Abdul Malek Salman, "Why Are American Elections Causing Frustration Around the World?" *Al-Watan* (Oman), April 1, 2008.

> election of a new president who would reexamine the aggressive policies abroad that the Bush administration carried out. [20]

Salman, like many other journalists in the Arab world, argues that change in administrations will not necessarily result in a change in American policy toward the Middle East, saying:

> All the indicators from the presidential battle so far within the Republican and Democratic parties suggest that hopes for change are dwindling, and the Bush's administration's hated policies … appear as if they could extend in one form or another beyond the end of Bush's term … This incites worry, annoyance, and frustration around the world, because it does not seem like the American elections will bring about the long-awaited change.[21]

Salman cites a number of "realistic" indicators for his prediction that the United States will not experience a drastic transformation, such as McCain winning the Republican nomination after crushing his competitors, as well as the ongoing division within the Democratic Party. Salman suggest that the drawn-out Democratic nomination process will hamper the party's eventual candidate in the general elections.

Despite McCain's long political experience, Salman suggests, the candidate's "views concerning the War on Terror revealed a shocking ignorance of its workings, a lack of knowledge that may well cause him to institute random, unconsidered policies that will threaten world security and stability."[22] Salman further says that if McCain wins, "The confused and conceited policies that constitute the Bush administration's foreign policy and approach to the War on Terror, from which the Arab and Islamic world, not to mention the world at large, suffered heavily, would be likely to continue, prolonging the era of Bush's hated policies in some form."[23]

Some writers have been content to lower Arab expectations for change to a simple change of administration, regardless of prospective shifts in policy.

In this framework, Salman criticizes efforts to portray Obama as merely a black man with an Islamic background, labeling this approach of discrediting a candidate as a confirmation that America has not overcome the problem of "racial discrimination

20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.

in its mentality and social practices."[24]

Some writers have been content to lower Arab expectations for change to a simple change of administrations, regardless of prospective shifts in policy. In an article on the "Islam Memo" website, Mohammed Lafi Al-Jibrini states, "If the Arab world rejoiced with the defeat of George H.W. Bush in the 1992 elections, just as Asians celebrated the departure of Nixon, then there is no doubt that the world will feel more relieved regardless of who is coming."[25]

American society: still discriminatory

Many Arab opinion articles jumped on the elections as a chance to affirm that American society has not yet shed the specter of discrimination, whether religious or ethnic. Negative portrayals of Obama, then, are not just components of the Clinton and McCain campaigns, but also evidence of wrong-headed U.S. attitudes. Arab sympathy for Obama must be viewed in this context. Al-Jibrini, for instance, highlights the continuity of anti-black sentiment in the United States, noting that the history of U.S. racism "is not yet over, despite the wars that America has waged all over the world under the pretext of human rights."[26]

In light of American racism, Arab commentators are willing to forgive Obama for taking stances that Arabs decry when they are taken by other U.S. politicians. This discrepancy is the result of a faulty assumption: that Obama's race handicaps him, demanding that he take seemingly "safe" positions on controversial issues like U.S. support for Israel. Last year, Arab blogger Amr al-Ghareeb posted a letter to Obama in which he offered the candidate advice on how to negate criticism and mitigate rumors being spread about him.[27] The letter reads like a satirical laundry-list of reliable U.S. political moves, sure to assuage fears about Obama's priorities:

> "1. Make a quick surprise visit to Israel and give a speech before the Knesset wearing a Jewish skullcap (like [former U.S. President] Bill Clinton). Vow to protect Israel as a Jewish state and to support its right to rebuild the Holy Temple.
>
> 2. From Israel, take that day's El-Al flight to the Danish capital of Copenhagen and give an exclusive interview to *Jyllands-Posten* on the role of freedom of expression

24 Ibid.
25 Mohammed Lafi Al-Jibrini, "Behind Every White Woman is a Black Man: Uncle Tom from the Cabin to the Doorstep of the White House…and No More!" January 21, 2008, http://www.islammemo.cc
26 Ibid.
27 Amr al-Ghareeb, "Dear Barack Obama: The Solution for You," http://news.maktoob.com/forum/news6638/

in national progress. Don't forget to show how pleased you were with the caricatures (which Muslims hate).

3. From Copenhagen, head for the British capital London to meet the writer ... Salman Rushdie. During a joint press conference, ask him to read selections from his famous book *The Satanic Verses* and keep a copy of the book.

4. From London, head south to the Italian capital of Rome and then to the Republic of the Vatican to see the Pope. During the press conference that you will hold with the Pope, mention that you were influenced by his comments on Islam, and that he 'opened your eyes' to the truth about this religion, and that you wish you had been among those attending this historic lecture.

5. From Rome, head to the Indian capital New Delhi and announce your support for India getting a permanent seat in the [UN] Security Council. Acknowledge India's right to the Jammu and Kashmire region, and voice your concern about the negative influence of Islamic terrorism in Pakistan and Afghanistan on security for our Indian brothers.

6. After returning from this successful trip (and before changing your clothes), ask your wife Michelle to call the Somali writer Ayaan Hirsi Ali to get to know her and invite her – as a warrior against Islam – to speak at a forum entitled 'Women in Islam: Oppressed, Subjugated, or Dominated?' that Michelle can organize in cooperation with the American Enterprise Institute and the Rotary Club and that Fox News can sponsor.

7. Personally call the head of the Zionist organization AIPAC [American Israel Public Affairs Committee] … Congratulate him on the great work the organization does to strengthen American-Israeli relations, and express your desire to be a regular speaker at AIPAC's activities.

8. Avoid any contact with the Islamic organization CAIR (at least until the elections are over) and turn down any invitation to speak at CAIR activities with the excuse that you're too busy with your electoral campaign.

9. Hire a law firm (preferably one whose founders are of Jewish origin) to raise a defamation suit against any newspaper or website which claims – or even hints

– that you're Muslim, not Christian, and demand from the defendants compensation for the terrible moral damage that this accusation has caused for you and the members of your Christian family.

10. If you feel that the previous steps did not succeed in killing off the rumor, you have to use the final solution. Announce an expanded press conference, saying that you need to come clean before the American people and confess the complete truth. The fools will think that you're going to admit that you're Muslim, but at the press conference you announce that you're gay, that your marriage was just a cover for your real identity, and then declare that you had a sexual relationship with Republican candidate John McCain!"

Though al-Ghareeb is obviously being facetious, the underlying point is unmistakably serious. That is, American society cannot shake off its lingering suspicions of African origins and blackness, and any candidate tainted by these qualities must compensate with strong support for Israel and championship for anti-Islamic causes. In other words, the blogger is suggesting that moderation within American society means opposition to Islam and Muslims.

Along the same lines, on the "Modern Discussion" website, an article by Ahmad Sukarno Abdul Hafeez points out that African-Americans, women and non-Protestants still suffer from discrimination in American society and the American political system, despite the country's grandiose claims in this regard. As Abdul Hafeez writes:

> Since the founding of the American state in 1776 they have called their country a melting pot, meaning that the origins of this country's population melt and completely fuse ... [R]eality, however, shows that this fusion was incomplete, with populations of African or Latino origins living in separated neighborhoods of American cities. Anyone who does not believe this should go to Harlem in New York City, the Latino neighborhoods in California, or the Cuban districts in Florida. Americans also never hesitate to call their country 'the land of opportunity,' though reality suggests that these opportunities are available to only Protestant men of Anglo-Saxon origin. The evidence for this is that all 43 American presidents have been Protestant men except for one Catholic man, 35th President John Kennedy (1961-1963).[28]

28 Ahmad Sukarno Abdul Hafeez, "Barack Obama and the American Elections," *Modern Discussion*, number 2186, Feb. 9, 2008, http://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=124325.

After he asserts that Obama has "returned hope to the Americans" and represents an important opportunity for American society to be rid of these problems of discrimination, Abdul Hafeez ends by asking a question: "Will Barack Obama win the Democratic nomination, or will racism and intolerance prevent that?" ■

Egyptian Islamists and Nonviolence

Views from the Prison Cell

DIAA RASHWAN
Director of the Program for the Study of Islamist Movements, Egypt

FOR THE FIRST TIME IN EGYPT'S HISTORY with violent extremism, the country's largest Islamist groups, Gamaa Islamiya and Islamic Jihad, which boast tens of thousands of members, have comprehensively performed introspective self-critiques of their jihadist ideology and their long history of radical, violent practices, reforming in order to join the ranks of increasingly popular peaceful movements within political Islam. In July of 1997, Gamaa Islamiya's leadership launched its Nonviolence Initiative and proceeded to evaluate its past actions and ideology, putting forth a self-critique in the more than 25 books it has published up to the present. Before its July 1997 initiative, Gamaa Islamiya was responsible for 95 percent of the terrorist attacks in Egypt, most notably the 1981 assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat.

Islamic Jihad, which has insisted it joined forces with Gamaa Islamiya to assassinate President Sadat, has also undertaken critical self-evaluations and renounced the use of violence. After the mid-1980s, internal conflict divided the Islamic Jihad movement into a distinctly Egyptian cohort and a foreign movement. The foreign component, including Ayman Al-Zawahiri, later evolved into a major component of al-Qaeda in the late 1990s, whereas a significant number of Islamic Jihad's historical leaders, many of whom are in Egyptian prisons or in exile in Europe, joined with Gamaa Islamiya's Nonviolent Initiative. Soon thereafter, many Islamic Jihad members undertook their own self-evaluations, making major advances with the November 2007 publishing of "Advice Regarding the Conduct of Jihadist Action in Egypt and the

World" by the movement's ideologue and former emir, Sayed Imam Al-Sharif, known also as Abdel Qadir ibn Abdel-Aziz or simply Dr. Fadl. The renunciation of violence on the part of these two popular Egyptian jihadist movements, endorsed and led by Islamist intellectual heavyweights, may change the course of global jihad and influence its development in the Arab world.

The concept and content of the self-evaluations

Speaking in accurate terms about Gamaa Islamiya and Islamic Jihad's revisionist processes requires one to specify the organizations' theoretical framework and practical content. It would be most accurate to say that Gamaa Islamiya's self-evaluation, as well as the current self-critique being undertaken by Islamic Jihad, are twofold, in that they address the ideology adopted in the past and the actions this past ideology drove these groups to take as well as the formulation of a new group ideology. These two parallel, connected processes, which Gamaa Islamiya has finished and Islamic Jihad continues to undergo, have resulted in what have come to be called "the self-evaluations." The first process is the fundamental, far-reaching criticism of past ideas and practices, while the second process is the formulation of a new ideological model that breaks with past jihadist thought. The complex, multifaceted nature of these self-reviews, undertaken by the two largest Islamist groups in the history of modern religious violence in Egypt, is what gives this process its significance, both for the future of these groups and for Egyptian society at large.

As for the product of this introspection, the leaders and members of both Gamaa Islamiya and Islamic Jihad developed their post-1997 positions, exemplified by the Nonviolence Initiative, into an ideology based on articulated theoretical foundations. This articulation of a new and more moderate ideological framework transformed Gamaa Islamiya's unilateral 1997 ceasefire from an internal decision, based on practical public relations considerations, into the actualization of a new group ideology. As a result, both Gamaa Islamiya and Islamic Jihad have come to be seen in a new light. From their founding and until the renunciation of violence, Gamaa Islamiya and Islamic Jihad were among the jihadist groups which believed that a genuine deviance was taking place among Muslims at the governmental, societal and individual levels and that correcting those beliefs was essential and warranted the use of violence. Furthermore, such groups felt that armed jihad opened

Gamaa Islamiya was responsible for 95 percent of the terrorist attacks in Egypt, most notably the 1981 assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat.

the door for the re-Islamization of society and the state, allowing them to be founded anew, based on the true Islam. With Gamaa Islamiya's renunciation of violence, followed by Islamic Jihad's own self-evaluative process, the two joined the ranks of the peaceful, moderate sociopolitical Islamist groups in the region that do not allow for any form of violence against fellow Muslims. At the forefront of their priorities is reorganizing their worldly situation, and the recognition that Shariah can only be applied by peaceful means. It is difficult to overstate the significance of the ideological leap that both of these groups have taken as they moved away from extremism and joined the broad field of moderate, centrist organizations, which represent the bulk of Islamic groups, past and present. The transformation and the revisions within Egypt's Islamist jihadist groups differ greatly from the experiences of Islamist groups in other Arab countries, such as Algeria and Saudi Arabia, where very few violent Islamist organizations have renounced violence. Most Arab countries have not reached this level of comprehensive transformation, nor have the changes resulted in the deep-reaching intellectual revisions that took place first for Gamaa Islamiya, and then for Islamic Jihad, in Egypt.

Jihadist groups believed that a genuine deviance was taking place among Muslims at the governmental, societal, and individual levels and that correcting those beliefs was essential and warranted the use of violence.

Gamaa Islamiya has made its substantive progress and its ideological transformation widely available to the public through its prolific publication of more than 25 books and other writings released since January 2002. These publications include not only the ideological bases and detailed visions of Gamaa Islamiya's new positions but also the organization's stances on a number of current international issues that touch upon Islam in some form. As for Islamic Jihad, after the publication of Sayed Imam Al-Sharif's "Advice Regarding the Conduct of Jihadist Action in Egypt and the World," the organization continued to review and revise its ideological vision, as it does still today. It is likely that Al-Sharif and other Islamic Jihad intellectuals will release further works on both their ideological stances and on contemporary international relations issues related to Islam, as Gamaa Islamiya did after the Nonviolence Initiative of July 1997.

Before 1981, Gamaa Islamiya had practically no famous documents or public intellectual figures justifying its ideology or the movement's actions, particularly its tendency to use violence, with the exception of two: the founder of Islamic Jihad Mohamed Abdel Salam Farag and his seminal manifesto "The Absent Duty" (*al-Farida Al-Gha'iba*), and professor of Quranic exegesis at Al-Azhar University, Omar Abdel

Rahman, whom Gamaa Islamiya leaders took on as their mufti. It is important to note that while Gamaa Islamiya and Islamic Jihad did not share many common sources for the formulation of their previous world views, Farag's manifesto and Sayyid Qutb's "Milestones," his Quranic exegesis "In the Shadows of the Qur'an," and some of his later works were hugely influential to both groups.

The first of the writings outlining Gamaa Islamiya's independent ideological framework emerged from Egyptian prisons after the assassination of Anwar Sadat on Oct. 6, 1981.

The first of the writings outlining Gamaa Islamiya's independent ideological framework emerged from Egyptian prisons after the assassination of President Anwar Sadat on Oct. 6, 1981, and the subsequent arrest of the group's leadership. Among these early statements was the "Charter of Islamic Action," which summarizes the group's ideological vision – its doctrine, goals and means of accomplishing its goals, as well as other principles of its philosophy and organization. In this stage, the writings of Gamaa Islamiya multiplied, all defining Gamaa Islamiya's path in terms of its violent tendencies: "jihad is fighting, i.e. confrontation and blood," and it was necessary for "Muslims to join the jihad however few their numbers."[1]

Islamic Jihad, in addition to Qutb's writings and Farag's manifesto, made use of philosophical writings penned by leaders of other jihadist groups that had formed since the late 1970s but had since disappeared. Most prominent was "The Message of Faith" (*Risalat Al-Iman*) manifesto authored by Dr. Salih Siriya, a Palestinian holding a Ph.D. in education, who led the failed Military Technical Academy in Cairo coup attempt in 1974. Both Gamaa Islamiya and Islamic Jihadist philosophies crystallized during the same period, and in the same prisons. Islamic Jihad put forth the seminal texts of its movement in two books by Aboud Al-Zomor, "Philosophy of the Confrontation" (*Falsafat Al-Muwajaha*) and "The Islamic Jihad Approach" (*Manhaj Jama'at Al-Jihad Al-Islami*). The goal of the group was clear in all of these documents, namely to "work to remove the dictators not ruling by God's law, establish Islamic rule, and restore the

1 The most important of Gamaa Islamiya's writings at that time were: Omar Abdel Rahman, *A Word of Truth* and *Categories of Rulers and their Rulings*; Najih Ibrahim, Assem Abdel Maged, and Assem Al-Din Darbala, *Charter of Islamic Action*; Aseem Al-Din Darbala, *Ruling of Fighting the Sect Abstaining from Any Part of Islamic Sharia*; Gamaa Islamiya's Research Council, *The Inevitability of Confrontation; The Excuse of Ignorance*; and *The Islamic Movement and Party Action*; Rifa'i Taha, *Harnessing the Energy to Reunite the Islamic Community*; and Abdel Akhir Hamad, *Replying to Doubts about Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice and Evidence in Sharia for the Permissibility of Changing Vice by Force to United the Flock*.

Islamic caliphate," by force.[2]

In both cases, the leaders who outlined the philosophies of Gamaa Islamiya and Islamic Jihad were young men in their twenties, who possessed neither any religious training nor the experience to allow them to reach conclusions harmonious with the true essence of Islam. This dearth of training and experience may help explain their tendency for rigid, exaggerated interpretations of some Quranic verses and parts of the *Sunnah* (traditions of the prophet), and their use of these interpretations to justify the campaigns of terrorism that both groups waged in Egypt for roughly 20 years. In retrospect, and after the profound changes in both groups' stance toward violence resulting in their complete renunciation of its use in Egypt and abroad, it does not seem implausible that a rudimentary understanding of Islam is what led the leaders of both Gamaa Islamiya and Islamic Jihad to tout an extremist interpretation of the Islamic faith. The early writings of Gamaa Islamiya, especially compared to some of its later revisionist literature, demonstrate that its leadership did not have a strong grasp of the different Islamic schools of philosophy and exegesis. The references cited in Gamaa Islamiya's early writings were limited to the most hard-line schools, which they relied on entirely in passing their judgments, with little consideration of more nuanced schools of Islamic teaching. In their later revisionist books, the same leaders clearly had acquired, through time and experience, a deeper understanding of diverse Islamic philosophies, and consequently retreated from their hard-line stances, openly admitting their mistakes and criticizing all that they had perpetrated under a false understanding of Islam.

The impact of the Revisions on Egypt

During the 10 years since the Nonviolence Initiative was announced in July 1997, the revisionist process has in fact led to a complete stop of religious violence perpetrated by Gamaa Islamiya in Egypt. The sole exception was the Luxor massacre on Nov. 17, 1997, which was committed by members of Gamaa Islamiya who were unaware of the leadership's decision to stop using violence. As for Islamic Jihad, a number of factors led them to stop committing acts of violence in Egypt in 1994, such as its overall weakness at the time and the leadership's desire to join Gamaa Islamiya's Nonviolence

2 The leading writings for Islamic Jihad during the same period were: Aboud Al-Zomor, *Philosophy of the Confrontation* and *The Islamic Jihad Approach* and *Ideological Agenda of the Islamic Jihad Group*; and Legal Council of the Jihad Organization, *Document of Jihad and Landmarks of Revolutionary Action*. Later on, in the 1990s, other prominent writings appeared, such as the following: Legal Council of the Jihad Organization, *The Necessity of Jihad and Honor of Martyrdom*; *Jihad against Tyrants Is a Divine, Irreplaceable Act*; and *The Secret Call*; and Abdel Qadir Bin Abdel Aziz, *Basic Principles in Making Preparations for Jihad* and *A Compendium for the Search of Noble Knowledge*.

Initiative. This largely practical stance on the part of Islamic Jihad has assumed an ideological dimension in the movement's current phase of self-evaluation.

The impact of nonviolence on post-Sept. 11 Egypt

In part due to the shifts in ideology and the adoption of nonviolence by Gamaa Islamiya and Islamic Jihad, Egypt's experience in the post-Sept. 11, 2001 climate differed greatly from that of many other Arab countries. While intelligence agencies around the world, led by those from America and the West, devoted resources to chasing down suspected domestic jihadist Islamists, throwing hundreds into prisons and secret detention camps, the Egyptian state had begun the process of emptying its prisons of Gamaa Islamiya members by gradually freeing over 20,000, and even accelerating the release of Islamic Jihad members in late 2007. Egypt was in the unique position of being almost free of jihadist groups and terrorist activity, while many Arab and Islamic states were overwhelmed by the proliferation of jihadist organizations practicing unprecedented levels of violence. Egypt has experienced a few instances of terrorism since Sept. 11, such as the three bombings in Sinai in 2004, 2005, and 2006, far from the crowded Nile Valley, and for which responsibility is still unclear. However, by regional and global standards, Egypt currently is relatively untouched by international terrorism.

The total cessation of violence by Gamaa Islamiya and Islamic Jihad in the last decade, and its implications for the future of violent jihadist organizations in Egypt, is especially significant given that the overwhelming international developments on the terrorism and religious violence fronts have failed to return these two groups to their old extremist ways. This decade has seen the birth of dozens of new jihadist organizations boasting thousands of supporters and sympathizers. Nonetheless, the explosive growth in global jihad has not pushed Gamaa Islamiya and Islamic Jihad to revert to their jihadist ideology and change their current status as peaceful sociopolitical Islamic organizations.

While intelligence agencies around the world, devoted resources to chasing down suspected jihadist Islamists, the Egyptian state had begun the process of emptying its prisons of Gamaa Islamiya members by gradually freeing over 20,000, and even accelerating the release of Islamic Jihad members in late 2007.

In addition to the renunciation of violence on the part of Egypt's most prominent Islamic movements, there are other factors that suggest that violent extremism will not reemerge in Egypt. For one, beginning with its exportation of liberalism and liberal values throughout the Arab world, Egypt his-

torically has exported more ideology than it has imported. In this vein, there is cause to believe that Egypt will not be greatly influenced by the violent extremism occurring in other countries in the region. As for the individuals and small groups that could be influenced by the model of al-Qaeda and other Salafi jihadist groups that have spread around the world during the past five years, the probability that they will appear in Egypt will likely diminish as Gamaa Islamiya and Islamic Jihad complete their self-evaluation processes. This could result either from the direct influence of the revisions' content on religious youth or from the members of the two former jihadist organizations spreading their influence throughout Egyptian society, acting as a buffer to protect youth in particular from violent jihadist ideas coming from abroad. It is not without irony that the two groups which yesterday were the source of religious violence and terror have now become Egypt's most important defense against the spread of global radical religious violence.

The Revisions' impact on international jihad

Islamic Jihad's self-review process and the release of "Advice Regarding the Conduct of Jihadist Action in Egypt and the World" are tantamount to the largest challenge, and the first of its kind from an Islamist group, to the global jihadist movement headed by al-Qaeda. This development promises to have a significant impact on international jihad and al-Qaeda, for a number of reasons. Most importantly, the prestige and international influence of Sayyid Imam Al-Sherif, aka Dr. Fadl, the author of "Advice Regarding the Conduct of Jihadist Action in Egypt and the World" and head of the revision process, lends legitimacy to Islamic Jihad's challenge to al-Qaeda's jihadist tendencies. Before the publication of Dr. Fadl's treatise, no Islamic Jihad leader had declared a fundamental difference in practice from al-Qaeda, especially in respect to the use of violence. It is imperative to note that Dr. Fadl's first two books, "Basic Principles in Making Preparations for Jihad" and "A Compendium for the Search of Noble Knowledge," remain at the top of the reading lists recommended by al-Qaeda and other jihadist groups, while audio files on jihadist websites confirm that at least as of a few months ago, his first book was still being taught to members as a very useful book in the field of jihad. That an intellectual leader with the caliber of Dr. Fadl has renounced the content of his previous two books, which remain fundamental sources of jihadist thought, must leave a mark on the global jihadist movement. Evidence suggests that some uncertainty and confusion has actually taken root in jihadist groups, as seen by many comments made during online jihadist forums after "Advice Regarding the Conduct of Jihadist Action in Egypt and the World" was published in late November 2007. These comments registered the disbelief toward the revisionist process and

In his broadcast on Dec. 14, 2007 on the occasion of the Annapolis conference, Al-Zawahiri devoted more than 40 percent of his time to sharply criticizing the revision process.

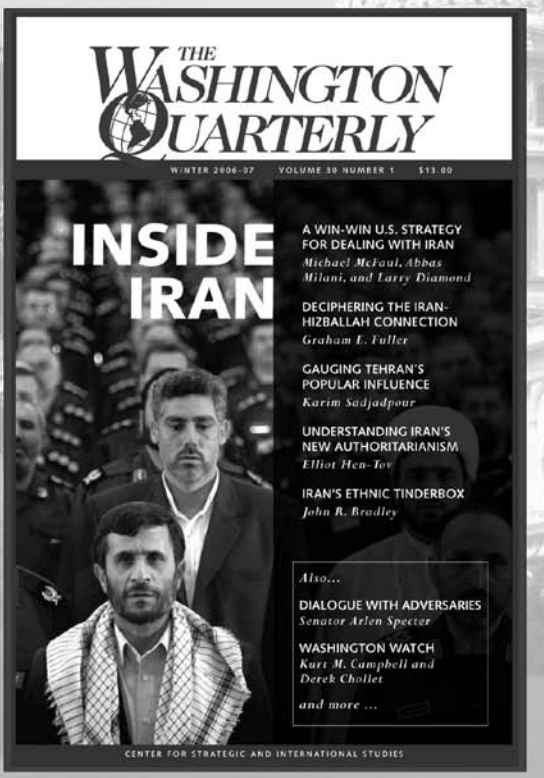
incredulity that Dr. Fadl himself could have taken such a huge step. The impact from the news of Islamic Jihad's self-review process was not restricted to the many anonymous young men posting online, but also spread to some of the major names in Salafist jihadist thought, such as Ayman Al-Zawahiri, the deputy leader of al-Qaeda. In a speech broadcast on Dec. 14, 2007 on the occasion of the Annapolis conference, Al-Zawahiri devoted more than 40 percent of his time to sharply criticizing the document and the revisionist process in general, promising that al-Qaeda would soon issue a detailed response. In addition to Al-Zawahiri, other jihadist thinkers such as Abu Baseer Al-Tartousi, Abu Yahya Al-Libi, Hani Al-Sebai, and Abdullah Bin Hamid Al-Ali have all commented in various ways on Dr. Fadl's document.

The revisionist actions undertaken by Egypt's Islamist groups and the work of Dr. Fadl will likely effect global jihadist organizations differently, depending upon their history, ideology, and makeup. For instance, al-Qaeda depends essentially on a large number of deceased historical and modern writers, with a few old-guard contemporary authors, whereas newer organizations are more prone to follow current thinkers. Thus, it is likely that the effect of "Advice Regarding the Conduct of Jihadist Action in Egypt and the World" will be greater on the original al-Qaeda than it will be on the newer offshoots, considering the former's familiarity and respect for Dr. Fadl's writings, and the latter's adaptability and ability to draw from new, younger sources. Nonetheless, the self-review process is expected to have an impact on both al-Qaeda and the newer jihadist groups, given the widespread admiration among jihadists for Islamic Jihad's leadership.

Some argue that the self-evaluation processes and Dr. Fadl's writings will leave affect on international jihad and al-Qaeda because during the past six years Salafist jihadist models and ideas have spread around the world as a direct result of American and Western aggression in many areas, particularly in Islamic countries. Since this situation seems unlikely to abate in the near future, the spread of jihad will be unaffected by Islamic Jihad's self-evaluation process and "Advice Regarding the Conduct of Jihadist Action in Egypt and the World." However, this self-criticism by Gamaa Islamiya and Islamic Jihad, the oldest and largest jihadist groups in the world, is not simply intellectual exercise. Rather, they embody a new reality in international jihadist thought and could compel others to pursue the same non-violent course. Also not to be forgotten is the nature of Islamist movements, and jihadist ones in particular:

the philosophical, legitimizing process plays such a central role in their disposition toward the use of violence under the slogan of "jihad," and they do not undertake practices without first providing religious justification satisfactory from their point of view. Hence, the trend of the evaluation process in general, and "Advice Regarding the Conduct of Jihadist Action in Egypt and the World" in particular, to criticize and correct jihadists will undoubtedly have an impact on the theoretical structure of believers within the international jihadist movement. ■

In the current issue, The Washington Quarterly *celebrates its 30th year with a new cover design and editorial board.*



EDITORIAL BOARD
Kurt M. Campbell, *Chairman*
Walter Laqueur, *Chairman Emeritus*

Lael Brainard
Daniel Byman
Karen Donfried
Yoichi Funabashi
G. John Ikenberry
Jeffrey W. Legro
Michael Mastanduno
Michael McFaul
C. Raja Mohan
Robin Niblett
Joseph S. Nye
Vladimir A. Orlov
Mitchell B. Reiss
Susan E. Rice
Simon Serfaty
Anne-Marie Slaughter
James B. Steinberg
Ashley J. Tellis
Bruno Tertrais
Celeste A. Wallander
Wu Xinbo
Fareed Zakaria

"The Washington Quarterly consistently presents its readers with in-depth analysis of all sides of today's critical geostrategic debates."
—Zbigniew Brzezinski,
Former National Security Adviser

http://mitpressjournals.org/twq

Alexander T.J. Lennon, Editor-in-Chief

PUBLISHED QUARTERLY BY THE MIT PRESS FOR THE CENTER FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

Downloading Democracy

Bloggers in the Gulf

AFRAA AHMED ALBABTAIN
Political Researcher, Kuwait

POLITICAL ACTIVITY ON THE INTERNET differs from one country to another and from one region to another, where the form and intensity of that activity are tied to the technological culture of its society, the extent of the action and interaction of the political forces in it, and the degree of government control over the Internet.

Political activity appears on the Internet through various web applications which exhibit a unique communicative nature making them tools that can be employed politically. Some people use e-mail to send messages with political content to an infinite number of people without cost, while others use chat rooms for the purpose of engaging in discussion about political events with others and trying to influence them. Many individuals and organizations create personal websites to distribute information serving their political interests. Many also create blogs, which is a recent and widely spreading phenomenon that allows individuals to write and post articles online about anything of their choosing, including political entries.

What interests us here is the appearance of a significant amount of political activity on the Internet in the Arab Gulf states, where that activity varies according to the goals, organizational structure, and the extent of influence on the political arena by contributors – not to mention different mechanisms, means and applications through which political activity is carried out. Online discussion forums are considered one of the most important web applications – especially in the Gulf – that can be employed politically, because they exhibit several distinctive features that help moderators and

users achieve political goals. Discussion forums provide the opportunity for dialogue about political issues and events.

Web applications in the Gulf region

The particularity of the political and security situations in the Arab Gulf states has played an important role in the widespread expansion of online blogs and forums. It is worth noting that the majority of those Gulf blogs and forums take a mostly political approach.

These two applications have become outlets for freedom of opinion and expression regarding what is happening in the region, whether on a local, national, or international level. This is why Gulf societies have made use of the distinctive features of blogs and forums in order to promote political participation and increase dialogue about political issues, not to mention providing the opportunity for freedom of expression that allows any user to write and post any opinion without censorship or fear.

Blogs are a distinct way of expressing one's self, ideas and knowledge through the Internet; moreover, the blog's moderator is considered to be the sole person controlling everything published on its pages. Blogs allow their users to participate in politics in a way that differs from the traditional forms of political participation in the Arab Gulf states, such that bloggers have come to feel a sense of accomplishment in their ability to change the dynamics of Gulf public opinion and political activity in the region. Bahrain and Kuwait are considered to be the most active Gulf States, where their bloggers organize and advance a number of objections to various legal and political issues, not to mention post critical analysis of political events happening in the region.

Gulf societies have made use of blogs and forums to promote political participation and to increase dialogue about controversial political issues.

Blogs give their moderators an opportunity to test their analytical, critical and debating skills in political affairs, which in the past was limited to a select group of active politicians and professional journalists in the Gulf states. Now, however, it has become possible for any person to participate in the debate about political issues, express his opinion, debate with others in the designated space and thus participate in focused political discussions. There was a time when Gulf blogs were considered an application relevant only to young people – a young people's revolution made by and for youth – considering that intellectuals still shied away from Internet technology. This conclusion is not completely accurate any more, however, for the phenomenon of blogs has been spreading to different age groups and social classes and is no longer limited to only young people.

What makes blogs different from other online political activity – especially online forums – is that they allow the blogger to write and express his personal opinion without interference from outsiders, since the blogger has complete control over his blog and nobody imposes any conditions, regulations, or copyright laws. Likewise, many bloggers seek to achieve their own "virtual" success, where the blogger can distinguish his blog with a special name or symbol that brands his ideas and visions. In addition, the blogger is conscious of his blog's success when he checks the number of visitors and commentators on his posts.

As for forums, they are firmly established. The number of participants is increasing, the topics are constantly updated, and they are run by a professional administrative team that works towards their success and expansion, encouraging Internet users to subscribe to the forum, visit it regularly, and continue to post their own contributions. What also distinguishes forums from blogs is that when a forum member raises a topic for discussion, his topic is available for other forum members and visitors to see, which guarantees that at the very least the forum members will read it.

Forums give their members a greater advantage in marketing their subjects better than blogs. Searching for blogs is a long process that puts the Internet user in a predicament as to which of the many blog links to choose. It doesn't stop at this point, for the matter also requires convincing the reader of the blog's content as well as its seriousness, so that he will enter and browse it. There is no doubt that this process requires great effort on the part of the bloggers. As for forums, the member has already chosen the forum and at this point is limited to choosing topics within the forum itself. Here is where the role of the writer comes in, to generate interest among the members by choosing interesting and inviting titles to guarantee that the greatest number of members possible read his topic and participate in it.

Despite the notable success of blogs in the Arab Gulf states, online forums are the most well-known and widespread application in the region. This is perhaps due to the fact that forums are considered older than blogs, since Gulf forums are estimated to have been around for 12 years whereas blogs in the region have been around only half this time. Also, by nature, forums include various sections for a wide range of subjects, not only political. In addition, forums provide an intimate and interactive atmosphere for their members, where any member can form friendships very easily and share movies, photos, video clips, programs, games, music, and more with other members.

Thus, a forum member spends a long time browsing the various sections of the forum, not limiting his participation to political sections only. This makes forums a more effective application at attracting members who then interact through political as well as non-political material provided by the forum. The blogger, on the other hand,

provides only his personal opinions and his own political and non-political analyses. He rarely provides materials for visitors; all he usually provides is a list of website and blog links – most of which are his personal preferences – that the visitor can use. This makes visiting the blog like a personal visit to the blogger himself, whereas participating in forums is closer to group work, where all members exchange information and materials and discuss all subjects, not to mention have the possibility to get to know each other.

Online forums have become the web application most used by political forces in the Arab Gulf region to achieve their political goals.

Online forums are collaborative efforts involving the participation of all members; indeed, the number of members and the intensity of their participation are considered among the most important criteria for judging the success of the forum. The greater the number of members, the amount of participation and interaction, the number of subjects raised for discussion, the electronic materials that can be exchanged, and so on, the greater the degree of the forum's success. A given forum cannot be judged to be successful unless it has a large number of members and it includes a large amount of participation, interaction, materials, and services. On the other hand, a blogger rarely writes about a wide variety of issues, but rather specializes in a single one: politics, society, art, literature, etc. The blog is based on the personal work of the blogger, and the success of the blog is conditional on the content he offers, the updating of subjects, and his ability to win over the visitor with his style and ability to analyze events.

The political use of online forums in the Arab Gulf states

Political forces began using various web applications intensively because these applications offered services completely different from what other forms of media could provide. Indeed, online forums have become the web application most used by political forces in the Arab Gulf region to achieve their political goals, for these forces make use of the distinct features of forums in various ways, each according to its ambitions and specific agenda.

Online forums facilitate the response time to current events, as well as the mobilization of the masses and gathering opinions with record speed. There is no longer need for physical human gathering – causing commotion, riots, and perhaps even destruction and killing. What is required is writing articles in the forums and making them available to as many people as possible in order to communicate the target message. Thus, the notion of demonstration and protest has changed in the era of online

forums and with the huge number of people using them and trying to benefit from the advantages provided by them. Forums also offer a framework and mechanism that guarantees a lack of confrontation with governments and security forces.

In addition, online forums facilitate the coordination of large groups of people regarding critique and expression, either to protest against a specific issue, criticize certain policies, or express dissatisfaction of existing circumstances at a local, national, or international level. This coordinating capability provided by online forums offers a great opportunity for political and social mobilization. The incident of the Danish drawings satirizing the Prophet Muhammad is an important example of the ability of online forums to coordinate, gather, and mobilize, as well as to direct public opinion in certain ways, especially concerning the boycotting of Danish products – for most of the Arab online forums contained a list of Danish products.

Online forums also play an important role in weakening government control over information, for it has become within the ability of forum moderators and users to transmit and post any information without significant restrictions. This represents great freedom, for forum users can send any message to an unlimited number of other users without censorship or great cost. For this reason, opposition forces move freely and easily on the Internet and intensify their activity – a frequent visitor of online political forums clearly notices the great number of articles and responses, which include condemnations or protests against political systems. Online communities usually use a strategy of channeling their opposition opinions through multiple online forums, which allows a greater chance of escaping government censorship of the content.

Online forums play an important role in weakening government control over information with the ability of forum moderators and users to transmit and post any information without significant restrictions.

Despite the abovementioned possibilities that online forums offer, some groups began using them in a negative way. Online forums have become a principal framework and mechanism that extremist terrorist groups depend on, where these groups take advantage of the forums' communicative and uncensored nature in order to connect and communicate with their followers all over the world. Moreover, they take advantage of the forums to promote their extremist ideologies, as well as to recruit members.

The various methods used by terrorists in forums have grown noticeably, both through development in their use of forums and through the variety of audio and visual materials posted there. Terrorist organizations and groups focus on two main strategies concerning online forums: the first is the establishment of their own online

forums in order to write and post their own statements and fatwas, promote their ideas, and exchange dialogues among the leaders of these groups and other online debaters. These forums are open to everybody and through them there is commentary on political events, posting of analyses, showing documentaries about the group, and adding anthems and songs that encourage what the groups call "jihad," as well as more provocative messages. What draws our attention is that the terrorists are establishing a huge number of online forums which differ in degree of seriousness and strictness, seeking to distract the efforts of security apparatuses. Moreover, they have some alternative forums in case of the destruction, damage, or closing of a forum.

A writer who calls himself Al-Salim has published a document on the *al-farooq* website (a code name that al-Qaeda is known by in Saudi Arabia) under the title "Al-Qaeda: the Thirty-Nine Principles of Jihad."

The second strategy used by these groups is to join in already existing online forums. It is worth noting that these groups quickly take to the religious sections of these forums, with the goal of spreading their ideas, fatwas, and extreme approaches by entering into ideological conflicts with the rest of the forum members. They also take advantage of already existing online forums to distribute their statements and create many links to large folders loaded with their media materials that any member can watch and download. Besides that, they raise funds by advertising fake websites that delude Internet users into thinking that they are charity sites raising donations to give to the poor and people in need all over the world.

Terrorist groups work on the Internet under the name of "online jihad." A writer who calls himself Al-Salim has published a document on the *al-farooq* website (a code name that al-Qaeda is known by in Saudi Arabia) under the title "Al-Qaeda: the Thirty-Nine Principles of Jihad." Principle thirty-four glorifies "online jihad" for being a "holy duty," and emphasizes that all Believers are called to join jihad by way of participating in online forums to defend Islam. It also explains to all Muslims that it is their duty to participate in jihad. Al-Salim adds that the Internet provides the opportunity for immediate response to false allegations and reaches millions of people in seconds. He also encourages those who are skilled Internet users to support jihad by infiltrating and destroying "enemy" websites (meaning American and Israeli) and "immoral" websites (pornography and gambling).[1]

In addition to the jihadi instructional function these forums serve, they also offer

1 Abdel Bari Atwan, *Al-Qaeda: al-tandhim al-sirri* (Beirut: dar al-saqi, 2007): 148.

information about how to effectively pursue jihad, starting with teaching their members how to make bombs, mix chemical weapons, load missiles and carry them, and other tactics concerning acts of violence. The forums even provide them with targets to focus on.[2] What is noticeable is that a lot of online forum members transmit this information without full realization of the danger and seriousness of its content, especially since the administration of many of these forums dodges responsibility for all online content and instead places this burden solely on the articles' writers. An important example of this is the large scale reception of *Al-Batar* magazine – an online military magazine issued by al-Qaeda specializing in military and field information and recruitment – which is being published and transmitted through extremist and non-extremist online forums alike.

There is no doubt that this serious matter necessitates conscious supervision on the part of the forum administration and proofreading the material that members upload and create in the forum, especially given the difficulty of full governmental control over the work of all forums due, in part, to the great ease of bypassing government mechanisms to block, filter, and censor websites.

Types of Gulf online forums

Online forums vary regarding the nature of their specialization, goals, and performance. On the one hand, there is the comprehensive forum that consists of many sections covering different fields, such as political discussions, ideological and dogmatic dialogues, literature, technology, sports, and more. On the other hand, there is the specialized forum.

Forums in the Arab Gulf region have witnessed rapid growth and cover diverse areas of interest: political, Islamic, ideological, sports, feminist, economic, literary, etc. What Gulf online forums are most distinguished for is their large number of members and high level of participation in a variety of subjects. Among these forums, political forums are considered to be the most intense in terms of the number of members and participation, as well as the number of subjects covered.

There are a number of large political forums that have asserted themselves on the Internet, reaching not less than 30,000 registered members. Some political forums have more than 70,000 articles, and in some forums the number of responses to political postings is close to one million. Table 1 shows the most important political Gulf forums the amount of participation in the political section, as well as their number of members.

2 Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon, *The Next Attack: The Failure of the War on Terror and a Strategy for Getting in Right* (New York: Henry Owl Books, 2006): 76.

Table 1: Most Important Online Political Gulf Forums

Forum Name Website Country	Political Section Postings/ Responses	Forum Postings/ Responses	Forum Members	Number of forum administration
Saudi Cool s3odicool.com/vb Saudi Arabia	729/ 14,980	28,880/ 403,444	33,700	4
Alquma www.alquma.net/vb Saudi Arabia	79,468/ 930,730	181,472/ 2,517,159	32,665	10
Bahrain for you www.bahrain4u.com Bahrain	71,290/ 582,619	181,923/ 1,482,822	42,992	27
Bahrain future www.bhfuture.org/vb Bahrain	1,782/ 7,169	10,984/ 60,849	4,971	7
alommah www.alommah.org/forum Kuwait	4,212/ 45,135	7,558/ 78,820	4,234	4
kuwaite www.kuwaite.com/vb Kuwait	1,746/ 28,679	72,697/ 1,315,835	143,759	8
Oman lover www.omanlover.org Oman	1,151/ 13,411	64,869/ 1,681,755	46,839	21
Al-qatarya www.al-qatarya.com Qatar	1,077/ 10,840	52,851/ 823,351	32,976	19
Watan www.wa6an.net/vb UAE	1,480/ 10,209	4,810/ 33,443	1,303	11

Source: The table was made by the author with the help of the available statistics provided by the forums mentioned in the table.

These forums have taken part in establishing an environment of debate and great freedom in addressing subjects which might be hard to broach directly, subjects that have long been considered taboo, and that perhaps still are considered taboo in face to face dialogue. This conclusion can be reached easily by reading these forums and the subjects under discussion by the forum members. The subjects under discussion, the views about those subjects, and the illustrations contained in the forums all indicate the great contribution of these forums in promoting, or at least revealing, the religious, ideological, and political diversity within Gulf societies.

For example, a member of *eltwhed* forum (www.eltwhed.com/vb) who calls himself *al-hayat helwa* ("life is beautiful") submitted a post titled: "I am a liberal ... and I say this without boasting?"[3] He wrote:

> After making it clear in more than one post, after saying it with all calmness, and after screaming as loud as possible that liberalism is not a religion, doctrine, or creed, but rather an ideology that is in harmony with all creeds, religions and doctrines – after all that, I say to you that you and I are liberals.
>
> Yes, I like conservative liberalism. Fashion attracts me. I watch satellite channels. I go to the movie theater when I am out. I enjoy dancing. I am passionate about traveling. Daring ideas and theses grab me and I learn and benefit from them and look for the truth in them. I don't deny that apple-flavored beer (al-musi or al-fayruza) makes me feel intoxicated. I also believe that it is not a shame or forbidden for a woman to drive a car. I also strongly believe that revealing a woman's face is not a temptation nor is her voice a temptation, and that seeing a good omen in the Prophet's female companions and those who followed them and those following those who followed them ... I would also like to clarify that I enjoy listening to Fairuz and her chants when she sings (A'tini al-nay wa ghanni) (Uhibb min al-asma') (Sa'aluni al-nas). I say with all conviction that the Western experience amazes me regarding the organization, discipline, and margin of freedom the regimes give to the individual, as well as their working for a better life for mankind. I also do not deny that the right of Muslim women to work is indisputable and I don't find in this any kind of shame or rebellion against religion or something sacred. Before I finish this post and go to the barber to shave the scattered hairs of my beard, I would like to whisper to you that I believe dying one's hair is a personal freedom. I have many reservations about our historical heritage and transmitted culture.
>
> I wonder if everything I have mentioned will remove my cloak of Islam.

This post provoked strong responses from the opposition, and one of these responses, Islamic in nature, is that of member called Brahim, who has a picture of Bin Ladin as his profile icon in the forum:

> Life is beautiful indeed! I am Muslim and I say this without boasting!!

3 See: http://eltwhed.com/vb/showthread.php?p=82670

> I am passionate about the Quranic verses. I watch lectures and lessons on TV. I enjoy praying. I am crazily passionate about jihad. Daring ideas and theses grab me and I learn and benefit from them and look for the truth. I drink apple and banana flavored juice, and things that are halal make me feel an intoxication that I have never found anywhere else. I like to hear the Quran. I say with all conviction that the experience of the Prophet and his Companions amazes me regarding the organization, discipline, and margin of freedom the regimes give to the individual, as well as their working for a better life for mankind.
>
> This is the Muslim.

Another member, called Rafidite fighter, posts:

> I myself hate all these foreign ideas, and the reason for this is that our identity and religion is Islam. Islam is a way of life that we are proud of in front of infidels, and we try to reduce the number of infidels with it. So why would we bring to the Islamic nation propaganda or foreign Western ideology that opposes the forgiving Islamic religion?

Political online forums and democracy in the Arab Gulf states

The spread of online forums in the Gulf has led to a change in the form of political participation in the region. It has become possible for any person to enter and participate in any forum, as well as to engage in dialogue, debate, and share political opinions with other users, which in the end has multiplied political activity.

Online forums have played a clear role in encouraging political participation and freedom of expression in the Gulf region. Many factors have helped this, the most important of which is the distinctive nature of the online forums, as indicated earlier. In addition to this, there is the abundance and continuing spread of online forum programs that are Arabic enabled, which has greatly helped. The idea of online forums is based on dialogue, discussion and posting articles. If not for the existence of Arabic versions for online forum programs, then these online forums would be limited to the select group in the Gulf societies that can speak English.

Likewise, the practice of concealing the identity of forum members by using screen names has played a significant role in attracting a large number of individuals to participate. There is no doubt that the use of pseudonyms gives each participant in these forums a greater willingness to engage in dialogue with the rest of the members without reservation. It has also given them a greater willingness to challenge prevailing customs and traditions in Gulf societies.

It is also worth mentioning that the diversity of these political forums has played an additional role in expanding the amount of alternatives available to the Gulf citizen. There is no doubt that the amount of alternatives plays an important role in enhancing the ability of the citizen to think about these alternatives and evaluate them, allowing him to avoid the narrow-minded thinking of believing there is only one way.

Despite all of these positive aspects, there are still obstacles to the role online forums play in the process of democratic change in the Arab Gulf states. Although forums play an important role in promoting political awareness, they have not yet developed to an extent that pushes the forum member to positive political and social action, which means his participation is limited to the virtual world. Thus, it is necessary to distinguish between exercising freedom and participation as a virtual behavior and activity, on the one hand, and exercising freedom and participation as a non-virtual physical behavior, on the other hand, without disparaging the positive long-term effects of the former form of political participation.

Although forums play an important role in promoting political awareness, they have not yet developed to an extent that pushes the forum member to positive political and social action, which means his participation is limited to the virtual world.

There is also an important physical obstacle embodied in the decreased percentage of Internet users in the Gulf states, where the influence of online political forums remains limited to those who excel at using computers and the Internet and online forums, specifically. Despite the rapid spread of the Internet in the Gulf compared with a lot of other Arab countries, the percentage of Internet users has not yet reached the required levels for the phenomenon of online forums to achieve the effect of large-scale democratic change. Table 2 illustrates the number and percentage of Internet users in the Arab Gulf states.

The statistical data in Table 2 indicates that less than one fourth of the population of the Arab Gulf states (about 22.2 percent) accesses the Internet. It is a tiny number compared to the financial means available to the Gulf countries which, according to the latest analysis, decreases the ability of online forums to spread the culture of democracy in the region.

The third obstacle is related to the control imposed by Gulf governments over online forums, especially the political ones. Namely, Gulf governments – like many political systems in the third world – refuse to relinquish their control over information and news resources, which has pushed the Gulf states – in an uneven way – to ration, control, and block the available content on the Internet, especially the applica-

Despite the rapid spread of the Internet in the Gulf, the percentage of Internet users has not yet reached the required levels for the phenomenon of online forums to achieve the effect of large-scale democratic change.

tions that are used politically, such as online forums. There is no doubt that the continuation of these restrictions limits the ability of these forums to make changes, encourage opening of the society, and strengthen democracy in the region. Likewise, the methods of the Gulf states concerning the banning and blocking of online political forums may alienate Internet users from frequently visiting those forums and push them to look for other means of expressing their ideas and opinions.

The fourth obstacle is related to the prevalence of superficial posts in many forums, in addition to the fact that in many cases they are full of verbal violence, psychological terrorism, and the rejection of the "other." In the end, this hinders the supposed role of online forums to enhance democracy in the Gulf states, which in turn stands in the way of attracting intellectual groups to the online political forums and enriching them with more profound discussions. This lowers the level of discourse and increases the difficulty of moving the debate to the level of organized action, especially when the administrators of these forums stoop to such lows.

Table 2:
Number and Percentage of Internet Users in the Arab Gulf States, 2000-2007

	UAE	BAHRAIN	SAUDI ARABIA	OMAN	QATAR	KUWAIT
2007 Population	3,981,978	738,874	24,069,943	2,452,234	824,355	2,730,603
Internet users in 2000	735,000	40,000	200,000	90,000	30,000	150,000
Internet users in 2007	1,708,500	157,300	4,700,000	319,200	289,900	816,700
Percentage of population that uses Internet	42.9%	21.2%	19.5%	13.0%	35.1%	29.9%
Increase in Internet usage from 2000-2007	132.4%	293.3%	2,250%	254.7%	866.3%	444.5%

Source: The table was made by the author with the help of available statistics on www.Internetworldstats.com.

Conclusion

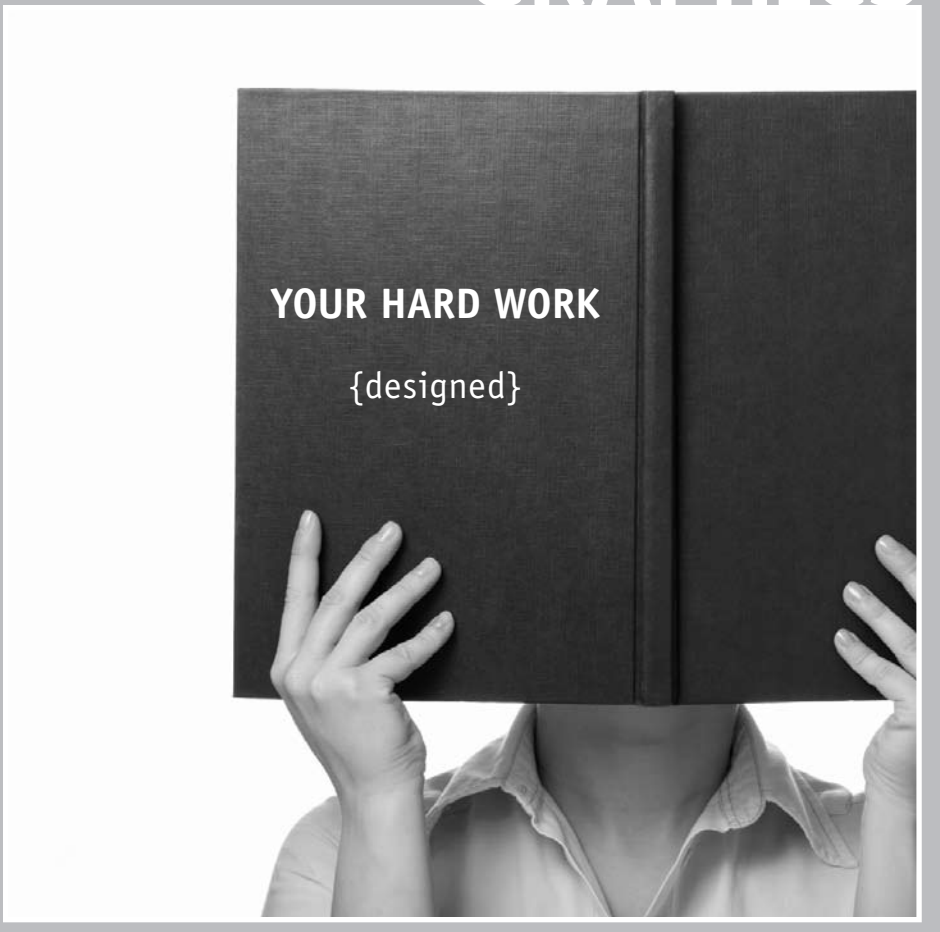
It is possible to say that online forums in the Gulf states have two faces: the first is the positive face of political engagement, for Gulf people have taken advantage of them as a means of political action, by writing and posting the opinions and ideas related to political issues, as well as for coordinating among members to exercise political protest, even in its virtual context. The other face is the negative one that serves extremist ideas, since terrorist groups have taken advantage of forums to market their ideologies, as well as to recruit new members and attract sympathizers. In addition, they have changed it into a tool to raise money.

What may also be observed in online political forums is the number of participants and the intensity of participation. Forums are very popular among Gulf people, for they use them as a space to express their opinions on various pressing issues, as well as to debate with other forum members. It is regrettable that the level of culture and dialogue in these forums is often petty, and they contain ideological disagreements which place the members in continuous conflict, dismissing each other's ideas. These forums are dominated by a harmful negative environment. Many members rebel against anything and everything and have a strong desire to attack all moderate tendencies on the pretext of a revolutionary spirit and of fighting the restrictions which limit their movements and ideas. This petty style of dialogue is considered one of the most important obstacles that prevents the role of online forums in enhancing and strengthening democracy.

It is possible to say that despite the generally positive phenomenon of online political forums in the Arab Gulf societies, their success in achieving significant progress in spreading democracy remains contingent on dealing with these obstacles. However, one should not disregard the important capacity of online forums to encourage freedom of opinion and expression, since exchanging political ideas and discussions in public is not easy in the Gulf's political and cultural climate.

The ability of online political forums to create political change in the Gulf and strengthen democracy in these countries remains unclear. It is difficult to predict the future path of these forums given the novelty of the experience for Gulf societies and the fact that online political forums alone are unable to start a revolution or affect the political change in the Arab Gulf region to achieve the values of freedom and democracy. ■

FREERAYN
GRAPHICS



202.668.0608
www.freerayngraphics.com

books	journals	copy editing
reports	newsletters	proof reading

China in the Middle East

Perspectives from the Arab World

MOHAMED BIN HUWAIDIN
Professor of Political Science, United Arab Emirates University

THE FOUNDING OF the People's Republic of China marked the birth of China's influence in the Arab world. While tangentially implicated in the ideological conflict between the United States and the USSR due to its adoption of communism, China managed to maintain a healthy distance from its ideological brother, the USSR, by adopting the principle of competitive independence, especially regarding its policies toward the Third World.[1] This stance fostered cooperation between China and Third World countries, many of them in the Arab world, as China increasingly became a prominent donor of economic, political and military aid, and encouraged Third World countries to imitate this new Chinese model.

While the relationship between China and the Arab world is longstanding, China's increasing prominence on the world stage, with its nuclear capabilities, United Nations Security Council veto, and economic rise to the second largest world economy has garnered increased scrutiny over its interests in the Arab World. This article examines the evolution of the Arabs' view of China and its involvement in the region in recent history, and the obstacles impeding the development of a real strategic partnership between the People's Republic and Arab nations.

1 John W. Garver, *Foreign Relations of the People's Republic of China* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1993): 133-166.

Arab perspectives on the rise of China

The first stage: looking for Chinese political support

The 1955 Bandung Conference was a critical turning point in Arab-Chinese relations, and the beginning of Arab interest in China, with the Arab countries rushing to establish diplomatic relations with Beijing. Arab interest in China, at this time, revolved around China as a source of political support for themselves and for their national liberation movements. In this context, the Palestinians and Algerians obtained Chinese political and military backing in their struggles against imperial powers, and the Egyptians garnered Chinese political support during the 1956 Suez Crisis. Leftist organizations in the Arab world, particularly the movements active in South Yemen and the Omani province of Dhofar, also received substantial aid from China. In addition, China supported leftist parties in the Arab world, such as the Iraqi Communist Party.[2] At this time, numerous Arab countries, including Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia and Yemen, were recipients of the economic aid offered by China to developing countries in order to compete with Western and Soviet influence.[3]

China's role in the Arab World was limited to providing political, military and economic support to aid in facing external threats.

Throughout the Arab world, China's role was limited to providing political, military and economic support to aid in facing external threats. China was also ready to give this aid in order to expand its influence vis-à-vis the West, and later the Soviet Union.

The second stage: investment in Chinese military and political capabilities

An overlap in Sino-Arab interests in the military domain distinguishes the second stage of Arab-Chinese relations. At this time, Arab states were looking to obtain weapons to bolster their defensive capabilities against new threats, while China wanted to expand its export market as a source of revenue for its military and civilian modernization programs. Throughout the Arab world these years saw escalating conflict and Arab countries were pushed to build up their arsenals, especially after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, and the breakout of the Iraq-Iran war one year after. On the Chinese front, Deng Xiaoping's rise to power

2 Hashim S.H. Behbehani, *China's Foreign Policy in the Arab World 1955-1975, Three Case Studies* (London: KPI, 1985).

3 Wolfgang Bartke, *The Economic Aid of the PR China to Developing and Socialist Countries* (London: K.G.Saur, 1989).

Table 1:
China's Main Arms Customers by Region, 1982-1991

Region	Value (U.S. $ million)	Share of China's Total Arms Sales (%)
Arab countries and Iran	13,225	82.2
South Asia	1,260	7.9
East Asia	1,005	6.3
Africa	435	2.7
North America	30	0.19
East Europe	10	0.06

Source: *World Military Expenditures and Arms Transfers* (Washington, D.C.: US Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, 1987 and 1991), 127-130, and 131-134.

and reform program to modernize China meant a drive to market China's military capabilities, both as part of a broader modernization effort and as a way to provide the necessary resources to finance China's modernization efforts on other levels.

This is not to say that China no longer had political importance in the Arab world, rather that military cooperation was the most prominent feature of this period of time, with Sino-Arab cooperation in other fields taking second place. Table 1 shows the distribution of Chinese arms exports from 1982 to 1991 according to region, with by far the largest share going to the Middle East.

The above table shows the relative importance of Middle Eastern countries as the main market for Chinese arms, with 82.8 percent of total Chinese military sales going to Arab countries and Iran. The Iran-Iraq war played a significant role in the surge of Arab dependence on China as a source of arms. As Table 2 demonstrates, the two combatants were the leading buyers of Chinese arms, with Iraq first among the countries importing weapons from China, followed by Iran. The Iran-Iraq war also transformed Sino-Saudi relations; whereas the Saudis eschewed diplomatic ties before the war, in the wake of the conflict they prioritized strategic initiatives that necessitated stronger ties to China, for example the purchase of advanced Chinese missiles to balance out Iranian and Israeli weaponry.[4] By the late 1980s, China was selling Dong Feng-3 medium-range ballistic missiles (called the CSS-2 in the West) to the Saudis.

Sino-Arab arms arrangements were relations of last resort. Arab countries only sought Chinese weaponry because of U.S. and Western European prohibitions on

4 For more details on this topic see: Mohamed Bin Huwaidin, *China's Relations with Arabia and the Gulf 1949-1999* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2002), 213-235.

advanced arms sales to most Arab states. China, meanwhile, was eager to promote its arms industry toward both political and economic ends. Through strong diplomatic ties with Arab powers like Saudi Arabia, China could preempt Arab states from developing diplomatic relations with Taiwan. China also aimed to compete with expanding Soviet influence in the region, capitalizing on instability in the region. Arms exports in the region also served Chinese interests economically as it gained foreign currency to finance its modernization project and modernize its own arsenal.

During the first Gulf War China became an important ally to many Arab states opposing the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. China's support of this coalition of nations seeking the restoration of Kuwaiti independence gave the coalition's policies legitimacy and was especially crucial given China's permanent membership in the UN Security Council. During this period, China was concerned with portraying itself as a responsible state, concerned with the preservation of international peace and security. Thus it did not oppose Security Council Resolution 678, which called upon Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait and authorized the international coalition to use armed force to expel Iraqi forces from Kuwait. In terms of Sino-Arab relations, the Gulf War demonstrated the strategic political and military role China could play in influencing Arab conflicts and regional security in the Middle East.

Middle Eastern countries are the main market for Chinese arms, with 82.8 percent of total Chinese military sales going to Arab countries and Iran.

The third stage: diversified interests

A new dynamic in Sino-Arab relations began with an astronomical rise in China's energy needs in the early 1990s. China become a net oil importer in 1993 and has since become the second largest oil consumer in the world after the United States (about 7 million barrels a day), though it remains the third largest importer in the world after the United States and Japan.[5] China alone is currently responsible for about 38 percent of the total global growth in demand for oil.[6] With the world's largest proven oil reserves in the Middle East and North Africa, China's energy needs made reinvigorated relations with Middle Eastern states inevitable.

Despite the centrality of petroleum sales in Sino-Arab and Sino-Persian relations, China's closer ties to the Middle East have necessitated more complicated bilateral

5 *Petroleum Times Energy Report*, Vol. 14, No. 20 (October, 14 1994): 7.
6 Energy Information Administration, Country Analysis Briefs, http://www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/cabs/China/Oil.html.

relationships. For instance, China has been a bulwark against U.S. and UN initiatives to stem the humanitarian crisis in Sudan's Darfur region because of the strategic importance of Sino-Sudanese trade. At the same time, China has embarked on a number of joint projects with the Gulf countries, such as a free trade zone and the investments in the field of energy. As Chinese interests in the Middle East have become more complicated, so too have Middle Eastern interest in China. We seek to explain the most salient of those interests here:

(1) Economic interests: Arab oil interests top Arabs' economic interests regarding China. The oil-producing Arab countries regard China as a promising market for Arab oil, especially considering the consistently high growth rates in the Chinese economy, which, as mentioned earlier, account for 38 percent of the total increase in global demand for oil. The Chinese market not only presents an opportunity to diversify into foreign markets, it also lessens Arab dependence on Western markets to sell Arab oil.

China has also initiated two major projects with its Arab partners to increase Arab access to Chinese markets. The first initiative entails vast energy projects. Notably, Saudi Arabia plans to build oil storage facilities within Chinese territory to ensure the flow of Saudi oil to global – especially Asian – markets should the security situation in the Strait of Hormuz deteriorate to a degree threatening the flow of Saudi oil to global markets.[7] The second initiative involves Arab investments in the Chinese market. The current oil boom has produced both private wealth and massive sovereign wealth funds that drive this investment. Moreover, some Gulf investors have been deterred from developed markets by hostile U.S. and European reactions to Arabs holding sizeable stakes in Western concerns. The row over Dubai Ports World's bid to manage a set of American ports as part of their takeover of Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company (P&O) revealed how unwelcome Arab investments are in some sectors of the U.S. market, and a harbinger of other Western efforts to block Arab investment. This development pushed many Gulf investors to reorient broadly towards the East. Some estimates suggest that Arab investments in Asia may reach $150 billion across the various sectors,[8] with

China alone is currently responsible for about 38 percent of the total global growth in demand for oil.

7 Jianjun Tu, "The Strategic Considerations of the Sino-Saudi Oil Deal," http://www.jamestown.org/terrorism/news/article.php?articleid=2373169.

8 *Gulf Business*, Vol. 12, No. 8 (December 2007): 194-195.

It is likely that China and India will become the two most important centers for Gulf investments in the near future, surpassing European and American markets.

current Arab investment in China around $1 billion.[9] It is likely that China and India will become the two most important centers for Gulf investments in the near future, surpassing European and American markets in this regard.[10]

China is also expected to be of special significance to Arab countries seeking to develop their peaceful nuclear capabilities, such as Jordan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia. These countries may look to cooperate with China in this field as long as they do not face technical or political obstacles from Western countries in carrying out these nuclear projects.

(2) Political interests: Arab political interests regarding China revolve around employing Sino-Arab relations to balance American and Western influence in the region and in counteracting contentious issues with the United States. The most salient example involves Sudan, which has sought Chinese support for its position on the Darfur crisis to confront American pressure, especially within the Security Council. In reality, these interests are not wholly unrelated to oil, since it is impossible to extricate China's Sudan policy from its economic interests in obtaining Sudanese oil. Chinese political and economic support is exchanged for Sudanese oil, 60 percent of which goes to China alone.

Another example of growing Arab political interests in China was Saudi King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz's visit to China in January 2006. Some analysts have argued that by choosing China as his first non-Arab destination since assuming the powers of the monarchy in August 2005, King Abdulaziz was delivering a clear message to the United States that the Kingdom may look to Eastern powers should American pressure escalate or American interests conflict with Saudi national interests. This visit also suggests an expression of a new Eastern orientation of Saudi foreign policy.[11] Another strategic rationale for Gulf Cooperation Council countries to develop closer political relations with China is to mitigate concern over growing Sino-Iranian relations.

9 *El-bayan El-eqtisadi*, December 24, 2007, 18.

10 N. Janardhan, "Time to Convert East-East Opportunity into Strategy," Gulf-Asia Research Bulletin, No. 2 (July 2007): 5.

11 Dr. Harsh V. Pant, "Saudi Arabia looks East: Woos China and India," http://www.pinr.com/report.php?ae=view_report_id=445&language_id=1.

Impediments to enhancing Arab-Chinese strategic relations

While the diversity of Arab interests in China would not prevent the adoption of a joint Arab policy towards China, there is no such coherent Arab policy. In addition, a number of factors currently hinder the further development of Arab-Chinese relations, some of which can be traced to Chinese policy, others to factors within the Arab world, and others to competing international powers.

Obstacles on the Arab side

A significant barrier preventing Arab states from developing strategic relations with China is a structural failing on the part of the Arab nations to collectively and successfully deal with foreign powers. Despite the presence of the Arab League, the Arab world has not developed a joint Arab foreign policy. The difficulty of coordinating among 22 Arab countries, entrenched national policies, and the disparities among Arab states in terms of their national interests in China have all prevented the development of a common Arab policy toward China.

Another impediment is that Arab countries still view China through a Cold War lens and therefore expect China to form an international bloc against the United States and the West, seeing Sino-Russian rapprochement or the creation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as precursors to the formation of such a bloc. Unable to see that the mechanisms and tools of international relations, rivalries and conflicts are now fundamentally different from what they were during the Cold War era, Arab states have been stunted in their ability to further develop strategic relationships with China.

Until recently many Arab countries viewed Chinese relations with both the Arab world and Israel as a zero-sum game in which China had to choose side. Despite the recent relative evolution away from this narrow-minded Arab view, it remains in some respects. As part of an evolving understanding of China's relationship with Israel, some Arab states now expect that China will undertake a pivotal role in managing the Arab-Israeli conflict. This expectation ignores the reality of Chinese-Israeli ties, particularly in the military domain, and fails to grasp the nature of the China's development as a rising power. Despite international appraisals of China's ascent, China still categorizes itself as a regional power out of fear that it will jeopardize its rise by alarming other international powers.

Until recently many Arab countries viewed Chinese relations with both the Arab world and Israel as a zero-sum game in which China had to choose side.

Another key obstacle is related to the limits imposed on the development of Arab relations with China given the strategic reality in the Middle East. This is particularly true for the countries allied with the United States, whether Gulf countries with their security and defense agreements, or other Arab countries with close military ties to the United States. Maintaining this current alliance is a basic precondition for Arab economic and military relations with the United States and European countries, and therefore essential for the preservation of regional stability in the Middle East. Thus, any major strategic move in these countries' interaction with China has to take into consideration both their special relationship with the United States and the nature of American relations with China.

In addition, security concerns and the lack of stability within the Arab world obstruct the creation of a genuine Sino-Arab strategic relationship. The experience of Chinese-Iraqi relations offers an important example in this regard. While former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein succeeded in developing strong economic and military relations with China, the collapse of his regime and Iraq's plunge into chaos badly damaged Chinese interests in the region.

Obstacles on China's part

An integral obstacle to China developing strong strategic ties with the Arab world is the priority of the economic determinant in Chinese foreign policy instead of political and ideological determinants. China today is fundamentally different from Mao's China, a fact which has had a crucial impact on the nature of Chinese relations towards the Arab world in several respects. For one, oil is the greatest driving force behind Chinese policy toward the Arab world, making China selective in its ties; priority is given to the major oil exporters (the GCC countries and formerly Iraq) or those who are believed to have significant oil reserves waiting to be discovered (Sudan), while assigning less importance to the non-oil producers. Due to China's oil priority, Arab political and security issues – from the Arab-Israeli conflict to America's role in the region at large – have declined in importance on the Chinese foreign policy agenda.

Another barrier involves technical problems preventing the expansion of cooperation in the oil arena. Even with oil's priority in Chinese policy toward the Arab world, the Chinese have had difficulty in making a quantum leap in this field: Chinese oil refineries are aging and need large-scale investments in order to handle the heavy crude oil produced in the Arab world. In order to combat China's limited oil refining infrastructure, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia have made large investments in the Chinese refining sector in hopes of upgrading China's refineries so that they will be able to process heavy crude oil.

Another important obstacle in the further development of strategic Sino-Arab relations is China's inability to compete with the United States and European states in certain fields, such as education, health, training and development.

Even with oil's priority in Chinese policy toward the Arab world, the Chinese have had difficulty in making a quantum leap in this field: Chinese oil refineries are aging and need large-scale investments in order to handle the heavy crude oil produced in the Arab world.

Impediments related to the United States

In addition to the aforementioned obstacles that U.S.-Arab relations present in the development of Sino-Arab relations, the extent of American influence in some parts of the Arab world, notably the Gulf countries, Egypt and Jordan, has prevented China from building relations in the region. As such, China has had to seek out partners in the region that do not have strategic relationships with the United States. Despite the importance of the oil market in Chinese-Gulf relations, American influence in the Gulf has compelled China to look elsewhere for sources of oil to avoid being at the mercy of fluctuations either in the regional situation or in American policy. For this reason, the Gulf comes in second behind Africa as a foreign source of oil for China.

The development of a strong, balanced relationship between China and the Arab world remains hostage to the adoption of a conscious Arab policy toward China, based on an objective evaluation of Arab interests and the limitations of China's role in supporting Arab causes and interests. It also depends on the careful management of the previously mentioned impediments and determinants in both the Arab world and China. ■

Azimuth Media's
Foreign Exchange
with new host Daljit Dhaliwal

World Security Institute

To find your local show times on PBS, or to watch the program in streaming video, visit:

www.foreignexchange.tv

Independent Research and Journalism on Global Affairs
worldsecurityinstitute.org

STRAUS MILITARY REFORM PROJECT

BRUSSELS, CAIRO, MOSCOW & BEIJING PROGRAMS

FOREIGN LANGUAGE E-PUBLICATIONS

PULITZER CENTER ON CRISIS REPORTING

Economic Reform & Political Openings

Lessons from Algeria

MOHAMED RATOUL
Professor of Economics and Political Science, Shalaf University, Algeria

AFTER GAINING INDEPENDENCE in 1962, Algeria faced many economic, social and political troubles. Like many developing and post-colonial countries at the time, Algeria chose to address these hardships by adopting socialist principles, financed by oil export revenues and foreign borrowing. However this socialist experiment collapsed in the late 1980s with the decline in oil revenue due to falling oil prices, and with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the strength of socialist ideology, leaving Algeria to face both economic and social crises. The Algerian government was forced to reexamine many principles that had not previously been open to discussion, and Algeria began evolving into a market economy. At the same time, Algeria amended its constitution in 1989 to reflect new political pluralism. Thus, beginning in the 1990s, Algeria was simultaneously undergoing two crucial processes: economic and political liberalization. This article will examine the sweeping economic reforms that Algeria implemented under the structural adjustment program and again in the early 2000s, in conjunction with an examination of the effects of political reform and the security situation on Algeria's economic development.

Reforms before 1999: harsh structural adjustment and democratic labor pains

By the late 1980s, it had become apparent that extensive economic and social reforms were required to transform the prevailing model of planned economic development that had been applied after independence and which relied heavily on oil export rev-

enue and foreign borrowing to support the Algerian economy. After huge, organized demonstrations took place in Algeria's major cities on Oct. 5, 1988 to protest the declining economic and political situation, the government took steps toward converting to a market economy and enacted a series of political reforms, the most important being the transformation to a multiparty system.

Economic reforms in the structural adjustment program (1995-1998)

Facing a dire economic situation, Algeria, in cooperation with the World Bank and IMF, initiated far-reaching reforms in the form of a structural adjustment program in 1995. Before carrying out the structural adjustment program, the Algerian economy was struggling,[1] characterized by dwindling foreign exchange reserves, rising foreign debt, dropping GDP growth rates, persistent budgetary deficits, high inflation (32 percent in 1992), malaise in the private sector areas of agriculture, construction and industry, rising unemployment, and supply and demand imbalances. In addition, Algeria relied heavily on imports of basic foodstuffs (accounting for 50 percent of the average Algerian's diet). There was also a dearth of more than one million housing units in public housing, poor integration between different industries, declining export revenue due to collapsing oil prices, and falling foreign investment and capital inflow figures. To combat these fiscal and social problems, the fundamental pillars of the structural adjustment program were laid out in a May 1994 standby agreement, which was followed by an extended fund facility accompanied by the rescheduling of Algeria's foreign debts over three years.[2] The program included a set of stringent guidelines for monetary and financial policy, international trade and the various economic sectors.

Algeria still relied heavily on imports of basic foodstuffs (accounting for 50 percent of the average Algerian's diet).

In terms of fiscal policy, the structural adjustment program attempted to reduce the deficit in the state budget through measures targeting increased GDP and minimized government expenditures. These policies included abolishing consumer subsidies, increasing the value added tax, increasing government tax income by fighting tax evasion, boosting loans from the financial market to avoid inflationary financing, decreasing government expenditures by limiting government and fixing public sector employees' salaries to avoid inflation driven by rising wages. Subsidies on essential

1 P. A. Belgherbi, *Economique: Les principaux elements*, No. 8, (1994): 24.

2 Mohamed Ratoul, "Transformations of the Algerian Economy – the Structural Adjustment Program and the Extent of its Reflections on the Level of Interactions with the Outside World," *Bahuth Iqtisadiya Arabiya*, No. 23. (Arab Organization for Economic Research, 2001).

goods were also abolished to reign in government spending, following the logic that liberating prices was a necessary goal of the structural adjustment program.

In addressing monetary policy; the structural adjustment program focused on interest rates and regulating the financial sector. Strict financial and monetary planning was followed regarding the resources collected, with the printing of money capped, internal borrowing limited, and an attempt made to raise foreign currency reserves to support the exchange rate and level out the balance of payments. In the same context, some measures were taken to restructure the financial system so that it would better suit the requirements of the free market and the pace of reform was hastened. Another goal of the structural adjustment program was exchange rate reform, with emphasis on reforming the balance of payments.[3] In this framework, the Algerian dinar was devalued 7.3 percent in March 1994, then 40.1 percent the following month. To liberalize the exchange market, a hard currency interbank market was created, permitting commercial banks to freely offer hard currency to their clients, and foreign exchange offices were permitted to open. All of these initiatives aimed to reduce the gap between the official exchange rate and the parallel exchange rate.

The liberalization of prices was also incorporated into the program. Before 1994, public subsidies had reached as high as 5 percent of GDP. However, prices began to be liberalized in 1994, and the legalized profit margin system was gradually phased out to disappear at the end of the structural adjustment program. Tied with this liberalization process was the application of a social compensation system to lighten the effects of rising prices and a falling dinar on the lower classes.

In keeping with the Algerian government's fiscal policy as put forth in the structural adjustment program, many public entities were restructured. State organizations were reconfigured, guaranteeing them more legal and financial independence. The cost of this financial restructuring from 1994 to 1999 alone was around $13 billion.[4] Harsh financial restrictions were imposed on these institutions to force them to become self-sustaining. A reform program was also imposed upon the public institutions responsible for construction and public works, with some of them privatized, others dissolved, and the rest downsized. The same policies were applied to government agencies, public utilities companies and local government institutions.

In addition to the sweeping reforms the structural adjustment program imposed on the state and financial institutions, the program also greatly affected Algeria's private sector. With the adoption of the program, for the first time, the sale of public

3 Mohamed Ratoul, "The Algerian Dinar between the Theory of Flexibility Methods and Rectification," *Iqtisadiyat Shamal Afriqiya* No. 4 (Algeria, June 2006): 233.

4 *Al-Khabar* 2 (January 3, 2000): 2.

institutions and their management by the private sector was allowed, and the private sector was also permitted to contribute to the capital of these institutions. Other laws further liberalized by ending the state monopoly over the insurance business and opening the door to foreign investment in commercial banks. Along the same lines, a set of measures was applied to encourage productive private investment. In this vein, the structural adjustment program included a number of measures specifically targeting agricultural reform, including returning some of the land that had been nationalized after independence to its previous owners. At this time, a bill was also put forward to privatize land by converting the right to use state-owned agricultural lands into full private property rights. However, this bill has yet to become law. In addition, steps were taken to encourage agricultural production and defend agricultural products from foreign competition. The development and reform of the fishing industry won particular attention through the reform of this sector's regulatory frameworks, the improvement of fishing methods and ports, and the facilitation of access to capital, allowing fishing to emerge as a professional, profitable sector attracting private domestic investment. The housing sector also experienced many reforms during this period. Many institutions that could not be restructured and downsized were dissolved completely, and most of the workers in this sector were pensioned off. These actions were paired with the encouragement of private investors to enter the sector.

To maintain the momentum of the structural adjustment program and the ambitious reforms it outlined, the Algerian government negotiated with the World Bank and the IMF.

To maintain the momentum of the structural adjustment program and the ambitious reforms it outlined, the Algerian government negotiated with the World Bank and the IMF and was able to secure funding and lighten the external financial burden. An agreement was also reached with the Paris Club and the London Club to reschedule debts of about $20 billion over the four-year structural adjustment period.[5] Furthermore, the IMF, along with other international and regional financing organizations, and other creditors set aside exceptional aid worth $5.5 billion to rectify the balance of payments. These two measures (debt rescheduling and exceptional aid) and the fiscal relief they provided for the Algerian government during the structural adjustment process undoubtedly contributed to the program's success.

5 Karim Nashashibi et al., "Algeria: Stabilization and Transition to Market," IMF Occasional Paper 165 (Washington: IMF, 1998): 10.

Results of the structural adjustment program

Many aspects of the structural adjustment program had great success and revitalized Algeria's economy. On the macroeconomic level, some indicators showed a return to more economically acceptable levels. After the program's completion, growth rates reached 5 percent (though this was less due to actual growth in industrial activity than it was to the national economy having shed the social burdens which it had shouldered for so long), inflation fell to under 1 percent and the real interest rate became positive. In addition, the dinar's exchange rate was relatively stable against major currencies, and the gap between the official rate and the parallel market's rate dwindled.

After sharp price increases in the initial stages of the structural adjustment program, progress toward establishing a market economy also led to relative price stability, and declines were recorded in some widely consumed products due to dropping prices in the international market.[6] Price liberalization also had significant positive effects, and the upward trend of prices when the program was first applied led to a reduction (or rather, rectification) in national demand, and the elimination of a large part of luxury consumer spending. Furthermore, prices also leveled out with those in neighboring countries, which in turn shut off cross-border commodity smuggling and speculation on widely consumed goods.

This is not to say that structural adjustment was wholly successful, as the improvement in some economic indicators was actually due to favorable external factors. While structural adjustment contributed to lowering foreign debt and debt servicing rates at the end of the program's application, imports as a percentage of foodstuffs continued to increase. Foreign trade liberalization measures helped expand the import business, with foreign goods flooding into the domestic market despite Algeria's high customs rates. While foreign currency reserves rose, this stemmed fundamentally from sharply rising oil prices, not other factors. In addition, attempts to lure foreign investment to Algeria also failed to have the desired effect, not only because of lingering bureaucratic complications, but also due to the poor political and security environment in Algeria throughout the 1990s. The flow of Algerian investment abroad also remained limited because of the weakness of Algerian capitalists, with the notable exception of some modest investments made by hydrocarbon giant Sonatrach in a number of countries.

As with foreign investment, the banking reform aspect of the structural adjustment program had limited success due to an entrenched bureaucracy and the lack of timeliness in applying modern banking technologies. This was also the case for both public and private economic institutions, many of which remained far from imple-

6 Ibid.

menting international best practices, whether regarding technology, prices, or quality and despite the progress made in restructuring these institutions.

In addition, it is necessary to speak to the real social costs of the structural adjustment program. Nearly 300,000 workers were laid off from government jobs, which led to rising discontent and poverty rates. Augmenting the negative social effects was the fact that the program's application overlapped with the proliferation of organized domestic terrorism, which helped destroy many public and private facilities. The security situation also had a considerable economic and social impact upon the rural population, and many people migrated back to their hometowns searching for greater security.

Political reforms: from a single party to pluralism

The successes of the structural adjustment program paved the way for further democratic reforms and ultimately the adoption of a new constitution in 1989 that recognized pluralistic ideals. While far from a real democracy, the language of democracy had been an important part of the liberation movement that freed Algeria from French colonial rule. For instance, the National Liberation Front (FLN) communiqué of Nov. 1, 1954, which laid the groundwork for the revolution, included an important paragraph which called for "the restoration of the Algerian state, sovereign, democratic, and social, within the framework of the principles of Islam." Thus, the concept of democracy was embodied in the basic national charters and constitutions, beginning from the official naming of the state: the People's Democratic Algerian Republic. However, practically speaking, the FLN was wary of losing the gains of the revolution and as a result, pluralism was not acknowledged until the 1989 Constitution. The constitution came amid various crises, giving new life to Algerian politics by accepting the principle of the freedom to form political organizations. Article 42 stipulated that: "The right to create political parties is recognized and guaranteed. However, this right cannot be used to violate the fundamental liberties, the fundamental values and components of the national identity, the national unity, the security and integrity of the national territory, the independence of the country, and the People's sovereignty."[7] The adoption of the new constitution did not automatically lead to a vibrant democratic awakening and many of the political parties that formed at this time were either stagnant or worked secretly, and had widely varying political leanings. After more than a quarter century of suppression of party activity, the constitution's sanction

7 1989 Algerian Constitution, dated February 23, 1989, and amended in 1996. Available in English at http://www.conseilconstitutionel.dz/Const89-5.htm

of the multiparty system led to the appearance of more than 60 parties: they ranged from Nationalist parties that drew inspiration from the anti-colonial movement and pan-Arabism, to Democratic parties, and both moderate and extremist Islamic parties. The democratization process, as much as it made Algeria a pioneer in the Arab world, was a bitter experience, in part due to the rapid descent into violent conflict after the electoral process was called off in the wake of fears of an Islamic majority in the Dec. 27, 1991 elections,[8] and in part due to the blatant contradictions among the active political parties. Algeria's adoption of democracy was also difficult due to the novelty of its experiment, which had no precedent to follow in the region.

Despite its descent into violence as the frequency of terrorist attacks increased during the 1990s, Algeria remained on the path of pluralism, at least on a minimal level, through the participation of the interim council and the peaceful succession of power. During this violent period, the presidency of Algeria passed from Chadli Bendjedid to Muhammad Boudiaf, who was assassinated on June 29, 1992, and was succeeded three days later by Ali Kafi. Liamine Zeroual then took office on Jan. 30, 1994, followed by the current president Abdelaziz Bouteflika beginning April 27, 1999. This period of political unrest also saw 10 different prime ministers.[9] While this rapid succession of power, both for presidents and prime ministers, shows the extent of the political crisis in Algeria, it also demonstrates the level of harmony with democratic principles in the attempt to correct the political course that Algeria had followed from independence until the 1989 constitution.

In addition to the political, economic and human costs caused by the prevalence of terrorism and a deteriorating security situation, there were indirect losses resulting from the redirection of government spending away from economic development and toward the purchase of weapons, the training of internal security forces, the compensation of victims' families, and the provision of ample essential and luxury goods to reassure citizens. There were also the costs associated with instability within the government and the ministerial posts. All of these conditions weakened the state's position abroad, in turn hurting its ability to seek loans and financing concessions. Foreign investment naturally dropped sharply given the security environment. All of

8 The first round of the legislative elections that year resulted in the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) gaining a majority, an outcome which was undesirable for the ruling powers, especially the secularist and Francophone branches. This result was also frowned upon regionally and internationally, due to fears about the application of the ideas for which some FIS leaders were calling, and concerns that the FIS would abolish democratic, pluralistic principles after gaining power. The democratic process was halted, and the second round of elections was not held, which led to the country entering a wave of violence characterized by organized terrorism.

9 In order, they were Sid Ahmed Ghazali, Belaid Abdessalam, Redha Malek, Mokdad Sifi, Ahmed Ouyahia, Smail Hamdani, Ahmed Benbitour, Ali Benflis, Ahmed Ouyahia once again, and at present Abdelaziz Belkhadem.

these circumstances indirectly reduced the number of resources that could be marshaled toward economic development.

This troubled state of affairs intensified the economic and social damage that the structural adjustment program had inflicted on the lower classes. However, despite the lack of security, the party system stayed active and these parties helped rectify the economic course and deal with its repercussions. In the political process, all of the various ideological trends – whether nationalist, Islamic or democratic – took part in the successive governments, the interim council and the People's National Assembly, or helped to relax the political and security situation through amnesty laws. This active participation is what ensured Algeria's ability to overcome the security crisis and move on to other phases of democratic development.

Algeria in the 2000s: economic takeoff and democracy taking hold

The economic and security crises began to show signs of abating with the election of Abdelaziz Bouteflika as president on April 15, 1999. There were two major tasks before the Bouteflika presidency: The first being the preservation of the economic gains realized under the structural adjustment program and the continuation of economic, commercial and financial reforms in order to maintain solid economic growth. The second task was to create a solution to the ongoing political and security crises. In terms of politics, restoring the constitutional rule of law was the most important accomplishment of this period, with all of the constitutional institutions returning to their prior status after having been disrupted for a full eight years (1992-1999). In keeping with the constitution and with the participation of most political parties, all political institutions were elected, including municipal councils, people's assemblies, state assemblies, and the presidency of the republic. Active party participation in government expanded as President Bouteflika succeeded in bringing together parties with widely varying ideologies for the first time in one government. His first government included seven different parties, which despite the fundamental differences among their platforms, worked together on executive and legislative levels, thus paving the way for a political system built on rotation of power and acceptance of the "other."[10] Meanwhile,

Despite its descent into violence as the frequency of terrorist attacks increased during the 1990s, Algeria remained on the path of pluralism, at least on a minimal level.

10 Hassan Abd Rabbo al-Masri, "Algeria and Bouteflika after Four Years: Paving the Way for a Politics of Succession and Acceptance of the Other," *Al-Zaman Al-Jadid* Magazine (March 4, 2002).

this period also saw peace gradually take root, based on the Civil Concord Law of July 13, 1999,[11] which was followed by the National Reconciliation Law of Feb. 27, 2006.[12]

The early 2000s was also distinguished by the restoration of hope and trust, especially after the civil concord program that led thousands of armed fighters to come down from the mountains. Acts of terrorism became fewer and farther between. These positive political and security developments were reflected in economic life, and various economic indicators showed improvement. Foreign currency reserves rose to nearly $100 billion, while foreign debt dropped to a mere $4 billion, mainly due to rising oil revenue. At this time, a set of key economic policies that sought to preserve the gains of the structural adjustment program were implemented. The most prominent policies involved completing the economic reform program; adopting a number of economic and social programs, such as the "Economic Revival" program launched in 2001, for which $7 billion was earmarked, and the "Supporting Economic Growth" program, for which $150 billion was set aside for 2005-2009; concluding a partnership agreement with the European Union in 2005; continuing negotiations with the World Trade Organization over liberalizing Algerian external trade; and paying down the country's foreign debts, which shrank from $28 billion to $4 billion. Other initiatives included working to increase domestic investment and direct foreign investment, continuing to privatize many public institutions, and helping encourage the private sector to expand, such that it became responsible for about 70 percent of non-oil economic growth.[13] In addition to these efforts, banking and financial reform continued, foreign currency law was updated, and infrastructure work continued as roads, railroads, airports and ports were built or rebuilt. These economic policies were positively reflected in Algerian social life and unemployment dropped to about 13 percent, family income rose, poverty rates fell to around 6 percent, and the housing problem was alleviated by large and diverse

These positive political and security developments were reflected in various economic indicators showed improvement. Foreign currency reserves rose to nearly $100 billion, while foreign debt dropped to a mere $4 billion, mainly due to rising oil revenue.

11 To see the full text of the law (in Arabic), see the following link:http://www.el-mouradia.dz/arabe/algerie/Histoire/wconcorde.htm.

12 A law passed by popular referendum on September 29, 2005, and made effective the next year, including the peace accord and national reconciliation.

13 From a speech by President Bouteflika at a dinner banquet honoring German President Horst Kohler, Algeria, November 12, 2007.

programs created to specifically address housing needs. The GDP growth rate was consistently around 6 percent, the dinar's exchange rate stabilized, inflation remained under 3 percent, and living standards improved tangibly.

Political forces agree on economic reform

It is essential to emphasis that the key factor contributing to the success of this second round of economic reforms in the early 2000s was the integration of diverse political parties in formulating and applying these policies. The various parties, whether nationalist, Islamic or democratic, took part in drafting and approving the policies in the National People's Assembly – a first in Algerian history. The principles of acceptance and inclusiveness became part of the new Algerian political status quo, and this period saw coalitions between parties that no one would previously have imagined could work together. Furthermore, there was an accord over the economic reform programs on the part of the 21 parties in the National People's Assembly elected in 2007 for the sixth legislative session.[14]

Overall there exists a large degree of consensus among Algeria's political forces over preserving the transformation to a market economy. Disagreement on the matter remains limited to this evolution's rate and scale. Some forces argue that there is no feasible option other than fully applying a market economy, privatization and economic liberalization, while others counter that expanding privatization and selling the remaining public economic institutions will hurt the Algerian people and be a blow against the lower classes. All political entities, however, strongly agree that Algeria must continue on the path of economic reform, toward a market economy that is integrated into the global economy. Most importantly, all agree that Algeria should seek economic efficiency without doing excessive harm to the poor. ■

14 In order of seats won during the May 17, 2007 elections for the 2007-2012 session, the parties were: National Liberation Front, National Rally for Democracy, Movement of Society for Peace, Independents, Workers' Party, Rally for Culture and Democracy, Algerian National Front, National Movement for Nature and Development, Movement for National Reform, Movement for Youth and Democracy, Renaissance Movement, Party of Algerian Renewal, Movement of National Understanding, National Republican Alliance, Al-Infitah Movement, National Reform Movement, National Front of Independents for Understanding, National Movement of Hope, Ahd 54, National Republican Rally, Algerian Rally, Democratic and Social Movement, and the National Democratic Front.

NEW FROM THE MIT PRESS!

WORLD POLICY JOURNAL

provocative debate

penetrating insight

lively writing

Karl E. Meyer, Editor

"The best policy journal in the country."

Lewis Lapham, Editor, Harper's Magazine

"The real intellectual competition for Foreign Affairs."

Columbia Journalism Review

"I greatly value World Policy Journal for its independent and fresh articles, for its frequent skepticism about conventional wisdom."

Robert B. Silvers, Editor, New York Review of Books

"World Policy Journal can be relied upon for independent, incisive and arresting analysis."

Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.

The MIT Press is pleased to announce that it will begin publishing *World Policy Journal* with the Summer 2006 issue. Self-published by the World Policy Institute at the New School University in New York since 1983, this quarterly journal is a leading left-of-center forum for U.S. foreign policy analysis and debate.

Subscribe to *World Policy Journal* and you will read some of today's finest political commentary, expert analysis, and global reportage .

SUBSCRIBE TODAY.

MIT Press Journals
Circulation Department
238 Main Street, Suite 500
Cambridge, MA 02142 USA
tel: (617) 253-2889
US/Canada: (800)-207-8354
fax: (617) 577-1545
journals-orders@mit.edu
http://mitpressjournals.org/wpj

CHINA SECURITY

A policy journal on
China's strategic challenges

Exploring both traditional and non-traditional security issues:

- Nuclear Strategy
- Space Ambitions
- Military Spending
- Foreign Policy
- Economic Development
- Energy & Environment
- Crisis Management
- Social Welfare

Bringing Chinese Perspectives to Washington

Subscribe now!

www.wsichina.org

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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

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."

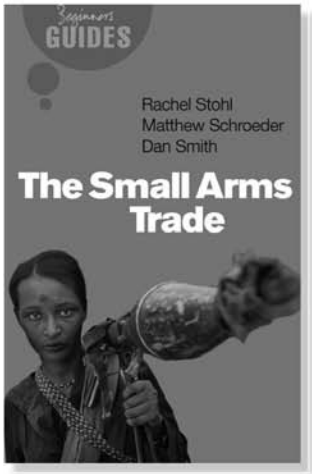
Conclusion

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

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.omeworld-publications.com**.

Skepticism in the Arab World

The Base of Conspiracies

HANI NASIRA
Director, Al-Mesbar Center for Studies and Research, United Arab Emirates

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

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

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

Conspiracy theories are not a product of emotion, but rather are a rational mechanism in Arab debate between different ideologies and schools of thought.

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

Thus, I do not agree with the argument that "the conspiracy-centered mentality is a way of emotional thinking."[1] The phrase "conspiracy-centered mentality," coined by Khaldoun Al-Naqeeb, gives the impression that this mechanism is unlikely to have a role in the ideology and identity-based foundation of the nation and state's conceptions. Conspiracy theories are not a product of emotion, but rather are a rational mechanism in Arab debate between different ideologies and schools of thought. It is a thoughtful strategy, as one of our contemporary writers said while calling for an alternative strategy,[2] and a tree always thriving in our Arab world according to another writer.[3]

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

Sources of skepticism in the Arab-Islamic mind

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

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

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

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

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

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

1. The assertion of every faction that it belongs to the true Islam and that others are wrong, with each providing evidence from the Quran, Sunna and elsewhere to prove that their understanding of Islam was correct.

2. Every group discussing the sayings and conceptions of other groups and casting doubt upon their arguments to rebut them and assert that their adherents had all gone astray.

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

The assertion of every faction that it belongs to the true Islam and that others are wrong, with each providing evidence from the Quran or Sunna to prove that their understanding of Islam was correct.

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

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

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

was killed in 661. The conflict which saw the emergence of the main Islamic factions: Sunnis, Shias, Kharijites, and Murjiites, and later on the Mutazilite faction at the beginning of the 8th century. Then these groups were divided further into what 12th century scholar Ibn Al-Jawzi called "the 73 factions," in reference to a saying of the Prophet, and it could even be said that some of these factions themselves split into another 73 splinter groups, each one naturally seeing itself as representing the true Islam.[6] After that, the splintering process of ideas and beliefs continued, with every faction claiming to possess the sole truth and to deserve the Caliphate.

Arab nationalist thought is extremely critical of ethnic minorities, such as Kurds, blaming downturns in Arab history on them.

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

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

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

6 Shahrestani, Ibid.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Skepticism in ancient and modern Arab thought

There are two basic functions of the aforementioned mindset:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

10 Ibid.

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

Spaces where skepticism is used

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

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

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

1. International relations, where many Arab analysts regularly interpret events under the umbrella of the struggle with the "other," and hence are prone to skepticism.

2. Discerning intentions in general provides fertile soil for skepticism. Even though only God knows our true intentions, conspiracy theorists also ap-

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

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

Mechanisms of skepticism

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

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

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

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

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

12 Hassan Shabakashi, "Debilitation and the Fall," *Ash-Sharq Al-Awsat*, July 24, 2005.
13 Galal Amin, "No One is Telling the Truth," *Al-Hayat*, August 10, 2005.
14 Ibid.

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

Cursory substantiation

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

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

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

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

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

15 Safinaz Kazim, "Have the Americans Hijacked Our Heads?" Ash-Sharq Al-Awsat, December 7, 2004.
16 Mohammed Al-Ramihi, "Conspiracy Discourse and the Absence of Rationality."
17 Theirry Meyssan, interview by Faysal Al-Qasim, Al-Jazeera, December 12, 2002.

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

Going off-topic

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

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

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

Features of conspiracy-centered skepticism

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

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

18 Ahmad Bishara, *Al-Qabas*, October 24, 2002.
19 Hassan Sati, "With or Without a Conspiracy … Farewell to the Devil," *Ash-Sharq Al-Awsat*, March 11, 2005.

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

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

TAQRIR WASHINGTON

Taqrir is the first Arabic-language publication to shed light on Washington-based think tanks.

Taqrir is the first and currently the only publication that provides a weekly review of news coverage of U.S. audio-visual media.

Taqrir provides nuanced perspectives on many topics in American politics that lend themselves to sensationalism and hasty generalizations when covered by Arab media outlets.

Taqrir work is reprinted in major electronic publication and news services, including Elaph.com and Islamonline.com, each of which enjoys an estimated readership of 1 million per day.

World Security Institute

Taqrir Washington is a project of the World Security Institute

www.taqrir.org

Inventing Fiction?

Conspiracy Theories in Arab Media

HAMDY HASSAN ABDUL AINIEN
Dean of the School of Mass Communication, 6th of October University, Egypt

AMID INCREASING SCHOLARLY INTEREST in emerging Arab media outlets, the relationship between these media sources and the conspiracy theories that have historically shaped Arab public opinion merits attention. In particular, do Arab media sources perpetuate conspiracy theories, and if so, what might remedy the situation? This article contends that social and technological trends have indeed imbued mainstream media outlets with a tendency towards conspiracy theories, a trend that threatens the vitality and development of the Arab world. Ultimately, however, this tendency is more a reflection of popular beliefs rather than a cause for them. In that light, critiques of Arab media must be complemented by analysis of the factors that create and encourage conspiratorial thinking.

First we must understand what is meant by "conspiracy theory." For the purposes of this essay, the term refers to any unsubstantiated conspiratorial claim, irrespective of either the outlandishness or the underlying merits of the claim. The term "conspiratorial framework" will refer to a mode of thought that reflexively trusts conspiracy theories, even when they contradict what is easily empirically proven.

This essay addresses Western and Arab concerns about the role of the media in propagating the conspiratorial framework. Indeed, the preponderance of conspiracy theories in Arab print and broadcasting is extensive, so much so it comes as no surprise that some observers blame the Arab conspiratorial framework wholly on the media. Yet especially as Westerners seek to understand the relationship between popu-

lar opinion and media in the Arab world, it is important to note that the conspiratorial framework long predates the advent of genuine Arab media. This fact does not absolve Arab publications and broadcasters of responsibility for perpetuating conspiracy theories, but in acknowledging that Arab media emerged in part to fill an information void that conspiracy theories had been occupying for generations, one is compelled to investigate what first encouraged the conspiratorial framework.

The notion that the media encourages the Arab conspiratorial framework stems from extensive research on the impact of media in other regions. As this article will explain, the conclusion of this research, which took the European school of critical communication theory as its point of departure, is that mass media powerfully shapes the opinions of its audience. American research, in particular, has demonstrated that by repeatedly airing certain issues over others, the media can become the most influential determinant of the audience's interests. In fact, this finding suggests that pressing an audience to consider a certain set of issues can be as important a factor in shaping public opinion as particular editorial slants in the interpretation of issues.

The conclusions of global scholarship on the relationship between media and public opinion hold true in the Arab world. The mainstream Arab media's ability to shape opinion is magnified by the weakness of institutions that countervail media bias in countries with more open flows of information. Specifically, the low quality of education in Arab world and the paucity of civil society participation prevent the kinds of information exchanges that might otherwise undermine the conspiratorial framework. Thus, Arab media can readily be said to monopolize a sizeable share of Arab thought.

The mainstream Arab media's ability to shape opinion is magnified by the weakness of institutions that countervail media bias in countries with more open flows of information.

If one accepts the dominance of the media in the Arab intellectual space, one's instinctive reaction might be to condemn the Arab press and media networks. But in doing so, one risks perpetuating the simplistic view of Arab power structures that the conspiratorial framework promotes. Rather, one should examine the role that political, economic, cultural and technological factors play in shaping the media. This examination has three components.

The first component is an analysis of the mechanisms by which the media supports the conspiratorial framework; without this analysis, the notion that there are forces shaping the media's message is moot.

The second component is an understanding of the institutions that depend on the conspiratorial framework, and for that reason, use their influence on Arab media to

promote conspiracy theories. Specifically, this includes both governments and those government-affiliated groups that benefit most from the widespread thrall of conspiratorial thinking.

The third component is that myriad of social and institutional factors further contributing to a climate within Arab media of shoddy journalism, and with it the conspiratorial framework. Among these factors are the character of an average Arab audience (for indeed, even as influential as media is in shaping public opinion, Arab media outlets still compete for audiences, and to some extent have to cater to audience interests); the political expediency of conspiracy theories; the limits on Arab intellectual and academic capital; and Arab journalistic values and attitudes with regards to objectivity.

With due acknowledgement of the above three components, a critical examination becomes possible of the role Arab media has played in encouraging the conspiratorial framework and why it has done so.

Cultivation and the spiral of silence

George Gerbner's research on the media's role in "cultivation"[1] and Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann's theory of "the spiral of silence"[2] provide useful frameworks for understanding the mechanism by which Arab media so powerfully shapes its audience's beliefs.

Gerbner's studies were initiated to discover whether television audiences readily accepted as facts ideas presented to them via television. Gerbner and subsequent scholars of cultivation theory found that the relationship between mass media and given audiences is complex. Rather than simply adopting the ideas and values of broadcast media, audiences subconsciously conceive of their immediate surroundings using the vocabulary and social frameworks that predominate in broadcast media. The idea that media shapes the audience's cognition of subject matter explains how the overall conspiratorial framework could be promoted by media outlets that report conspiracy theory as fact. Moreover, subsequent studies suggest that audiences lacking personal experience with the subject matter will base critical decisions on the "symbolic reality" constructed for them by the media. This may be particularly important in the Arab world, where suppressed information exchanges mean that Arab audiences have less personal exposure to the subjects of media reports than other audiences may have.

1 George Gerbner, "Cultivation Analysis: An Overview," *Mass Communication & Society* Vol. 1, No 3/4 (Summer/Fall 1998); George Gerbner, et al. "Growing Up with Television: The Cultivation Perspective" in Jennings Bryant and Dolf Zillmann (eds.), *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research*. (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Assoc., Inc., 1993).

2 Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann, *The Spiral of Silence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2nd ed., 1993).

Noelle-Neumann's theory of the "spiral of silence" posits that one is less likely to voice – or even adhere to – an opinion if one perceives that the opinion will be in the minority. Mass media, then, can vastly alter public opinion by portraying one or another stance as conventional wisdom. Consumers of mainstream media usually estimate the popularity of any given belief by its treatment in the media they consume. Individuals who feel that they are minority opinion-holders tend towards silence. The phenomenon "spirals" because the more these individuals remain silent, the less representation their beliefs have in the media, since, as noted earlier, the media is responsive to public interests. Importantly for our analysis, the theory applies not only to opinions, but also modes of thinking, such as the conspiratorial framework.

Just as the risks of value "cultivation" in the Arab world are elevated by the region's social and political climate, so too is greater the risk posed by the "spiral of silence." Whereas the mechanism of disenfranchisement of minority opinion-holders may be subtle – or not present at all – in Western societies, minority opinion-holders in Arab states are subject to explicit and costly punishments. Not only the state, but also opposition and socio-familial groups that presuppose unanimity on cultural and political issues often punish dissent, whether overtly or implicitly. Minority opinion-holders are often branded agents of foreign powers, a charge that can have drastic social and security consequences. Interestingly, when Noelle-Neumann articulated the "spiral of silence" theory she suggested that it only holds true for subjective matters of opinion; that the spiral of silence would not undermine public understanding of empirically provable facts. Ironically, in the Arab world, the historical predominance of the conspiratorial framework created an intellectual milieu in which facts are subjective. In this context, the spiral of silence makes the conspiratorial framework self-reinforcing.

Government interests and the conspiratorial framework

Once one understands the mechanisms by which the media reinforces the conspiratorial framework one must ask what motive Arab media has to propose conspiracy theories. In order to difine this motive, one must identify institutions that have the ability to create incentives that reward or punish certain types of media behavior. Traditionally, Arab governments have used sticks and carrots to manipulate national media to their benefit. It is a logical supposition, therefore, that governments are one of the factors in the media's advancement of the conspiratorial framework.

Despite developments in press independence over the past decade, Arab governments' continued propensity to manipulate press coverage to their benefit is well documented. To the extent that conspiracy theories could advance these interests of governments, one can assume that government officials would naturally seek to pro-

mote the conspiratorial framework. Notably, most ruling parties or monarchies in Arab government use conspiracy theories to blame other groups for government failures.

For example, the Egyptian government used press controls to encourage reports that portrayed Israel's victory in the 1967 Arab-Israeli War as the outcome of an international conspiracy rather than Arab governments' military and economic shortcomings. As a consequence, Arab discontent focused on Israel and the international community, proving less of a threat to defeated Arab regimes. In that instance, government promotion of conspiracy theories was explicit. Arab media now plays a similar role in shaping the public response to terrorism, though the influence of governments on Arab media has been obscured by privatization and the nominal liberalization of press laws. Notwithstanding countless studies, particularly the work of Alan Krueger and Jitka Maleckova, that demonstrate the role of the state in creating conditions that breed terror, Arab media perennially portrays terrorism as the product of conspiracies for which the state bears no responsibility.

Traditionally, Arab governments have used sticks and carrots to manipulate national media to their benefit.

If one accepts the premise that Arab governments can and do underwrite the Arab media's embrace of the conspiratorial framework, the next question is how contemporary Arab regimes, often constrained by international pressure and nominal reforms in press laws, exert influence on national media.

1. Overt monopolization

Public ownership, which is to say ruling party control, is still the dominant model for Arab media. There are myriad reasons why this pattern prevails, the most important being rivalries between Arab regimes and restrictions imposed on private capital. But irrespective of its causes, state ownership removes even the pretense that media is disinterested when discussing state policy or issues that reflect on the state. Such stifling control has also inhibited the development of journalistic skills on a par with international standards. As a result, Arab media remains deferent to the policies of the forces that own it.

2. Concealed monopolization

The relationship between Arab media and Arab political and social institutions in the broadest sense is unique. In much of the world, developments in the past two decades have reshaped this relationship, loosening the grip of political and social institutions on the media and making the press and associated networks more responsive to the

market. The Western European press, for example, became less partisan than it was in the 1960s and 1970s. Western European radio and television broadcasting has also become less subject to public control (which was a result of public funding). The same has happened to varying extents in India, Eastern Europe, East Asia and Latin America.

In the Arab world, however, the last two decades' changes in the media industry – and even the advent of satellite channels – have not really changed the relationship between the media and dominant social and political institutions. Whereas media outlets elsewhere are increasingly private and accountable to non-governmental interests, privatized Arab media outlets have been strategically shaped to pro-government business concerns. These corporate entities are usually composed of pro-regime figures that, in tacit exchange for their loyalty to the sitting government, receive preferential access to various markets. This dynamic means that corporate media source owners have a strong incentive to bolster the state and ensure its continued viability. Thus, corporations that own media outlets, rather than the editorial leadership of outlets themselves, can be considered the primary private sector force encouraging the conspiratorial framework embraced by governments. This dependence may explain the lack of foreign investment in Arab media as capital has poured into equivalent markets in Asia, Eastern Europe, Latin America and Africa.

Nominally, private networks deploy several strategies to tow the government line, but most important for this analysis, in light of Gerbner's cultivation theory, is a preponderance of government commentary. Official or semi-official figures represent the overwhelming majority of people appearing in broadcast news coverage, and government agencies are by far the most common subject of Arab news stories.

Arab media in context

The above analysis addresses the reasons for, and mechanisms of, intentional efforts to promote the conspiratorial framework in Arab media. But just as important are circumstantial conditions that, taken together, seem – rather fittingly – like part of a grand scheme but are in fact unfortunate byproducts of the political and social stage of Arab development. Acting simultaneously, these conditions bolster the conspiratorial framework. Just as importantly, they offer good reason to reserve judgment of Arab media outlets themselves, for they are more the products of their environment than the causes of it.

1. The Arab audience

The first of these conditions is the character of the Arab audience. Despite the discussion above on the ability of media outlets to determine their audiences' interests, the

relationship between mass media and public opinion is at least somewhat reciprocal. Especially since the advent of satellite television networks, and the slow trickle of alternative media that are becoming available, the "spiral of silence" is being interrupted by competition. Ordinarily that would be a good thing. In the Arab world, however, interests that audiences develop independently of the media are just as likely to be shaped by conspiracy theories as those developed via television and the press. The Arab public's willingness to embrace the conspiratorial framework – which is a conditioned result of the long dominance of the conspiratorial framework – is as much to blame for the proliferation of conspiracy theories as anything else. In this way, the predominance of the conspiratorial framework is self-reinforcing, the audience whose interests are ultimately at stake also part of the problem.

In light of increasing competition among satellite channels, Arab media outlets are becoming increasingly responsive to audience interests. In particular, networks that do not enjoy government sponsorship (or government-affiliated support) are scrambling for viewers. With the conspiratorial framework already entrenched as described above, these private networks can scarcely afford to alienate viewers, even if only briefly. As a result, networks are unwilling to undermine the conventional wisdom that holds Arabs victim to conspiracies, whether foreign or domestic. This portrayal appeases the Arab masses that do not want to bear responsibility for change or modernization, a feeling supported by low levels of political awareness, prevalent illiteracy, inadequate education and the predominance of cultural values belonging to the distant past.

In light of increasing competition among satellite channels, Arab media outlets are becoming increasingly responsive to audience interests. In particular, networks that do not enjoy government sponsorship are scrambling for viewers.

The conspiratorial framework also appeals well to Arab audiences because of the predictably conservative reaction it provokes. At the risk of making an observation the defense of which is beyond the scope of this essay, one can observe that Arab culture has become reflexively conservative in the face of modernization and globalization. The reasons for this are complicated, but the conservative dynamic is well rooted in Arab history. The waves of rational thinking that swept into Arab life are perennially unable to confront the brand of metaphysical thinking dominant since Muslims chose to follow Al-Ghazali rather than Averroes. Yet Arab objections to modernization go beyond the protestations of Salafists; even many moderate Muslims and non-Muslim Arabs object to the social change they fear will accompany political and economic

modernization. In this context, the conspiratorial framework offers the best excuse to dismiss modernizers; specifically, that modernization is a Western-imposed plot to oppress the Arab world and exploit its resources. Only this conspiratorial conflation of modernization and Westernization could justify out-of-hand dismissal of the merits of modernizing and reforming tendencies.

2. The political expediency of conspiracy theories

Inasmuch as Arab governments are conscious and willing contributors to the conspiratorial framework they can be blamed for the preponderance of conspiracy theories in the Arab world. But like media outlets, governments are only acting predictably in reaction to the circumstances in which they find themselves. In the Arab world, poor education and weak civil society make media manipulation by any means easier than addressing the problems that would otherwise lead to more discontent with Arab governments. State influence on the media offers a "quick fix" for failed initiatives, removing incentives for governments to improve their policies. If governments can recover from failures by masking them in the press, they are unlikely to expend the necessary resources to critically analyze their failures and improve. This discrepancy, in turn, leads to even more dismal failures that require a more complicated media strategy to explain, necessitating the conspiratorial framework.

True, governments are also at least partly responsible for these shortcomings. But the failure that can and should be addressed is the failure to develop a robust civil society. Given other constraints on Arab media, a freer and more liberal press will likely stem from a freer and more liberal society, rather than the other way around. The ultimate goal of crowded Arab airwaves seeking to cross Arab borders is the desire of Arab governments to control the political street, a lasting lesson learned upon Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and the subsequent division of the Arab street with regards to both the invasion and the subsequent policies of Arab governments.

3. The influence of conservative powers

Conspiracy theories are invaluable for the predictability of the reaction they provoke. Whether directly or indirectly, the Arab media industry, especially Arab satellite channels, is mostly subjugated to conservative political and social forces. These forces impose either overt or covert restrictions on Arab media's handling of political and ideological issues, as well as limiting the media's ability to enlighten its audience, which would seem to be what the Arab mind needs most at the current time. Conservative forces generally resist change, modernization, or both together. Thus, conservative forces by their nature and goals provide a convenient climate hospitable

to a pattern of thinking seeking to clear the individual of responsibility by blaming a given situation on conspiracies and other parties, hidden or open. Conspiracy theories in effect blame the devil for current events, with the devil also becoming responsible for the sins committed by individuals. Thus, individuals are largely absolved of initiative and belief in change. The predominance of metaphysical thinking in Arab culture helps engender conspiratorial thinking, since phenomena are attributed to forces that cannot be subjected to rational study.

Some Arab media outlets deliberately align themselves with conservatives whereas others are forced to yield to conservative pressure. The result is that the media's ability to enlighten the audience and promote rational thinking is greatly diminished. Many media outlets have learned their lesson well and gone out of their way to avoid Enlightenment thought. In the early 1990s, for example, *As-Sharq Al-Awsat* was fiercely attacked by conservatives, with mosque sermons calling for it to be boycotted as "a threatening evil." Similar threats were made against *Al-Hayat*. In Egypt, conservative forces acquired expanding influence, revealed in both nonstop growth in the number of mosques and media coverage devoted to examining social issues and even scientific matters according to metaphysical thinking and conspiracy theories. In *Al-Ahram*, for example, the arbitrary link between the Quran and celestial and geological events merited a full page every week for years, this only recently being reduced. Furthermore, the nature of the *fatwas* published in the press and broadcast on television reveal a metaphysical mentality and psychological illiteracy constantly fostered by the media.

In addition, conservative forces are not far removed from the most influential satellite channels that cover regional and international events; the two most popular channels in this category (Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiyya) are closer to conservative forces than they are to those supporting rational thought, falling as they do between the hammer of conservative owners and the anvil of an audience eager for analysis based on conspiracies.

4. Limits on Arab intellectual and academic capital

At present, Arab media entities are mostly not profit generating and are therefore at the mercy of their backers. This situation is unsurprising; the astounding expansion in Arab media since the beginning of the 1990s overstretched Arab financial and journalistic resources, which left media outlets scrambling for cheap journalistic input. This low-cost mixture encourages conspiratorial thought in the media in four ways.

First, the intensive use of media for entertainment numbs sensitivity towards reality rather than encouraging attempts to understand it, a mindset that leads to widespread passivity in society. Ironically, despite the series of catastrophes the region

is suffering, media is used for diversion among broad sectors of the Arab public. This attitude may be a reaction to the almost nonstop crises and attendant failures Arabs have experienced since the middle of the 20th century, which together have destroyed confidence in ever finding solutions. This use of media as escapist entertainment fosters conspiratorial thinking as a way to avoid confronting continued failure.

Second, the number of pundits who are qualified and willing to offer rational and objective analysis of contemporary issues is more limited in the Arab world than elsewhere. Certainly the Arab academy is not adequate to fill the demand for regular scholarly commentary in the media. In fact, according to some estimates, the number of expert commentators available to Arab satellite networks and the press lingers at around 150. In this atmosphere, the rubrics of a commentator's success have become distorted; the popularity of some pundits stems more from their ability to hold the audience's attention than from the profundity of their insights. Coupled to the intrigue inherent to conspiracy theories, this low threshold of intellectual capital rewards pundits who can most eloquently explain a conspiracy rather than the few who might be able to debunk one.

Third, the rapid flow of information which began at least a decade ago in the Arab world so far appears to be more a technological fact than a cultural one; the rapid exchange of knowledge and intellectual rigor that accompanies it has not taken sincere root in the region. Otherwise healthy flows of information become more complicated when the flood of knowledge taxes the very ability to keep up with it. Education has not kept pace with the sudden influx of media sources, creating a situation in which audiences are unequipped to discern the quality of media they consume. Not surprisingly, the weak empirical and logical foundation of most conspiracy theories does not undermine their credibility with a gullible Arab audience.

Only once the media is free of its encumbrances can it help overturn conspiracy theories and become the tool for democracy that reformers so desperately need.

Fourth, the last 10 years of information flow within the Arab world have not empowered freedom of expression, which had been allowed a certain liberty by some Arab regimes, but have been dealt a blow culturally and socially by the ascendance of conservative forces. Freedom of expression is not necessarily the logical result of the free flow of information, given the absence of development and current levels of political awareness. In the Arab world, champions of freedom of the press, a concept that has progressed relatively far, are still largely unaware of another more important freedom,

which is freedom of thought. Freedom of expression is being restricted to the freedom to criticize the government, whereas many other types of freedom of expression are waning. Looking at the freedom to criticize the political system in Egypt today, for instance, versus the same right before the July 1952 revolution, the two situations are roughly comparable, but freedom of expression in the broader sense cannot be compared.

5. Arab journalistic values and attitudes on objectivity

Notwithstanding the questionable credibility of some partisan commentators, Western media is dogmatically devoted to objectivity. The notion of dispassionate reporting is at the core of journalism, but it is also an 18th century Anglo-Saxon invention. To Arab pundits, objectivity – that is, respect for the audience's right to have facts presented untainted by opinion – is a less noble virtue than adherence to one's stance. This set of priorities is further complicated by the importance of news analysis in contemporary media. That is, even for Western news organizations, reporting must be supplemented by analysis to be valuable. Absent a clear commitment to objectivity, analysis quickly becomes slant. In the Arab word, strict news is retreating before the advance of opinion pages, with their near-complete disregard for objectivity. The result is the supremacy of opinion over fact and editorials over news columns. In this "opinion media," there are more opportunities for conspiratorial thinking to appear and predominate, since compelling language is more important than empirical support for one's argument, and since there is simply less straight reporting to contradict wrong-headed beliefs.

This cultural reality threatens the media's position and destroys the chances of increased objectivity in news coverage in general. The sudden change in news coverage of the war on Iraq before and after the collapse of the Iraqi regime shows how much news coverage is subject to polarization, both regarding the media's work and its audience. This polarization dominates not only direct news coverage but also opinion articles. Studies of op-eds in four Arab countries (Egypt, Yemen, Saudi Arabia and Syria) revealed that the vast majority were unabashedly one-sided messages. This means that many Arab op-ed writers assume a readiness on the part of the reader to accept the one point of view adopted in the article, or that the writers support the dominant opinion amongst the target audience. In any case, the pluralism currently allowed in many Arab countries is under pressure, checking its growth if not threatening its very existence.

Conclusion

The success of the conspiratorial framework in Arab media is complicated and, fitting-

ly, is not the product of an orchestrated effort to obscure fact. Rather, the dominance of conspiracy theory over rational thought is the product of institutional incentives, cultural and professional values, and limited resources. Though it would certainly not behoove the Arab world to turn a blind eye to the media's malfeasance, those who would see the media change must focus their efforts elsewhere. The Western presumption that a vigorous media is vital to a free society is not mistaken; the Arab press will surely play a part in future bouts of liberalization. But given how multifaceted the constraints on Arab media currently are, efforts to alleviate those constraints, whether by improving education, encouraging civil society, or reforming Arab economies, are a worthier use of time and resources than efforts dedicated to media reform. Only once the media is free of its encumbrances can it help overturn conspiracy theories and become the tool for democracy that reformers so desperately need. ■

Teaching Fiction?

Conspiracy Theories in Arab Public Schools

HODA AL-BAKR
Political Science Researcher, Egypt

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).

History curriculum is crucial for developing students' understanding of historical relationships, including one incredibly pertinent in the Arab world – the relationship with the Western, or "other" world.

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 word 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 Zarif 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 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]

Egyptian secondary school curricula focus only 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.

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.

Some 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

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. ■

Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting

We will illuminate dark places and, with a deep sense of responsibility, interpret these troubles times.

- Joseph Pulitzer III (1913-1993)

The Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting offers travel grants to promote in-depth coverage of international affairs in the American media.

Our mission is to be a model for journalistic practice, focusing on topics that have been under-reported, mis-reported – or not reported at all.

We seek to highlight differing perspectives on emerging conflicts, to engage the broadest possible audience, and to foster debate on America's role in the world.

World Security Institute

STRAUS MILITARY REFORM PROJECT

FOREIGN LANGUAGE E-PUBLICATIONS

BRUSSELS, CAIRO, MOSCOW & BEIJING PROGRAMS

AZIMUTH MEDIA

www.pulitzercenter.org

www.worldsecurityinstitute.org

Preaching Fiction?

Conspiracy Theories in Religious Institutions

NEZAR ELTHAHAWY
Political Analyst, Egypt

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 co-operation 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-Zifzaf, "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 outright 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.

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.

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]

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-Maatani 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. ■

رؤى عربية

www.arabinsight.org

World Security Institute

www.worldsecurityinstitute.org

The World Security Institute (WSI) is a non-profit organization committed to independent research and journalism on global affairs. Through a variety of publications and services, WSI provides news and research-based analysis to policy-makers around the globe – from decision-makers in Washington, D.C., and Moscow to scholars in the Farsi- and Arabic-speaking world to scientists in China. WSI serves as an authoritative and impartial monitor of security issues, while continuing to meet the increasing worldwide demand for information and independent ideas.