5.8
CONSPIRACY THEORIES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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Introduction

Conspiracy theories are a routine – some would say ubiquitous – feature of Middle Eastern social and political discourse. The U.S. planned the 9/11 attacks as an excuse to conquer the Middle East – or, according to others, Israel’s intelligence service, the Mossad, did. British intelligence assassinated Princess Diana and Dodi Al-Fayed. Various Middle Eastern leaders are spies for the U.S. Or for Israel. Or others. The U.S. orchestrated the 2011 Arab uprisings – and the rise of the so-called Islamic State in 2014, too. One of a legion of even stranger ones in 2007 saw some southern Iraqis claim that the British military had bred and released killer monsters, bears, or some such creature; it turned out to probably be an aggressive group of local honey badgers (Farrell 2007). Even Israel, while very culturally and politically different to its neighbours, is not immune from such language: From the 1995 assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin (Abramovich 2018) to, more recently, claims in 2018 that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was trying to plant a conspiracy theory in the Israeli media to counter a legal indictment against him (Verter 2018).

The examples are legion and are not only grievances of the socially marginalised and economically peripheral, but occur among more educated people and sometimes in the language of the state. They may focus on rulers, minorities, foreign powers or (more recently) on a murky ‘deep state’ (al-dawla al-‘amīqa), a secretive, powerful clique of military intelligence, organised crime and (corrupt) state elites (Filiu 2015: 1). Yet, there has been only limited scholarly attention paid to them: A few book-length works (Pipes 1996; Gray 2010a; Graf et al. 2011; Butter, Reinkowski 2014; de Medeiros 2018), and a smattering of journal articles. There is a little more discussion among other observers, but often these contain little in the way of explanatory frameworks. To some such observers, for example, conspiracy theories are condemned as a simple but dangerous manifestation of ignorance; at best, they are seen as intellectually lazy, but sometimes it is argued that they feed political extremism and undermine the region’s stability and development (Pipes 1996: 1–2, 8–9). Since the focus of conspiracy theorists’ blame is often on foreign actors, some observers argue that this not only fosters ignorance but, crucially, also allows people to ‘avoid the shame of having to admit that [an] event was their own societies’ fault’ (Field 1994: 167–8), to which some add claims of a culture of fatalism (Frydenborg 2018). It is not only outside observers who make these claims: Local commentators do, too, often frustrated by the
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prominence of conspiracy theories or concerned that they are a mass self-delusion (Al Shaali 2015; AlMuhaini 2017).

There is often merit to these arguments, but conspiracy theories come from a far wider range of sources, and their development, transmission and use are more complicated than such explanations typically allow. This chapter lays out some of these sources and dynamics, arguing that conspiracy theories are a multifaceted socio-political dynamic, but with important insights into, and implications for, the region’s politics, development and social relations. It begins by examining the main sources of conspiracy theories, and then examines their transmission and impacts. While conspiracy theories are certainly not unique to the Middle East, their origins, uses and impacts include many dynamics specific to the region’s socio-political structures and political cultures.

Analytical points of departure

Not all conspiracy theories in the Middle East need to derive from complicated sources. In occasional cases they may simply be a manifestation of psychological problems or a sign of social isolation in the narrator. This is indeed the origins of U.S. research on conspiracy theories, which began in psychoanalysis and psychology (Melley 2000: 23–5) before being examined in socio-political contexts by Hofstadter (1965) and others in the 1950s and 1960s (Fenster 1999: 3–21).

Much more commonly, and true in any culture, they are sometimes simply a source of entertainment or amusement. They feature prominently in the plots of films, books, television series, plays and other popular entertainment (Gray 2010a: 27–9). In such contexts, they are rarely intended to be believed. They may have political ramifications if, for example, their cumulative effect is to undermine people’s trust in the state or in other figures or institutions, and arguably this indeed has occurred to some extent since they are a relatively politically-safe means by which to criticise an authoritarian state or to otherwise question authority. Some plays and films in the Middle East have had such goals (Gray 2010a: 28), but the overwhelming majority have been more innocuous, serving only as amusement.

That noted, just as works that see Middle Eastern conspiracy theories as simple manifestations of ignorance, paranoia or extremism are inadequate in their explanatory utility, so too are others that claim that these theories are genuine and rational attempts to understand social reality. While the occasional conspiracy ultimately proves to be correct, for the most part such ‘cultural perspective’ arguments (Nefes 2017: 610) are weak. In trying to be both simplistic and comprehensive, they typically identify monolithic, omnipresent villains and offer homogeneous answers (Bale 2007: 47–50, 53–5), using data selectively and lacking falsifiability (Gray 2010a: 5–6). Even if some are attempts at ‘naïve deconstructive history’ (Rudmin 2003), meaning an accidental or inexpert attempt to deconstruct and explicate events, Rudmin’s claim that conspiracy theorists focus on people rather than ‘impersonal forces like geo-politics, market economics, globalization’ (Rudmin 2003) is not generally true in the Middle Eastern case. Moreover, conspiracy theories are not something to be encouraged given their flaws in method and logic, however valid and laudable the attempts at agency that they represent. Instead, most Middle Eastern conspiracy theories find their origins and sustenance in more complex dynamics than entertainment or paranoia, and are grounded in a broad range of historical, political, economic, social, cultural and other dynamics and grievances.
Arguably the most important political source of conspiracy theories in the Middle East is the distance between states and societies (Gray 2010a: 88–117). This covers a range of political dynamics: Weak states; authoritarian politics; fragmented societies; and personalised politics and social and economic interactions. One of the historical legacies of external intervention and regional weakness was the creation of states that are, in many senses, artificial. Many states’ borders do not reflect historical boundaries, and are the product of Ottoman rule, European rivalries, manoeuvring by local elites and other factors beyond the control of most local people at the time. Some states, such as Jordan, Syria, Iraq, Egypt and others, have unusually-shaped or artificial-looking borders with at least some of their neighbours; others such as Israel lack full and final borders; and some, such as the Arab monarchies of the Gulf, are extremely small entities (Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar) or a federation of micro-sheikhdoms (the United Arab Emirates, or U.A.E.), reflecting the dominance of certain families under British domination. As a result, border disputes have been common and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and wider Arab-Israeli one, is also at its core a territorial conflict; a dispute between two peoples over the same land.

Artificial borders also meant that states often inherited populations that were diverse and divided, contributing in part to societal fragmentation in many places. Some have sharp ethnic or sectarian divisions, most famously Lebanon, Iraq and Syria. Others have minority regimes: The ruling al-Asad family in Syria is from the minority Alawi community, while the majority of Syrians are Sunni, and, in Bahrain, the Sunni Al Khalifa dynasty rules over a society that is 70 per cent or more Shia. Even where rulers come from a majority social or religious group, conflict or tension with minorities is often a feature of politics and social relations. Some, like Lebanon, are a conglomeration of different groups: The overwhelming majority are Arabs, but no religious sect constitutes a majority, and the Lebanese constitution recognises 18 different religious sects and groups. Elsewhere, a majority group may exist but alongside large minorities, as in Iran – where the majority are Persian, but at least one-quarter are Azeri, Kurds, Baluchis, Arabs and others – and Israel, where Arabs are about 20 per cent of the citizenry and there are divisions among the Jewish population. Iraq, Syria, Turkey and others also have large minority ethnic or sectarian populations. Sometimes, communal relations are quite harmonious, but many of these societies have suffered unrest and even civil war in modern times: Lebanon was torn apart by civil war over 1975–1990; Iraq likewise fell into chaos after the removal of Saddam Hussein in 2003; and Syria since 2012 has been torn apart by a number of disputes in which ethnicity or sect have played a role.

The region’s history, borders, weak state institutions and social divisions all combine to create weak political systems (Bill, Springborg 1990: 31–85, 230–99). In the Arab republics, leaders often are the successors of military officers who seized power in the decades after independence. After a series of failed state-led policies, these regimes often lack legitimacy and maintain power through a combination of (increasingly unsustainable) welfarist cooptation and authoritarianism repression (Brynen et al. 2012: 17–91; Kamrava 2014: 17–45). Leaders often maintain their position through patron-client Networks (de Elvira et al. 2019), making politics seem opaque and unfair. The weakness of state institutions means that in the bureaucracy, and in business too, strong hierarchies and informal personal connections deliver a similar result, privileging those who have good wasta, or connections through intermediaries (Cammett et al. 2015: 324–6), making processes unclear and often unfair, and undermining people’s confidence in the system. Corruption derives from some of these dynamics, too, and is poisonous to the state-society relationship (Milton-Edwards 2006: 77–8, 87).

Individuals and social forces witness all these dynamics and may have trouble dissecting them. At the same time, unless they are one of the lucky few beneficiaries of the system, they resent
these dynamics, or at least feel that they are unfair. This fuels conspiracy theories by making society feel as though the state is distant and uninterested in ordinary people, and by creating a perception (or reality) that the system is discriminatory or unfair (Gray 2010a: 102–9). In the absence of clear political and decision-making processes, it is easy for conspiracy theories to claim that the political elite are acting against society at large, sometimes in cahoots with foreign powers. Similarly, it is routine for conspiracy theories to credit the state and regime with enormous power and reach into society. If a small regime can control the country and maintain power, such reasoning goes, then surely they must be incredibly effective.

Of course, regimes and states typically are not this powerful. They control society primarily through a balance of cooptation and repression, and provided that these two tactics are reasonably balanced, and opposition suppressed quickly and sufficiently, ruling elites have the benefit of incumbency and can draw on the state’s resources and capacity. However, they are also hampered by the difficulty in mobilising popular support for the existing order, since past policies, and then more recent economic reforms, have proven either ineffective or unpopular. State-led policies brought some benefits and opportunities to society, but also created the monolithic bureaucracies that today drain state coffers and hamper new initiatives and undermine transparency. More recent market-based reforms have not been popular either, often viewed as a risk to ordinary people’s livelihoods, or even as a threat to the country’s economic independence (Tripp 2013: 163–6, 173–5). Political Islamism attracts some people, but not usually a majority – and, even when people lean towards it, there is little agreement on what Islam constitutes in practice (Hamid, McCants 2017).

This ideological inchoateness also helps conspiracy theories flourish and spread (Gray 2010a: 102–11). Current leaders or conditions are often compared unfavourably to past ones, with an assumption that, if their policies lack popular support, then they must be maintaining power through more nefarious means. Such conspiracy theories arguably are a response to people feeling isolated from the political systems under which they live, but also stem from a lack of ideological cohesion and the absence of detailed, transparent information about how politics works (Pipes 1996: 363–4; Gray 2010a: 102–5). Where a leader comes from a minority group, or where a minority feels unfairly treated by the state, this too will spur conspiracy theories, either targeting a social group or alleging collusion between it and the political elite (Gray 2010a: 108). Not surprisingly, Islamists in secular systems and secularists in Islamist or Islamising ones also sometimes try to explain their situation, especially what they typically claim is their relative weakness, by alleging some sort of conspiracy, whether within the state or society or involving external forces (Gray 2010a: 110). Conditions of conflict, such as Iraq after 2003 and Syria after 2012, further amplify societal conspiracy explanations or add to their appeal (Gray 2010a: 107–9; Qiu 2017; B.B.C. 2018).

More recently, state-society dynamics were central as a source of the 2011 ‘Arab Spring’, the uprisings that removed leaders in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen, and sparked the 2012–civil war in Syria – but they also allowed many leaders to outmanoeuvre the protestors, minimise change or undermine new leaderships. There are a plethora of conspiracy theories that emerged from the uprisings, ‘built on an assumption that an all-powerful Deep State was striking back and avenging itself on the post-dictatorial regimes’ (Filiu 2015: 1) and then, more recently, blaming the failure of democratic transitions on the same deep state (Hanieh 2013: 161–6, 168–73; Filiu 2015: 200–5, 210–11, 249–53). State-society dynamics therefore also account for many conspiracy theories about the uprisings. The opacity of politics (along with seemingly-powerful external actors) has led people in the region to see the uprisings as the product of a Western plot to sow sectarian division and impose weak leaders towards the ultimate aim of (re-)gaining control of the region (M.R. 2013; Hasan 2014). As threatened regimes fought back against popular protests in 2011 and 2012, they were typically repressive. Where change did not
occur, but the political environment now is as repressive as before 2011 (or even more so), people are tempted to explain the failure of the will of the people in conspiracy terms: ‘the Arab Spring represents … [for] Arab subjects … “terrorism”, economic collapse and an uncertain future’ (Cherif 2017) given how little substantive change has thus far occurred.

Real conspiracies and conspiracy theories

Beyond the political dynamics of the Middle East, conspiracy theories are supported by the fact that real conspiracies do occur (Gray 2010a: 49). This is the case elsewhere too, of course, but arguably is especially important in the Middle East because of the degree to which the region has been penetrated and shaped by external powers in modern times, from the Ottoman era through European colonialism and on to the Cold War (and post-Cold War) era, fuelling a propensity in the region to see structures and events as shaped by this history. Sometimes a conspiracy is widely accepted to have occurred, as with the 1956 Protocol of Sèvres and its role in the 1956 Suez War. It was agreed at a secret Anglo-French-Israeli meeting where the three parties agreed to regain control of the Suez Canal, which Egypt had recently nationalised, including through starting a military conflict (Shlaim 1997: 509). At the time, there was an assumption in the region that the U.K., France and Israel had conspired on the conflict, even though the details were not known (Heikal 1986: 179). There are other examples, such as various ‘false flag’ activities by Israel in Egypt in the 1950s (Gray 2010a: 66), and the Anglo-American collusion to overthrow Iranian Prime Minister Muhammed Mossadeq in 1953 (Gasiorowski 1991: 57–84; Kinzer 2003). Other events such as the 2003 U.S.-led Iraq War show signs of a conspiracy, too, and are widely viewed that way both in the region and in the U.S.A. (Cramer, Duggan 2012: 201–43; Hagen 2018: 32–5).

Such historical events have two main effects in promoting conspiracy discourse. First, and perhaps most obviously, they create genuine grievances that undermine trust in the alleged conspirator or other actors. Historical memories feed directly into contemporary political perspectives, especially when there is some continuity to events or where people perceive an immediate threat based on the past. At least one observer has argued that the idea of the ‘paranoid style’ is unsustainable because conspiracy theorists may be pointing to a genuine or real threat (Sivan 1985: 15, cited in Pipes 1996: 325). This points to the second, and very common, impact of historical memory: The potential for a real conspiracy to serve as a basis to legitimise other – often less plausible, or even clearly false – conspiracy theories. Real past conspiracies allow a conspiracy theorist to base their claims in initial agreement over a past conspiracy that is not in contention, and then to use this to build the plausibility and acceptability of their (usually less credible or unprovable) conspiracy theory (Gray 2010a: 49). In this way, the U.S. role in the 1953 Iranian coup may help support a conspiracy theory about the current U.S. role in Iran or the region; past Israeli efforts to deceive the region can be used, similarly, to mount all sorts of claims about present-day Israeli plotting. Historical events that now seem quite distant to people beyond the region are still recalled by conspiracy theorists (and many others) across the region: A prominent example is the Crusades, which are often used to explain contemporary Western interventions in the Middle East, with Americans or Europeans regularly and critically tagged as ‘Crusaders’ (al-ṣalīḥīyūn) by politicians, intellectuals and Islamists (Gray 2010a: 51–2).

External influences and conspiracy theories

Beyond these dynamics, there are also externalities that can provoke or promote conspiracy theories. Some of these are generic to or very common in conspiracy theories elsewhere in the
world, such as the fear that local cultures, religious values or economic conditions will be undermined by the forces of globalisation. Globalisation is also an opaque force, with economic, social, cultural and other impacts and influences, while at the same time also one with symbols such as corporate logos and globally-recognisable brands. In the Middle East, there is also a strong sense that globalisation is a homogenising and Americanising force; whatever the accuracy of this view, it is commonly-enough held that it has an impact on local opinion and ultimately on politics (Gray 2010a: 33–4).

Globalisation also matters because of the tools, and the cultures around them, that it has introduced. Satellite television, Internet and instant messaging have all made the transmission of conspiracy theories easier and faster, and have expanded the potential network through which they can travel. There has been an expansion of online Islamic space, where a range of people from traditional scholars to self-declared experts with no recognised training in religion compete for attention with a large, even confusing, array of views. At the same time, websites and other online spaces increasingly form part of people’s identities (Bunt 2009: 7–54).

Globalising technology therefore reduces the importance of place and local authority figures to people. Arguably, a conspiracy theorist has a much easier time finding an audience, even a small or selective one, online, when compared with trying to challenge orthodox explanations for events made by traditional family, religious, tribal or community figures. Traditional figures were more likely to impose their authority, and more able to do so in the absence of the range of counter-narratives now available online. Instead, the Internet and other online systems have a broadening effect, allowing individuals to claim knowledge or authority on a topic and to spread their views easily. The impacts of this vary: When successful, such individuals may be able to undermine traditional authority figures and spread their opinions and analyses. Such theories often are successful, moreover, especially given problems such as the social divisions and state-society gaps noted earlier. Even if a conspiracy theorist does not succeed in building a large audience, the rise of so many online voices has the effect at times of crowding out more rational ones, or simply undermining clear debate on a topic because there are so many competing explanations for people to choose from.

The rise of satellite television news channels has been important in challenging many official state narratives, but also in propagating conspiracy theories. Hezbollah’s Al-Manar has been most prominent in this role, but most others have played some role, too (Gray 2010a: 144–51). Beyond this, satellite news channels have also themselves been at the centre of conspiracy theories, as Al-Jazeera was when its Kabul office was struck by a U.S. missile in November 2001, and then in Baghdad in April 2003, when one of its staff was killed in a U.S. strike. In both cases, a range of conspiracy theories emerged, claiming that the U.S. strikes were deliberate. Some also point to a supposed memo of an April 2004 meeting between then U.S. President George W. Bush and U.K. Prime Minister Tony Blair in which the former supposedly suggested that the U.S. or its allies should bomb Al-Jazeera headquarters (Cowell 2005). Whatever the truth of it, this so-called ‘Al-Jazeera bombing memo’ is a reminder of how easily conspiracy theories can emerge and linger, especially when there is some factual detail on which it can be founded.

Often there is also an external or international link to a domestic dynamic, a recent example being the dramatic rise of the so-called ‘Islamic State’, or I.S.I.S., in early-mid-2014. While it derived from a range of factors, many of them political and social ones home-grown in the region, it was often claimed that I.S.I.S. was a creation of the U.S.A. (B.B.C. 2014), or Israel (Hasan 2014) – despite the fact that, in Dabiq, its main English-language publication, I.S.I.S. was highly critical of conspiracy theories as something that risked confusing potential members and steering them away from the group (Colas 2017: 180). Still, the rumours of I.S.I.S. as a U.S. plot were so widespread that, at one point in August 2014, the U.S. government took the unusual
step of making a public statement denying the claims (Huffington Post 2014). This tapped into the broad sense in the region of U.S. power and reach into the region; the U.S.A. displaced the U.K. as the main target of such language as Israel’s power increased in the 1960s, especially after the 1967 Six Day War and then after the U.S.A. rushed support to Israel during the 1973 Yom Kippur/October War (Brown 1984: 201–12, 268–77; Bill, Springborg 1990: 360–8).

The state and political leadership as conspiracy theorists

A particular, but not unique, feature of Middle Eastern conspiracy theories is the prominent role that states and political elites often play in originating, spreading and encouraging conspiracy explanations. All governments seek to shape public perception and opinion, of course, and at times many prominent political actors have mouthed a conspiracy theory, but in the Middle East conspiracy narratives by such figures are more routine than what is typically found in more democratic or competitive political settings. Some leaders and elites are renowned for framing a situation and their decision-making in conspiracy terms. Former Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein did this in numerous statements (Gray 2010b). Just before his 1990 invasion of Kuwait, he alleged a ‘grand conspiracy’ between the Arab Gulf states and Western powers to maintain low oil prices at Iraq’s expense (Long 2004: 20). During the subsequent January–February 1991 war over Kuwait, he also used conspiracy language when talking to Iraqis, saying for example

… some Arabs and … many foreigners … could not remember what Zionism and US imperialism have done against Iraq, beginning with the … Iran-Contra scandal in 1986 until the first months of 1990, when the plot against Iraq reached its dangerous phases.

(Hussein 1991: 233)

In Syria, both the state and state-controlled media have long used conspiracy theories to explain events or justify actions (Kedar 2005; Rabo 2014: 212–27). The post-revolutionary regime in Iran has done so even more prominently, often with especially colourful language, heavily peppered with conspiracy terms and claims (Beeman 2005: 49–67; Ashraf 2011). Other groups, such as Lebanese Hezbollah, while not technically ruling a state, nonetheless have some political authority and in that role have also done similar (Gray 2010a: 129).

State-narrated conspiracy theories come through three main channels in the Middle East: Directly in the speeches of a political leader; through articles and opinion pieces in state-owned or state-manipulated mass media; and through the speeches, statements and remarks of other members of a regime such as ministers of state, party officials, state capitalists and other well-connected figures (Gray 2010a: 122). But, why do leaders and other figures speak in conspiracy terms? Do they really expect their audience to believe them? In some cases, they do. Just as societal actors may genuinely believe a conspiracy theory, and base this in part on a past conspiracy that genuinely did occur, so some leaders do the same thing. Political leaders face conspiracies as a normal part of politics, attuning them to the likelihood that there are various actors and forces seeking to undermine and remove them. The distance between states and societies, and the fact that many regimes are dominated by minorities, as already discussed, along with the paucity of legitimacy that hobble many regimes, make this all the more likely. The same dynamic is a feature of international relations and diplomacy, where states are operating in an anarchic international environment and, at times, will seek to undermine or remove the leaderships of rival states. That noted, the evidence is usually scant as to whether a conspiracy theory is genuinely believed or not.
More commonly, however, there are political incentives lurking beyond state-narrated conspiracy theories. These are not inconsistent with them also believing what they say, although it is often assumed that they are cynically using such language for political gain or advantage. Perhaps most obviously, conspiracy theories can serve as a distraction or a diversionary tactic. In this sense, they are similar to lies or to opaque political language, but not typically of the same nature as propaganda, which in many cases is an expression of state authority and not something that necessarily has to be believed. A conspiracy theory used as a diversion, however, represents a tactic of debate and argument with society. It might seek to plant false or inaccurate thoughts in the minds of the audience, making them see the state in a more positive light, or to solidify societal views on events that are opaque or for which there exists multiple claims competing against the state’s. Conspiracy claims may also serve nation-building and nationalism goals (Xu 2001: 155), by drawing people together (under the state and regime, of course) against a commonly-perceived external threat, although the risk is that this will prove a short-term benefit for the regime but at the longer-term risk of eroding trust in the state if a conspiracy theory is exposed as false. Finally, conspiracy explanations may make the state’s control over society easier to maintain and manage (Gray 2010a: 131–2). People may be more likely to discount opposition claims if, stoked by conspiracy theories, the loyalties or intentions of the opposition have been called into doubt. Elements of society and businesspeople may also accept greater state intrusion into their lives and the economy if they have concerns about their safety or the stability of the political system. Claims against groups that are framed as primarily a threat to society rather than the state will often be an indicator of such a tactic. For these reasons, states not only articulate their own conspiracy theories, but are often tolerant of societal ones that suit the state’s agenda and pose no threat to it.

There are more complex arguments about the state’s motivations in articulating conspiracy theories. One of these is an extension of the argument, using the case of Egypt, that political language is not only about making claims to an audience, but also about asserting the authority, even domination, of a leader or a political system over that audience (Kassem 2004: 170). In authoritarian settings, the state may use conspiracy language to clarify for society what sort of topics are acceptable or not for discussion, or may claim that an opposition figure is part of a wider conspiracy in order to discredit them, but also to show that the person or group has crossed a particular ‘red line’. Another idea, drawn from Syria, is that state narratives and language may seek to monopolise public discourse, confuse people and, by leaving out key facts or adding false ones, leave society unclear about the exact details of an event or unable to construct a clear, consistent counter-narrative to the state’s (Wedeen 1999: 42, 44–5).

Propaganda is often used towards such ends. Conspiracy theories and propaganda share other features. They may be repeated and shared by people confused or misinformed by them, of course. Furthermore, when they are consistently articulated by an authoritarian state, and their propagation encouraged, people may decide to spread them more widely or repeat them, even if they know they are false or misleading, as a way of demonstrating their allegiance with the state or regime, or at least to send a message that they are not interested in challenging the system. This generates a veneer of deference to the state and unspoken acquiescence to the political order, and thus can be useful as a form of political control even in cases where the conspiracy theory is believed by neither the leader and state elite nor by the people in society who are repeating and spreading it (Gray 2010a: 134).

Similarly, conspiracy theories can also serve as counterfactual or counter-relevant political language; for example, to build a cult around a leader or send a message to society that they should pretend as though change is occurring when it is not, or is not occurring when it is. Society, and even members of the regime, therefore act ‘as if’, as Wedeen (1999: 81–3) argued,
demonstrating obedience and being drawn into complicity with the regime. The Middle East is not alone in many of these dynamics – similar features are evident in China, the Soviet Union/ Russia, some African states and elsewhere – but they are especially prominent in many Middle Eastern settings and in the region’s politics.

Transmission, evolution and impacts

Conspiracy theories don’t just matter because of their multiple and complex sources and what they say about political systems, but also because of how they are transmitted and for the risks they pose for political systems, societies and individuals. As discussed, sometimes a conspiracy theory turns out to be the correct interpretation; a theory correctly explaining a conspiracy, in other words. Far more often, however, this is not the case.

The actors and groups that transmit conspiracy theories are often the same ones who originate them. A political leader will not just state a conspiracy theory and leave the subject alone: If its spread is in the leader’s interest, then it will be reinforced by other elites, in the mass media and elsewhere, and perhaps repeated by members of the ruler’s or ruling party’s supporter base. Someone opposed to a regime, likewise, will usually not state a conspiracy theory only once or twice, but rather will repeat it regularly to different social circles, or perhaps join an online group, or spread it through other networks.

This noted, there are a couple of specific reasons why conspiracy theories may be adopted and spread. One is the political environment: It is safer for individuals, social groups and businesses to frame comments or criticism on politics in indirect ways. There is arguably an incentive in authoritarian contexts, therefore, to use conspiracy theories more often than might be typical in more liberal systems. At its simplest, criticism of a leader or system may be framed as a hypothetical observation. Other discursive tactics are important too. Just as joke-telling and humour can be an effective method for people to express opinions or assert some autonomy from the state (Kishtainy 1985: 128), conspiracy theories can be used in the same way. Both jokes and conspiracy theories offer an outlet that is politically safer for the narrator and more acceptable to a regime than would be direct political argument, due to their more conjectural style or non-specific framing. They also offer a degree of deniability; if a conspiracy theory is taken seriously or causes offence, its narrator can claim that they have been misunderstood or were only being facetious. Yet, if well framed and relevant, a conspiracy theory can be almost as clear and effective as direct politically-confrontational language (Gray 2010a: 103–4).

Second, conspiracy theories may also travel quickly and effectively, and in unique ways, because they often blend very effectively both a serious underlying message and an entertaining framework and style. Conspiracy theories can be engaging, even enjoyable, which probably reduces their social viscosity; they are also somewhat like rumour, in that in their articulation they are group-oriented and exclusivist (Hörner 2011: 99–100). At the same time, whether they are pointing to both real or constructed issues and grievances, the fact that conspiracy theories usually appear to be plausible – or at least are not falsifiable – and are relevant to people’s experiences or biases, is an incentive to spread them further and usually gives them a long life.

Given all this, is the Middle East particularly prone to engaging with and spreading conspiracy theories? In other words, are conspiracy theories more common there than in other parts of the world? Some observers argue so: ‘Unlike the West, where conspiracy theories are today the preserve of the alienated and the fringe, in the Middle East they enjoy large, mainstream audiences.’ (Pipes 1996: 2). Other observers, including those in the region, have made similar claims.

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The difference between conspiratorial beliefs in the U.S. and in the Arab world is a matter of degree rather than kind. In the U.S., such thinking is marginal and limited to small circles. In the Arab world, unfortunately, such conspiratorial explanations are far more dominant and widespread, even among the educated.

(Al-Ghwell 2018: n.p.)

While valid in some respects, it must also be noted that certain conspiracy theories in the West also are mainstream. Perhaps most famous are those surrounding the 1963 assassination of U.S. President John F. Kennedy – a 2013 Gallup poll found ‘that 61 percent of Americans still believed that others besides Oswald were involved’ (Baker, Shane 2017: n.p.) – and the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks provoked a range of conspiracy theories, too, for example with a 2004 New York Times/CBS News poll finding that only 24 per cent of Americans believed the Bush Administration was ‘telling the truth’ about the attacks, while 16 per cent thought it was ‘mostly lying’ (New York Times 2004: 28).

If conspiracy theories are more common in the Middle East than the U.S.A. and other Western societies, it is most likely due to the region’s political and social environments. This chapter argues that political and social explanations, with some relationship to economic issues as well, are of paramount explanatory utility. There is less evidence for culture or religion being key factors in and of themselves, although ‘Occidentalism’ – the ‘dehumanizing picture of the West painted by its enemies’ (Buruma, Margalit 2004: 5) – may sometimes provide a cultural source for conspiracy theories, in turn linking to religion as (sometimes) another expression of culture. The common association of Western culture with the Enlightenment, secularism and, more recently, trivial or materialistic popular culture (Buruma, Margalit 2004: 6–10) could lead religious people in other cultures, especially ones undergoing rapid modernisation or transformation, to interpret the West as a threat and to adopt Occidentalist explanations, including conspiracist ones, in either a genuine or manipulative attempt to convince others of such a threat. However, such arguments ultimately are founded on a political explanation.

Islamic groups routinely use conspiracy theories, too, but there is far less evidence that the nature of the religion itself promotes such language. As with the rise and fall of I.S.I.S., conspiracy theories routinely surround extremist groups such as al-Qaeda, including, perhaps most prominently, around its origins and events impacting its leadership. The 2011 U.S. raid that killed its then-figurehead Osama bin Laden is one such example, fed by a refusal – for various reasons – to believe that he had been killed, or because of how the raid was conducted, or simply from a more general mistrust of the U.S.A. in the Middle East and South Asia (Gray 2011).

However, when conspiracy theories come from Muslim figures or are framed in religious language, on closer inspection this, too, is typically the product of politics or societal tensions; see as examples the explanations for such language laid out in Gray (2010a: 107–11, 154–60), Pipes (1996: 206–12) and Schmid (2014: 157–76). Events specific to the region have been important, too, of course. The effects of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the U.S.-led 2003 Iraq war arguably had unique impacts on the region, especially by lowering ‘the thresholds for [both] aggressive anti-Western propaganda and Islamophobia’ (Hörner 2011: 102). Supporting this is some quantitative evidence that strong anti-Western and anti-Jewish attitudes in the region help contribute to conspiracy theorising (Nyhan, Zeitzoff 2018: 1400–4); but, again, these attitudes have obvious political sources, as argued here and elsewhere (Gray 2010b: 28–46; Schmid 2014: 157–76; Nefes 2017: 610–22; Frydenborg 2018; among others). Anti-Western propaganda and a rise in Western Islamophobia may have increased the occurrence or transmission of conspiracy theories, but are only two factors in a large array of sources and explanations for them.
Conclusion

Both the prevalence and the sources of conspiracy theories in the Middle East point to why they matter to observers of the region. They are sufficiently routine that they suggest the region has a sizeable population that is dissatisfied with the political system, economic conditions or other features of the region. There is a perception that the region is heavily penetrated and exploited by external powers, and has been for some centuries now as a result of the relative decline in its global prominence as Europe and, later, the U.S.A. rose to positions of global dominance. The anti-Westernism and anti-Israeli sentiments that are so common in the region are best seen in this light; as symbols of the anger and fear created by foreign intervention and by the endurance of the seemingly-insoluble Israeli-Palestinian issue. The conspiracy theories that see the state as a threat likewise point to the sense of powerlessness among so many people in the Middle East, and the widespread view that the political and commercial systems are rigged against ordinary people; against all but the best-connected or most corrupt. This provides fertile ground for conspiracy explanations. That the state, too, articulates conspiracy theories shows that the politics of such language goes further still, being embedded in authoritarian political structures and of use for elite consolidation, popular legitimisation and, ultimately, regime maintenance and the stability of the state.

The Middle East overall suffers from a range of formidable economic, social and political problems. The struggles of most regional states to deliver economic development has been a notable issue in recent decades, with the economy undermined by factors such as a high population growth, the reliance in many states on oil and gas revenue, and the challenge of competing economically at the global level in other sectors. Meanwhile, Islam is going through a period of turmoil, as many key figures and movements within the religion contest the long-term question of who should speak for Islam and on what tenets they should do so. Societies are both constrained by traditional hierarchies and traditions, while in many ways liberated by new communications technologies and other transformative products of globalisation. Conspiracy theories are important because they signify failings and disappointments among actors and forces across all these dynamics. At the same time, where they mislead or confuse or undermine faith in institutions, they are also adding new complexities to regional politics, undermining and complicating efforts at stabilising the region, hampering the development of the state-society relationship, and hobbling economic processes and outcomes. Conspiracy theories are thus an important component – if only one of many – in the formula that will determine the future of the region.

References


