

Conspiracies & Theories

In the immediate aftermath of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon on the fourteenth of July many observers challenged the US-Israeli claim which justified the campaign as a response to Hizbullah's "kidnapping" of two Israeli soldiers two days earlier. First, Israel and Hizbullah had previously exchanged prisoners without going to war. On the other hand, a "normal" response to the kidnapping could not amount to such an immensely "disproportionate" scale (killing over 1800, wounding 4000, displacing one million, and bombing civilian infrastructures, homes, roads, bridges, power stations, and airports). And finally, countries do not simply augment wars in two days; waging war with clear aims requires careful planning and preparation. In other words (as Seymour Hersh documented in the *New Yorker*, 21 August 2006) the Israeli government had planned with close involvement of the US the invasion far in advance in order to destroy Hizbullah and its military capabilities. This would remove a threat to Israel, and preempt retaliation by Iran through Hizbullah in the event that the US moves to attack Iran's nuclear installations. Israel needed only a pretext, which Hizbullah provided by kidnapping the two soldiers.

The problem of conspiracism

The establishment circles often discredit and stifle such counter-narratives by charging their authors with weaving "conspiracy theories." How plausible are such charges? Not much. As a pejorative term, "conspiracy theory" or "conspiracism" originally referred to the work of historians who viewed most historical events and trends as the product of hidden design by those in power. To a large extent, grand happenings and sweeping trends, rather than individual and less significant incidents, were traditionally the subject of conspiracy theory. In the current popular usage, however, the term is extended to include the narrative genre which assumes behind many major or minor, social or political adverse events a concerted, secret, and unlawful plan by powerful people and institutions. Whatever the connotation, the prevalence of conspiracism in any intellectual tradition and political culture represents a serious drawback, for not only is it built upon epistemological flaws, also because it follows grave social and political implications. As such it is the antipode of critical inquiry and agency; it denigrates probing, breeds cynicism, and justifies passivity. Conspiratorial mindset fails to acknowledge that intended plots may be subverted, modified, or resisted by opposition, unforeseen factors, mistakes, or accidents. Moreover, it gives little credence to structural dynamics in forming a decision or shaping an event.

The Middle East is often said to harbour pervasive conspiratorial outlook, where many attribute almost any unfavourable political act to foreign or domestic intrigues. An Islamist member of Egyptian Parliament, for instance, would go so far as to claim in 2002 that the sanitary towels the Ministry of Education provided for girls in schools were funded by a U.S.-Jewish company and could make Egyptian girls "infertile." Or there are those Iranians who continue to believe that the Islamic revolution of 1979 was a British design to oust the Shah, to eradicate the US influence in Iran, and to install British-friendly clerics. Authoritarian regimes particularly find in their real or pretended paranoia a pretext to quell opposition groups and impose surveillance. The power elites invariably charge genuine democracy advocates with collaboration with an overblown "western enemy" to undermine "national interests" and "traditional values."

Some observers associate the source of conspiracist attitudes in the Middle East to such factors as the Islamic doctrine, historical decline of Muslims as a political and economic force, and authoritarian regimes dominating the region. Thus, predestination and fatalism in Islam are said to render Muslims to imagine hidden design behind every unexplainable occurrence. Additionally, the historic decline of Muslims and their humiliation at the hands of the colonial west and later Israel seems

Currently, many people seem to be preoccupied with creating or discussing conspiracy theories. At the same time, others discredit unwelcome inquiries into hidden political agendas by labelling the resulting ideas "conspiracy theories." In such an environment, the distinction between fantasy and critical thought tends to become blurred. Only by acknowledging that real conspiracies exist, and by refuting ideas that cannot be empirically staved, will we be able to analyse political situations in a manner that is neither politically naïve nor the product of a conspiracist mindset.

rial attitudes, fatalism as a cataclysm for conspiracism is problematic since free will and rationalism also figure prominently in Muslim intellectual tradition. In addition, why should Middle Eastern Muslims in particular be susceptible to conspiratorial thinking, and not, say, those in Asia? The fact is that, and this is what many anti-conspiracist critics largely ignore, besides wild conspiratorial imaginations and paranoia occur also pervasive *real* conspiracies, which in turn may reinforce a mindset that is weary of the unknown, suspicious of strangers, and cynical of the powerful, and which promotes exaggerated fear among those who have little means, knowledge, and avenues to verify what they hear or to challenge what they doubt. Modern history of the Middle East is replete with colonial intrigues, divide-and-rule strategies, coups d'état, and recently, preparations for regime change. Indeed, it is the trade of secret services, such as CIA, KGB, or Israel's Mossad, to engage in plotting and implementing covert operations. In 1953, the CIA engineered a coup, which removed Iranian Prime Minister Muhammad Mosaddeq and reinstated the Shah, ending a unique democratic experience in twentieth century Iran. Mossad has engaged in numerous covert activities through its undercover agents in the Arab world. Incredibly, in the 1960s, Mossad's agent, Eli Cohen, infiltrated the highest ranks of the Baathist regime in Syria, reaching close to even the head of Syrian intelligence. Spielberg's film *Munich* dramatizes some of these covert operations. The occupation of Iraq in search for its non-existent weapons of mass destruction and the July war against Lebanon constitute a few of the latest episodes in this chain of intrigues.

While it is crucial to do away with any kind of conspiracist fantasies, one should also resist those who in the name of "conspiracy theory" discard or dampen critical inquiry into the possibility of real conspiracies. There exist fundamental differences between a "conspiracy theory" and critical inquiry. Whereas conspiracism assumes habitually or in principle that all or most adverse happenings are plotted secretly, critical inquiry does not rule out the possibility of the conspiratorial origins of some events. Contrary to conspiracism which takes its narratives for granted—narratives which often lack logical consistency and transcend common sense—critical inquiry begins by making critical observations, discovers inconsistencies, explores reasons, and develops a proposition to guide further examination. In a sense, critical inquiry aims at what the journalist Amira Hass believes to be the responsibility of genuine journalism: "to monitor the centres of power". Both the conspiracy theory and establishment narratives denigrate critical inquiry—the former defies serious investigation because it is sure of its presumptions while the latter silences critiques under the guise of anti-conspiracism. Conspiracy theory is as detrimental to truth as the cover-up of real conspiracies to justice.

to have entrapped them into a conspiratorial obsession. Some even suggest that belief in martyrdom encourages Muslims to externalize their misfortune to which conspiracy theory becomes an outlet. Against this background, authoritarian states and suppression of free expression would further bolster opinions which are informed by rumours and exaggeration.

Real conspiracies

Whereas authoritarianism plays a substantial role in developing conspiratorial

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