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Arab Reactions

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The printed Arabic media offer hardly any critical review of the social and political settings in the Arab world that may help to explain the emergence of violent Islamist groups. Standard newspaper articles and comments on the post-September 11 events vary from elaborations of the marked inconsistencies in US foreign policies to the popular conspiracy theories in which 'international Zionism' is blown up to mythical proportions. A few intellectuals, however, opt for a more open and frank approach to the issues involved, including some who had been accused in the past of endorsing militant Islamism.

► **Usama bin Laden sits with his advisor Ayman al-Zawahiri, an Egyptian linked to the Al-Qa'ida network.**

Just before the American-British retaliation against Afghanistan, the Arab daily *Al-Hayat* published a series of articles on Usama bin Laden and his Al-Qa'ida network. Based on interviews and statements made by former members of Al-Qa'ida, the author, Kamil at-Tawil, a Lebanese journalist living in London, offers an in-depth discussion of the development of Al-Qa'ida in Afghanistan and beyond from 1988 onwards. He explains that the organization did not begin its fight as a jihad against Western influence in the Arab world, but rather as one against the 'unjust Arab rulers'; anti-Americanism was a later consequence of the Second Gulf War. Bin Laden's failure to establish an Islamist network operating from the Gulf region, specifically Saudi Arabia, led him to Afghanistan in 1990, to the Sudan from 1991 to 1996, and then back to Afghanistan where he remained until the September 11 attacks.

At-Tawil argues that the radicalization of the Al-Qa'ida was the result of a new leadership within the network, headed by two former members of the Egyptian Jihad – Ayman az-Zawahiri and Abu Hifs al-Misri. The goals now included the expulsion of the US troops from the Arab Peninsula and the liberation of Jerusalem. The new direction taken by the Al-Qa'ida network was illustrated by its official declaration of war against the US in 1996, and the enactment of a fatwa to legitimize the suicide-attacks against the American and Israeli armies and civilians.<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, the frankness of these *Al-Hayat* articles is not representative of the Arab press reporting on the September 11 attacks and their underlying causes. Readers of Arab newspapers are either confronted with articles which abound in stereotypes of and ideological remarks on Islamism and the relationship between the Arab world and the West, usually accentuating the US support of radical Islamist groups in the 1980s and 1990s and criticizing Western policy regarding the Arab-Islamic world. Other articles emphasize the peaceful nature of Islam and the faultiness of the Huntington thesis. The internal and regional factors causing the emergence of radical Islamist movements are rarely discussed. Criticism of the West is so frequent and in such obvious disregard of the context that one may conclude that despite the prevailing condemnation of the September 11 attacks, there is an implicit justification. Bin Laden's popularity among the Arab peoples is believed to stem from his willingness to deal with significant problems (e.g. Palestine) and his ability to teach the 'arrogant Americans' a lesson.

#### The conspiracy

Conspiracy theories, of which there are three basic patterns, comprise another component of common argumentation. The first asserts that American intelligence orchestrated the September 11 attacks, with the intention of justifying an already planned attack on the Arab and Islamic *umma*. The

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second claims that the Christian Occident orchestrated the attacks to create a pretext for cleansing the West from its Muslim residents. This theory is further supported by the apparent smear campaigns against Islam in parts of the Western media and by the first legal steps taken against Islamist groups in Europe. The third mostly appears in Arab media and is based on the assumption that the West is dominated by international Zionism. It is claimed that the attacks were carried out by Israeli intelligence in order to justify the brutal behaviour of the Israeli administration against Palestinians in the occupied territories. To this effect, a rumour circulated that all Jewish employees of the World Trade Center were mysteriously absent on September 11. This theory represents a return to the Arab public's most frequently used explanation for any crisis situation: 'it's the Jews' fault'. Whether it be the spread of the HIV-virus in the Arab region (allegedly by female Israeli HIV-positive intelligence agents who consciously seduce Arab men in order to infect them), or the poor cotton harvest in Egypt (due to manipulated seeds given by the Israeli government), Israel is always the culprit.

A clear example of how these different conspiracy theories are not mutually exclusive, is demonstrated by Mustafa Mahmud in the Egyptian daily *Al-Ahram* (November 3). In his essay Mahmud accuses the West of having been planning its crusade against Islam already for several decades. The September 11 attacks which, according to Mahmud, were carried out by American groups, served as justification for attacking the Islamic *umma*. In his opinion, the increasing brutality of the Israeli army against Palestinians is not only an expression of the current anti-Islamic attitude of the Jewish state, but also proof of Israel's participation in the attacks. In an apocalyptic manner, the war in Afghanistan is claimed to be the final battle between true Islam and the materialistic civilization of the West. Martyrdom will relieve the Islamic community from its continual anguish, and cause the definite downfall of the West. This line of argumentation does not only elucidate a radical Islamist interpretation of 'the end of history'. It rather completes the last circle of an Islamist varia-

tion of messianic thought, in which the good and its hero (in this case Bin Laden) ultimately prevail.<sup>2</sup>

#### Critical thoughts

Although simplified and ambiguous explanations are clearly predominant in the Arab press, a small number of critical articles represent important, though not necessarily new, ideas. For example, the Lebanese philosopher Ridwan as-Sayyid links his defence of 'true Islam' to a critique of radical Islamism. He condemns the simplified depiction of Islamic politics as merely an implementation of the *shar'ia* and the readiness to use force as a means of Islamizing contemporary Arab societies. He also refuses to legitimize the terrorist attacks as a response to the American foreign policy of the last decades regarding the Middle East.<sup>3</sup>

The significance of this rather marginal position lies in the fact that As-Sayyid is known as a prominent representative of moderate Islamism whose advocates have been previously accused of quietly supporting the use of violence by radical religious movements. This clear turning away from militant Islamism reflects the recent rediscovery of the moral and peaceful roots of Islamism, as articulated by the founder of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, Hassan al-Banna, in the 1920s and 1930s. The Tunisian thinker Abu Ya'rib al-Marzuqi asserts that this turn-away entails a distancing from the politicization of Islam once put forth by the Egyptian Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966).<sup>4</sup>

A number of secular thinkers and authors are shifting their focus within the Arab debate since September 11 and openly discuss internal and regional factors. For example, the Lebanese sociologists Waddah Sharara and Salim Nasar argue that the rise of radical Islamism was not so much a product of anti-Americanism, but of societal crises in the Arab world where ruling elites used religion as an instrument to divert attention from their policy failures and the deficient legitimacy of the political system. Therefore, Arabs should realize the implications of the lack of foundations to support democracy in their own societies, before unilaterally expecting the West to deal with the consequences of Arab politics. Both Sharara and Nasar condemn the use of the

Arab-Israeli conflict as sufficient justification of religiously-motivated acts of violence against the West. They both hold that Bin Laden's motive is much less the liberation of Palestine, than it is the establishment of a regressive Islamic state within the Arab world, in which universally accepted principles such as human rights would bear no meaning.<sup>5</sup>

The personage of Usama bin Laden and its current use in the Arab public sphere received some critical review. The Egyptian political scientist Wahid 'Abdulmajid interprets the portrayal of Bin Laden's character in the media as a reflection of modern Arab hero-legends. His being depicted as a lonely warrior against the arrogant powers of the Western world is analogous to the construction of the character of Adham as-Sharqawi, a legendary fighter against the British occupation of Egypt at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Additionally, Bin Laden's hiding in the desolate mountains of Afghanistan reminds one of the prophet Muhammad, who hid in the cave of Hira' when leaving Mecca for Medina. This particular legendary aspect seems to have been consciously adopted by the Al-Qa'ida, as reflected by their self-portrayal in the video-messages broadcasted following the first retaliation strikes by the US. According to 'Abdulmajid, the emphasis on Bin Laden's eloquent yet matter-of-fact style of speaking fulfil a double function: firstly, elating him to the position of sole representative of self-confident Muslims and, secondly, transfiguring the lacking realism contained in his political objectives.<sup>6</sup>

Even though these critical ideas do not occupy a central position in the Arab media's reporting on the September 11 events and their consequences, they bear great potential for the future. The possible intellectual isolation of radical Islamism, on the one hand, and the public discussion of the normative underpinnings of modern Arab societies, on the other, are significant departures from the dominant discourse. It seems to be increasingly difficult to explain crises in the Arab world by pointing to the West as the cause of all harms, and thus divert attention from our own failures. Ironically, this change might be a significant step forward in the dialogue between the Orient and the Occident.

#### Notes

1. Kamil at-Tawil, 'Usama bin Ladin', *Al-Hayat*, 4–9 October 2001.
2. Mustafa Mahmud, 'Hal huwa intihar!', *Al-Ahram*, 3 November 2001.
3. Radwan as-Sayyid, 'Isti'adat al-islam min man khatafuhu', *Al-Hayat*, 11 October 2001.
4. Abu Ya'rib al-Marzuqi, 'Munasaba li-tachlis al-'alam', *Al-Hayat*, 11 October 2001.
5. Waddah Sharara, 'Bunyat la dawat bin ladin al-archibiliya wa'l-qabaliya', *Al-Hayat*, 16 September 2001; Salim Nasar, 'Harb 'alamiya thalitha didd rajul yuda'a bin ladin', *Al-Hayat*, 22 September 2001.
6. Wahid 'Abdulmajid, 'Abdel Nasser – Saddam Hussein – Bin Ladin', *Al-Hayat*, 3 November 2001.

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