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The Bin Laden Conspiracy Theories

Why Falsehoods Flourish in the Muslim World

Matthew Gray

May 4, 2011

Summary: After the death of Osama Bin Laden was announced, rumors about it swirled throughout the Middle East. Given its history and politics, the region is particularly prone to conspiracy theories--and there is little that can be done to counter them.

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Immediately after the death of Osama bin Laden was announced, rumors about it swirled through the streets, coffee shops, and Internet cafés of the Middle East, Pakistan, and other parts of the Muslim world. The raid took place, some claimed, only to hand U.S. President Barack Obama a political victory, or to give him political cover for the troop drawdown in Afghanistan. Other, more outlandish, theories proposed that bin Laden had been collaborating with Washington all along. Another one had it that bin Laden died years ago but that his body had been frozen and retained for later use by the United States; still others suggested that he remained alive. "There are numerous question marks still seeking clear and honest answers from the American administration," went an opinion piece in the Palestinian paper *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*. "Why did we not see the corpse of the Sheikh until this moment, while all we have heard was that it was 'buried' at sea because his homeland the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia refused to receive it?" Some have even suggested that the world's most wanted terrorist was not real but an American invention.

Conspiracy theories like these are especially common in the Middle East and western Asia. Why? At the simplest level, conspiracy theories in the region are a way of displaying skepticism toward the United States. But they can also be earnest attempts by the angry to explain dramatic events, particularly when people have difficulty accepting them: most residents of Abbottabad were no doubt amazed to learn that they had been neighbors of bin Laden. Media reports have quoted some Abbottabad locals as saying that in the absence of any evidence that bin Laden or other Arab extremists had been living in the town, the bin Laden story simply had to be a conspiracy.

One reason the region is so susceptible to conspiracy theories is that it has been subject to an unusually high number of actual conspiracies in the past. The overthrow of Iranian President Mohammed Mossadeq in 1953 was driven by a secret U.S. and British plot to remove him, and the 1956 Suez War was the result of a covert British-French-Israeli agreement struck in France. Thus, today's conspiracy theorists often cite real conspiracies of the past as evidence for present-day ones. During the 2003 Iraq war, for example, many Middle Eastern commentators brought up the Suez War: If one generation of foreigners could craft a scheme to conquer a recalcitrant Arab leader, the argument went, why could another not do the same, half a century later? Now, as conspiracies about bin Laden gain currency, those peddling them will likely point to past American plots in the Muslim world, real or imagined, for support.

Conspiracy theories also flourish where people feel disempowered -- a condition that applies to the Muslim world. In much of the region today, there is a sense of ideological aimlessness and a feeling that the region, for all its history, is unfairly weak and vulnerable compared to the West. Even bin Laden used rhetoric along these lines, justifying jihad as a counterattack against a conspiracy and explaining the Crusades as a Western and Christian conspiracy against Islam. Conspiracy theorists seek to counter these sentiments of disempowerment. Feeling as though one possesses rare or secret knowledge and controlling who shares such information can bring one a sense of power and privilege. This is true even at the societal level: a culture that feels vulnerable can find solace

in a conspiratorial perspective of their condition.

The Middle East has been subject to an unusually high number of actual conspiracies in the past.

conspiracy claims coming from society, usually for the same reasons.) At times, leaders or elites in Pakistan, Iran, Syria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and elsewhere have mouthed conspiracy theories or encouraged others to do so. In the past few months, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and the Libyan leader Muammar al-Qaddafi have each cited foreign conspiracies as a source of protests in their countries; the Iranian leadership often justifies the regime's actions as a response to U.S. or "Zionist" plots. While bin Laden enjoyed little sympathy among the rulers of the Middle East, if conspiracy theories about him mean that people pay less attention to examining their own governments, few leaders will try to stop conspiracy talk.

Given how common conspiracy theories are, and how fragmented, conflict-prone, and anti-American the Middle East can be, is there any hope of conspiracy claims being countered? Direct counterargument is useless; it is exactly what conspiracy theorists expect from a plotter, and it may even strengthen their case. This is why it is a mistake for the U.S. State Department to engage conspiracy theories as it does, posting takedowns of them on its Web site. While understandable, such initiatives are probably futile in changing the views of those most being targeted. Likewise, releasing a photograph of bin Laden's body will convince only those who remain open-minded about bin Laden's death: it will have no impact on die-hard conspiracy theorists, or even those customarily suspicious of the United States.

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