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## 3.5

# FUNCTIONS AND USES OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES IN AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES

*Julien Giry and Doğan Gürpınar*

### **Introduction**

Do conspiracy theorists believe in their theories? Are conspiracy theories the delusions of obsessed minds or are they sinisterly crafted by ambitious and manipulative actors, or something in between? This is an ongoing debate within the expanding field of conspiracy theory studies. This chapter will not argue that conspiracy theories are deliberate machinations, but will instead seek to demonstrate the underlying logic of conspiracy theories pervading non-democratic countries – deliberately or unknowingly – reinforcing the authoritarian character of the regimes.

The ideological formation and modes of legitimisation of authoritarian regimes are a major factor in the employment and pervasiveness of conspiracy theories. Authoritarian ideologies are characterised by an unshakeable belief in their righteousness and a tendency to provide comprehensive explanations for complex events, which renders them prone to conspiracy theories. Karl Popper (1945) famously defined conspiracism as an intrinsic component of Marxism. The relation between Marxism and conspiracism has been a stimulating theme amongst scholars – especially by ex-Marxist ‘anti-totalitarians’ (Christofferson 2004) – particularly with regard to Stalinism (Moscow trials), post-Second World War Eastern European ‘witch-hunts’ (foremost the Slansky trial) (Levy 2001; Appelbaum 2012) and Maoism.

Extreme nationalism is also conducive to conspiratorial culture, with Nazism as the climax. Fascism is described by many scholars as a negation simultaneously anti-Marxist, anti-liberal, anti-capitalist, anti-intellectual and even anti-conservative (Sternhell 1983; Payne 1995; Gentile 1996). In this regard, fascism obdurately needs (new) enemies to persevere – it would be pointless and indefinite in the absence of perpetual enemies. These enemies – whether real or imagined – need to be connected and amalgamated. For those reasons, conspiratorial thinking is a constitutive component of fascism, serving as ersatz ideology or semblance of ideology. Zionism and the ‘Elders of Zion’ plot becomes the super-conspiracy theory that binds, connects and envelops other accompanying conspiracy theories (Curtiss 1942; Bernstein 1971; Taguieff 1992).

Such necessity is equally true for populism (Hofstadter 1955, 1965; Bergmann 2018), both in democratic and authoritarian regimes. Different from ideologies of the modern age, contemporary populism (in the age of ‘post-truth’ in which improvisation outdoes the theoretical

rigor of ideology) does not offer a robust theoretical base. Its *raison d'état* is its constitutive others. Authoritarian or non-democratic regimes and ideologies employ conspiracy theories as communicative and proactive propaganda tools to reinforce and legitimate their power, by emphasising 'foreign threats', 'deep state' activities or 'enemies within'. Using examples from several geographic areas such as the Middle East (see Chapter 5.8), Latin America (see Chapter 5.11) or post-Soviet space (see Chapter 5.5), this chapter will explore the uses and functions of conspiracy theories in authoritarian regimes, showing how conspiracy theories are used as propaganda, allowing regimes to identify and denounce perceived enemies and silence political opponents.

### Political functions of conspiracy theories

In authoritarian contexts, conspiratorial rhetoric used by the regimes is expedient for mobilising masses, reinforcing incumbent structures of power and authority, and assuring the loyalty of the people. This is particularly true during periods of social turmoil. This mobilisation is not necessarily physical, i.e. taken to the streets or digital space. It is instead a 'nudge' that stimulates hitherto indifferent, apolitical and apathetic individuals or groups towards a kind of political consciousness, one that is based on a Manichean dualism in which 'us'/'the self', i.e. the ordinary and innocent majority of 'good' people, are perceived to be threatened by an evil 'them'/'other' driven by a desire for absolute economic and political power (Groh 1987). In this dualistic vision, the conspirators are not only the enemies of the people or the regime; they are also genuine *outsiders*.

Conspiracy theories are used to reaffirm the dominant and established values of an ingroup while identifying and subsequently portraying outsiders in a negative light (Giry 2017). Conspiracy theories thrive only if they comply with the deep-rooted values of the dominant group and its social, historical or geographical background. The reception of the same conspiracy theory varies from one group to another because of differences in collective imaginary, collective memory, biases, stereotypes, etc. In other words, the plausibility of conspiracy theories, and their reception, is bound to communities' collective judgments (Fine 2007). What's more, people are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories when they seem to relate to them, when the conspiracy theories exonerate them or their group (Waters 1997; Frampton *et al.* 2016) and when they implicate their political opponents (Miller *et al.* 2016).

Operating like a political myth (Girardet 1986; Giry 2015), conspiracism is paradoxically reassuring – symbolically at least – because it purports to identify and unmask a hidden threat. Conspiracy theories express, then, a reductionism that serves and contributes to uphold, promote and reinforce conventional behaviours, while discrediting or delegitimising inappropriate or marginal ones. Conspiracy theories offer comfort, providing a refuge from complexity, uncertainties and qualms, and serving an 'ego-defensive' function (Katz 1960) that helps to build a positive self-image. The enemies or scapegoats portrayed as responsible for all society's ills are not anonymous; they have names and are identified, variously, as Americans, Zionists, Russians, Jews, Muslims or Freemasons, etc. They are often depicted as animals: rats, cockroaches, spiders, octopuses or snakes, etc. Such universally disparaged animals are employed to embody the 'conspiratorial other' and are often depicted crawling over or surrounding their enemy, as in a spider's web or octopus's tentacles (Giry 2015, 2017). Such enemies/scapgoats are identified as the single overwhelming cause behind the perceived threat, what Poliakov (1980) calls 'diabolic causality'.

Conspiracy theories centred on ethno-cultural or ethno-confessional prejudices and stereotypes powerfully contribute to the production and circulation of social hate and the exaltation of ingroup values, status and identities. Particularly endemic in periods of riots, violence or

political destabilisation, their movements create the conditions under which ingroups ‘become pitted against each other in fear and mutual hatred, constructing images of self and other’ (Das, 1998: 109). Conspiracy theories and rumours of violence trigger actual violence, justifying, legitimating and reinforcing pre-existing stereotypes or prejudices (Festinger *et al.* 1948; Elias, Scotson 1965). Rumours of conspiracies in times of moral panic and disarray stimulate a tendency to take sides, contributing to segregation/ghettoisation, civil war and even genocide (Kalyvas 2006; Ternon 2009). These have been used and manipulated by authoritarian regimes that owe their rise, consolidation and perseverance to these propensities, with many authoritarian regimes establishing and legitimising themselves through civil wars and strife such as the Bolsheviks after the civil war, with its horrendous death toll; the Franco regime after the Spanish civil war, accusing Freemasons, Jews and communists for plotting; as well as the seventeenth-century English civil war, prompting anti-Popish frenzy and fear from Popish plots.

In the same way, revolution incorporates conspiratorial impulses. If revolutionary moments are, in fact, civil wars in which no legitimate authority can safely impose itself, then every revolution requires a counter revolution, conceived not as a web of resistance to the revolutionary effort but as a top-down scheme orchestrated by hidden plotters (Reaction with capital R). The French Revolution elicited a plethora of conspiracy theories for or against (Tackett 2000, 2003, 2004). Revolutionary fear had a real base:

In any case, counterrevolution was real and tangible. It was not, in the main, a phantasm: an aristocratic or capitalist plot invented by Jacobin and Bolshevik zealots or strongmen to enliven their Manichaean ideology and rhetoric with a view to justifying and legitimating revolutionary terror. Besides, conspiracy mongering was common on both sides of the friend-enemy divide.

(Mayer 2000: 6)

Yet, such abrupt ruptures inevitably unleash conspiratorial discourse: ‘The Jacobin practice of conflating all resistances, without distinction, and tying them to an all-embracing conspiracy, gave the word-concept counterrevolution a distinct politico-ideological coloration.’ (Mayer 2000: 47). The counter revolutionaries (Godechot 1984) also aspired to arrive at explanations for the French Revolution, which thereafter constituted the crux of all modern conspiracy theories, eventually evolving into *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* in the early twentieth century (Oberhauser 2013). Denying any agency to the revolutionaries and any earnestness to their motivations, they perceived the French Revolution as devised by a cabal of evil-doers. Since then, a historical pattern based on this revolution-counterrevolution dualism has emerged. Whereas revolutionary regimes, whether republican, communist or Third-Worldist, replicated the revolutionary conspiratorial narrative, regimes built on counter-revolutionary scripts such as Cold War Latin American military dictatorships and European fascisms reproduced the counter-revolutionary account.

### **Conspiracy theories as a tool of propaganda**

In authoritarian regimes, the mobilisation function of conspiracy theories is used to reinforce and legitimate power by directing popular anger towards purported formidable and omnipresent enemies. In this respect, conspiracy theories are a propaganda tool in the hands of authoritarian regimes to justify their power, minimise their failures and silence/discredit their opponents. This way, the regimes also self-style themselves as indispensable, as only they can fight against, counter and defeat the ubiquitous and otherwise indomitable threat.

Not limited to authoritarian regimes (Bernays 1928; Tchakhotine 1940), propaganda can be roughly defined as mostly distorted information that political platforms or leaders publish, spread or broadcast in order to influence popular opinion and secure unconditional allegiance. In authoritarian regimes, given the restricted public sphere, propaganda is associated with unilateral censorship and state-controlled media (Yablokov 2015). Notwithstanding possible ideological affinities, authoritarian regimes use conspiracy theories to legitimise their transgressions, justify violence and discredit, defame or silence any dissent, alternative or opposition. To this end, all the enemies need to be amalgamated, interlinked and associated. Clearly, conspiracy theories are deliberate schemes for legitimacy and repression.

Conspiracy theories function to tame, intimidate and discredit political opponents. They implicate political adversaries as being in the payroll of treacherous enemies of the nation. This mechanism helps to delegitimise any dissenting view. Such a morally oppressive environment generated by mechanisms of repression and reinforced by conspiracy theories normalises self-censorship and moulds public opinion. The anti-communist witch hunts in the U.S.A. (1947–1957) are a historical example of the use of conspiracy theories as a political tool (Toinet 1999). While McCarthyism purported to identify the threat of communism, its implicit aim might have been to discredit liberals and democratic socialists alike (Bell 1955), accusing them of being covert communists (Schrecker 1998; Doherty 2005: 94). Although such accusations were absurd, they helped to mould public discourse and create a conservative-leaning Cold War consensus. Although McCarthyism was a craze or an epiphenomenon, it served to further a conservative agenda and the institutionalisation of the anti-communism of the 1950s (Gibson 1988).

South America is also generous in terms of its conspiratorial culture, as the Chavez-Maduro Bolivarian Venezuela regime well attests (Tarragoni 2012, 2018). Two centuries of U.S. economic, political and military predominance, and genuine conspiracies hatched and/or supported by the U.S.A. in the 1970s in Chile, made Latin Americans prone to anti-U.S. conspiracy theories. That the U.S.A. was responsible for repression, long before the onset of the Cold War, is the main source for this longstanding distrust of ‘Yankees’ (Brands 2012). Anti-imperialist ideologies in different forms, from anti-colonialist nationalisms and Third World socialisms of the 1960s to Islamism since the 1990s, are all imbued with conspiratorial culture. Imperialism is framed as the overarching conspiracy that explains and simplifies the otherwise tortuous, multi-faceted and intricate historical process. It is also a mechanism that exonerates guilt, responsibilities and inadequacies. The rhetoric of victimisation serves as an instrument to legitimise state terror, based on the presumption that anti-imperialist forces are exempt from undue violence, and thereby justifying ethnic cleansing, genocide and massacre as in the Young Turks’ genocide of Armenians, Milošević’s Serbia, Pol Pot’s Cambodia, Mugabe’s Zimbabwe and other Third Worldist regimes from the 1960s to 1990s.

While, in democratic regimes, the denunciation of pernicious plots and conspiracies orchestrated by foreign countries, deep state agents or enemies within emerges mainly in the rhetoric of fringe political opponents or cranks, in authoritarian contexts such denunciations usually originate from government sources and agents. Put another way, conspiracy theories in authoritarian regimes stand as official truths, they ‘are not merely derivative but constitutive of political environments’ (Ortmanna, Heathershaw 2012: 560) that complemented each other. For example, during the Second World War in Germany and France, antisemitic, anti-communist and anti-Masonic conspiracy theories helped to shape public policies. Foreign and domestic so-called conspiracies were seen as entwined, deriving from the same plot to destroy European civilisation.

In sum, in authoritarian regimes, top-down conspiracy theories play a decisive and essential role in legitimising and strengthening governments and the structures of power. They are

constitutive tools of propaganda to mobilise the people on behalf of the state. They identify three main ideal-types of inherent enemies, which are often amalgamated: Foreign states, deep state forces and political opponents/enemies within.

### **Historicisation**

Authoritarian regimes offer a narrative of self-victimisation through conspiracy theories: Once mighty overlords commanding over vast territories, they are now in a miserable state. Every nation has a golden age: The glory of Byzantium for Greeks, the medieval kingdom of Dušan for Serbs, the Caliphate for Arabs (and Muslims in general), among many others. These golden ages are celebrated, not only to boost self-esteem, but also to monumentalise the threats and enemies both abroad and within. Belief in the historical greatness of Russia, China, India and the lost grandeur of Greece, Turkey (Gürpınar 2019) and Serbia continue to nurture conspiratorial scripts. The plotting of enemies within and without are shown as the main cause of these declines. The indisputable fact that past national empires had been ravaged by treachery and international collaboration reminds that the same threat is ever-present and equally relevant today. This rhetoric feeds a state of ontological insecurity, requiring constant vigilance and watchfulness against perceived nebulous threats. Thus, authoritarian regimes often rely on historical national greatness even when they are communist, such as in the cases of national communism of Romanian dictator Ceaușescu (Verdery 1991; Boia 2001) and Milošević's Yugoslavia, as well as many of the Third World socialist autocracies.

Historical legitimacy always serves as a trump card in the resolution of all immediate quandaries, contradictions and shortcomings. Identity politics also require a historical narrative that establishes absolute and irreconcilable nemeses that remain unchanged over time. The historical imagery couched in conspiracy theories suits such an agenda impeccably. The historicisation of conspiracy theories further trivialise the present, deeming it ephemeral and passing in the eternal grand theatre of history and struggles, and this historicisation also trivialises transient moral transgressions. As wars render morality a secondary concern that needs to be reassessed within the reality of war, while also justifying misdemeanours, the introduction of history as a theatre depicting a perpetual state of war also deems moral claims inconsequential and petty in the larger theatre of history. Conspiracy theories remain as an effective means of depoliticising public debate, imposing the politics of eternity and justifying temporary injustices in the name of rectifying historical injustices.

### **The post-Soviet space and Russia as conspiracy state**

Today, it is Russia that is most associated with conspiracy theories as state projects. Indeed, state-sponsored intellectuals and state-controlled media such as *Russia Today* and *Sputnik News* (Pomerantsev, Weiss 2014; François, Schmitt 2015; Yablokov 2015) are the main disseminators of conspiracy theories in 'Fortress Russia', which perpetuates the idea that, since the fall of the Soviet bloc, Russia is under constant threat from both foreign and domestic enemies. In this narrative, the West and domestic democratic forces are seen as plotting to weaken and destroy Russia (Ortmann, Heathershaw 2012; Yablokov 2018). In addition, Putin's 'troll army' spreads conspiracy theories on the Internet (Tüfekçi 2017). Both state-controlled traditional media and the Internet are manipulated to support Putin's 'virtual politics' (Wilson 2005), which includes denunciation of purported enemies, the creation of fake oppositional parties or rivals and 'scarecrow' opponents. The primary role of the mass media in Russia is to project these conspiratorial creations and falsify the entire political process. In order to do this, the Russian regime devised

a quasi-ideology called ‘sovereign democracy’ to uphold and legitimise its autocracy. For this purpose, the regime employs what is known as ‘political technology’ (Wilson 2005) – a euphemism in the former Soviet states that refers to the highly developed industry of political manipulation and propaganda. This political technology was defined by Timothy Snyder (2018) in his analysis of Putin’s strategies as the ‘politics of eternity’ (as opposed to *ordinary* politics) and he further observed that ‘politics of doing’ had been replaced by ‘politics of being’ (i.e. fixed – national, religious, cultural – identities). Putin’s political technologists employ conspiracy theories as a means of effectively fortifying Putinism and delineating ‘sovereign democracy’. Through this approach, all enmities are rendered moral, ontological and perpetual, ensuring the vanishing of the ‘political’. This means that Putin and his aides selectively invent (new) domestic and foreign enemies, including homosexuals, feminists and liberals. Putin built on an inherited aversion to everything different, alien and indefinite in Russian nationalism and an enduring scepticism of the West. Putin’s political technologies benefited from the ideational and emotive reservoir of Russian Orthodoxy, Russian nationalism and the syncretic Euro-Asianist fantasies of Aleksandr Dugin to devise conspiracy theories (Laruelle 2008, 2009; Clover 2016; Snyder 2018).

This is also the function of cyberbullying on the part of the state, which prevents any dissent from being freely articulated and thus disseminated. Repudiating the optimism that had seen it as a liberating space, cyberspace came to be the perfect venue for the deliberate dissemination of conspiracy theories (Morozov 2012). Although most of the conspiracy theories articulated in cyberspace are fringe, they serve a purpose. Fuelling hatred sanitises cyberspace on behalf of authoritarian regimes. The conspiracy theories also silence cyberspace by nurturing a climate of hatred by targeting opponents. Once opponents were harassed and accused of conspiring with international cabals; now many are forced into silence both in cyberspace and real life (Tüfekçi 2017). Those trolls are not necessarily ordered by the authorities to slander critics of the regime, yet those volunteering partisans inadvertently serve their agendas.

In Russia, Putin and his aides routinely denounce secret manoeuvres for destabilisation orchestrated by the hidden hand of ‘the West’ (the U.S.A., the U.N., N.A.T.O., etc.) or a ‘third force’. Since 1991, the idea that the fall of the Soviet Union resulted from a U.S. plot is central in the Russian conspiratorial imaginary and, since then, conspiracy theories, in everyday life, offer explanations for complex issues and traumatic experiences that the country and its former satellites have witnessed. As with the Arab Spring, conspiracy theories germinated to explicate the ‘Colour revolutions’ and subsequent turmoil in Russia and post-Soviet Central Asia. In such theories, not only does the West operate as an external foreign threat to the Russian regime, it also acts from within, through the support of subversive agents. This allows democratic uprisings or influential political opponents like Alexei Navalny to be accused of being agents of Western intrusion. In authoritarian regimes with very few media outlets, conspiracy theories are a means of discrediting any form of social or political discontent. Political opponents, especially those with a broad audience, are seen as enemies within, conspiring against the state and its interests for the benefit of the West, portrayed as traitors who seek to topple the regime and undermine Russia’s status as a world power. Such narratives reappeared with great fanfare in the wake of mass protests against the election results of December 2011, and during the presidential campaign of early 2012. Laruelle (2009) observed that fears of foreign plots, domestic threats, as well as nefarious deep state activities, have long-standing roots in Russian nationalism and such affinity allowed them to be easily incorporated into Putin’s conspiratorial reservoir. Consequently, conspiracy theories are not only discursive or rhetorical tools, but they also deliver political outcomes by legitimising or delegitimising particular political attitudes and supporting repressive policies. Conspiracy theories that revolve around threats from the West, its purported spies and

the so-called Western-controlled opposition, are a powerful tool to disseminate Russian nationalism and legitimise the established regime as a bulwark against the decay of Russian civilisation.

In post-Soviet Central Asia, the themes of foreign threats and deep state machinations are equally paramount in the conspiratorial imaginary. The foreign threat, common in official conspiracy theories, is first and foremost embodied in the figure of the Russian elder brother, the historical hegemon of Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Ironically, 'when demonstrable examples of Russian hegemony are lacking, the conspiracy theory becomes one of the primary means by which such status is reproduced' (Heathershaw 2012: 611) in order to make sense of political turmoil. Russia's hidden hand is supposedly pulling the strings and pushing conspiracies. Hence, Russia is suspected of secretly controlling from afar to destabilise the entire region. Russia is also supposed to manipulate domestic political opposition, organise assassinations, upset geopolitical equilibrium and initiate wars or social movements to weaken governments, etc. Many of the usual suspects are also seen as potential foreign threats: U.S.A., U.N., N.A.T.O., Islamic groups, Israel, Jews/Zionists and Freemasons. As in Central and Eastern Europe, conspiracy theories that involve George Soros and his foundation are prevalent in Central Asia. The Hungarian-born billionaire is routinely accused of being a sort of puppet master who secretly masterminds global politics and the economy. All these narratives of foreign threats constitute practical expedients used by governments. In Ukraine and Georgia, for example, the hidden hand of Russia is supposed to be behind every social or political process. In these countries, conspiracy theories are disseminated by nationalist governments to explain away their economic failures and justify the authoritarian nature of their regimes as essential to resist the hegemonic ambitions of Russia and Western manipulations behind seemingly pro-democratic uprisings. This is particularly obvious in countries like Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and other ex-Soviet countries. Next to foreign threats, deep state conspiracy theories are also widespread in Central Asia. They usually relate to the inner workings of the state apparatus or the rulers's close circles and families/relatives (not unsurprisingly!).

### **Populism and conspiracy theories: Populism in power and populism as manual for authoritarianism**

Since the 2000s, Eastern Europe has seemed to be under the spell of conspiratorial visions. Victor Orban emerged as a pioneering populist and found a goldmine in the conspiracy theories revolving around George Soros, particularly those that incorporate *The Elders of Zion* narrative. Orban also accuses the E.U. of aiming to destroy Hungarian morals and culture. In his ascent to power, Orban relied on an inherent ideological, political and cultural milieu that was pervasive in post-communist Eastern Europe (Balint 2016; Lenvai 2018). The Soros narrative is widely used in Eastern Europe, in Romania or Slovakia for instance, by states as well as different political platforms across the left/right divide. It also builds on pre-existing antisemitic narratives. The post-communist milieu is also a factor, as it cultivates economic and social insecurity, disillusionment and general distrust. While communist Eastern Europe has also employed antisemitic vocabulary – as in Poland or Romania – the disorder and vulnerability in the post-Soviet space made people more prone to believing conspiratorial narratives as a way to explain the current miserable situation. Eurosceptic conspiracism is pervasive in both Western and Eastern Europe, although they show different traits. In Eastern Europe, it casts a shadow over historical and national contexts, with civil society seen as a disguise for this end. The abrupt rise and vocal display of L.G.B.T. and feminist communities, as seen in the Gay Pride and Women's Day parades, also unleashed a moral panic. Such displays of identity are associated with moral



corruption as part of a global conspiracy to undermine traditional values and render nations and states vulnerable (Sperling 2014).

Contemporary varieties of populism differ from ideologies of the modern age for not offering an inflexible theoretical base. They designate enemies on purpose to serve their cause. Contemporary Western populism needs immigrants, Muslims, cultural Marxists, leftists, liberals and the liberal establishment to frame itself (Bergmann 2018; Müller 2018). The fear of the establishment of 'Eurabia' (Ye'Or 2005) and the 'Grand Replacement' (Camus 2011) of white Christian populations by non-white Muslims in Europe looms over this conspiratorial universe in Western Europe and elsewhere in the world (the U.S.A., Australia, New Zealand, etc.). Rather than simply singling out the Islamic threat, however, this form of conspiracism foregrounds the supposed 'complicity' of 'liberals' and 'cultural Marxists' for placating and espousing Islam in the guise of multiculturalism. Furthermore, their alleged complicity does not derive from their naivety, but from their innate hatred of Western civilisation's values that deem them willing collaborators of purported 'Islamofascism'. Different conspiracies needed to be inextricably related, amalgamated and coalesced. Hence, animosities towards marginal outsiders (powerless, but imagined to be omnipotent) and towards the 'establishment' (a nebulous term indicating excessive political and economic power combined) complement and reinforce each other. Conspiracy theories in this respect are communicative tools to reach out to targeted audiences. Although populism in Western Europe is a movement of the disgruntled, as with the case of Trump in the U.S.A., populist leaders may come to power and keep their base intact by leaning on conspiratorial rhetoric that demonstrates the commonality of these patterns and mechanisms, even in democratic countries. This has led scholars of comparative politics and historians of fascism to write jeremiads warning about how fascism comes to power, itself now a thriving genre (Snyder 2017; Ziblatt, Levitsky 2018).

Populists position themselves as the enemy of the establishment and global and national elites. Reference to the 'deep state' has emerged as a kind of shorthand, allowing populists to contrive an omnipresent, omnipotent force that conspires against the interests of the people. The term seamlessly connects a plethora of seemingly unrelated groups and renders them parts of the same overarching power network. Originating in Turkey (*derin devlet*) and coined in the mid-1990s to delineate a nebulous web of politicians, bureaucrats, military, mafia and businessmen, the term 'deep state' has been taken by populists as an expedient conspiratorial buzzword (Nefes 2018). Despite different interpretations of the concept (Blanuša 2018), deep state envisions the secret collusion of rogue and corrupted elements in the state apparatus (civil servants, army officers, secret service agents, etc.) with top-level financiers, business industrialists, mobsters and, eventually, terrorist groups. All together, they destroy governed consent, electoral processes and to foster their own agenda through legal and illegal means. As a state within the state, deep state elements supposedly operate independently of the political authority and are the effective policy makers unfettered from political clout. Such a scheme was first and most vocally crystallised in the notorious Italian P2 Freemasons' lodge, revealed after police raids in 1981 (Ginsborg 2003; Rayner 2005).

In the U.S.A., deep state became the catchphrase of far-right groups, pundits, tweeps and Internet forum and social media users. This was, however, not new ground for right-wing conspiracy theories, which had long incorporated the idea of a powerful underground liberal establishment in Washington D.C. and New York that maintained firm control of politics, academia and the arts. Many conspiracy theories surrounding the Kennedy assassination pointed to the presence of an imagined all-pervasive deep state. The idiom added a conspiratorial twist to pre-existing perspectives, as well as further fuelling right-wing libertarian qualms and mistrust of the

federal state. Yet, in authoritarian states, the deep state as a concept was employed both as an excuse for their failures, as well as a pretext for more authoritarian grip. Deep state is a popular populist mantra that establishes the main dichotomy between the gullible people (as one overarching and indivisible metaphysical entity) and machinating establishment forces conspiring against the genuine interests of the people. Populists position themselves as siding with the people and speaking for them against a conspiring deep state and its agents and elements hidden from naked eyes.

### **The Middle East and Islamic world**

Throughout the Islamic world, conspiracy theories are a means to explain and come to terms with the mortifying downfall of the Islamic realm from its medieval glory. Conspiracy theories function to blame a real or hypothetical ‘other’ for this failure, whether at national or communal level. Keywords such as Crusades, Church or Freemasonry are freely employed to refer to the arch-enemies conspiring in close collaboration to achieve the historic mission to destroy Islam and are to be blamed for the present-day decay.

In the Middle East, conspiracy theories about foreign threats are widely disseminated. They stand for official statements spread through national media and a means for regimes to communicate with their people. Conspiracy theories usually focus on the U.S.A. and Israel, but they also identify banks, large corporations such as Coca Cola or Disney, and international institutions like the I.M.F. or the World Bank. They are shown to be passionately motivated to loot the Middle East and to destroy Islam. What is more, conspiracy theories centred on “the Great Satan”, “Zionism”, “imperialism”, and “Bolshevism”, along with all their permutations, have been employed to explain many of the political, military, economic, and social defeats and setbacks suffered by the Arabs’ (Zonis, Joseph 1994: 445). Since the colonial era and the emergence of Israel, Middle Eastern countries have grown suspicious of foreign motivations and intents. The Sykes–Picot Agreement, the Balfour Declaration or the Protocol of Sèvres have fostered conspiratorial views and helped to create a conspiratorial framework regarding the ominous intentions of the West towards the Middle East. Wars, too – such as the Six-Day War, the two Gulf Wars and the invasion of Afghanistan – and their aftermath are consistently explained in terms of a conspiracy led by the West and its allies – foremost Israel, and, depending on the geopolitical situation of the time, certain Arab countries like Egypt or Saudi Arabia – to destabilise the region. Conspiracy theories, Gray argues:

Have the effect of strengthening popular nationalism, diverting opposition away from the state and its leadership, and reinforcing the state as a source of protection against a perceived enemy, and all are useful to states, such as those common in the Middle East, that lack structural legitimacy or whose policies are moving into a post-populist phase.

*(2008: 169)*

The same fear is invoked by Islamic dissidents such as the Muslim Brothers, who see Baathist regimes as accomplices of the West to destroy Islam and use such theories as a mobilising platform. In addition to foreign threats, conspiracy theories in the Middle East also identify domestic menaces. Those purported agents of destabilisation are found among ethnocultural or ethnoreligious minorities such as Jews, Copts or Shias. They are accused, with the help of the state-controlled media, of constituting a fifth column and are shown to be responsible for governmental failures.

Gray relates the prevalence of conspiracy theories in the Middle East to the:

Condition of ideological aimlessness and introspection, brought on by the failure of post-independence political and economic ideologies such as Arab Nationalism, Pan-Arabism, state-led economic development, and “Nasserism” ... failing to widely or adequately fill the void left by the shortcomings of these earlier political and developmental strategies.

(2011: 110)

For those reasons, he argues that in the Middle East states are a foremost source of conspiracy theories. Although he rejects the reductionist equivalence of state propaganda with conspiracy theories (2010: 130), Gray demonstrates that conspiracy theories are an effective tool in the hands of regimes. The existence of Israel is a boon for the Arab dictators who lavishly exploit the Israeli theme to garner obstinate loyalty from their populace. Hence, in 2001, Bashar al-Assad declared during the Pope’s visit to Syria that ‘we see [Israel] attacking sacred Christian and Muslim places in Palestine.... They try to kill the principle of religions in the same mentality in which they betrayed Jesus Christ and tried to kill the prophet Mohammed.’ Conspiracy theories revolving around Zionism contribute to legitimise Baath dictatorships (De Poli 2014: 269–270). The *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and Holocaust denial are indisputable historical facts in the Arab Middle East (Achcar 2010; Butter, Reinkowski 2014: 25).

In Iran, perhaps one of the most prolific countries in terms of conspiracism (Zonis, Joseph 1994), conspiracy theories are guides to understanding politics and history. Emphasising the (semi-)colonial legacy of Iran over the last two centuries, this conspiratorial narrative views the British as the puppet masters behind the entire course of world history. The British were accused of stealing Iran’s oil, of corrupting Persian elites and of fomenting social turmoil – such as the coup against Mosaddegh in 1953. After the Islamic Revolution, the Soviet Union, the ‘Lesser Satan’ and the U.S.A., the ‘Great Satan’, played a major role in this conspiratorial imagery, with the U.S.A. as the heir to Great Britain as the global puppet master. Influenced by *The Testament of Peter the Great*, a forgery of 1795 by a Polish immigrant in Paris (Resis 1985), conspiracy theories about Russia were revived in the 1980s. According to the *Testament*, the Russians had two major secret goals: To subjugate Europe and to conquer Persia to obtain access to the Persian Gulf. Since then, Russophobia and memories of the Persian campaign of Peter the Great (1722–1723) are constantly harnessed by Islamic Revolutionary Guards and the Iranian regime. Conspiracy theories about the U.S.A, not surprisingly given U.S.–Iran relations after the Islamic Revolution, are also commonplace in contemporary Iran. According to these, political opposition, homosexuality, feminism or social movements, such as the widespread protests of 2009 following the re-election of Ahmadinejad, are stage-managed by the U.S.A. or their ally, Israel. More generally speaking, since the Islamic Revolution, the idea of a ‘crusaders’ conspiracy’ against Islam is widely disseminated by the Iranian regime and its media outlets. Khomeini had articulated the grand conspiracy led by the Christian West to destroy Islam and its foremost nation, Shiite Iran:

Since the Crusades, Western nations are supposed to have plotted to subjugate the Islamic world and to inhibit its prosperity and development, specifically to dissolve the Ottoman empire, foment conflict among Muslim communities, support Israel and world Zionism, and ‘brainwash’ the younger generation of Muslims. In addition to those foreign threats, conspiracy theories in Iran also implicate domestic enemies.

(Ashraf 1992)

Indeed, Iranian conspiracy theories accuse Freemasons, Illuminati or Zionist agents of acting secretly to overthrow the Islamic Republic. More specifically, the Bahais, a minority religious group, are also accused of constituting a fifth column, controlled by the U.S.A. or Israel and plotting to destroy the Islamic regime and Islam.

Islamic Republic also invokes Holocaust denial and conspiracies about Zionist world domination to legitimise governmental policies (Ashraf 1992). Mahmoud Ahmadinejad promoted conspiracy theories by openly articulating them, most notoriously in his Holocaust denial. This reached a climax in 2006, when he organised an international conference in Teheran on the Holocaust that gathered leading denialists and conspiracy theorists such as David Duke, Robert Faurisson, Roger Garaudy, David Irving and Fredrick Töben. Self-styled as a layman, outside of the Islamic clerical oligarchy, Ahmadinejad addressed his audience with a populist rhetoric matching the occasion, mixing Islamic and populist political conspiracy theories. Although the historical and cultural setting of the event facilitated this conspiratorial mind-set, the ideological agency of the authoritarian states should never be underestimated. Such tendencies are exploited by regimes for their own ends and agenda.

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