

Tales of 9/11: What conspiracy theories in Egypt and the United States tell us about 'media effects'

In the years following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Americans have been subjected to extensive polling to better gauge their knowledge, opinions, and attitudes about such matters as the threat posed by terrorism, the nature of Islam, the scope of the Patriot Act, the wisdom of US military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, and other issues pertaining to foreign policy and domestic security. Many of these survey findings appear worrisome, particularly from a civil liberties perspective. For example, public support for the unprecedented surveillance measures undertaken by the Federal government after 9/11 has remained high, while negative attitudes towards Islam and/or Muslim-Americans have increased (Harris Interactive 2004; Pew Research 2003, 2006). However, while such attitudes may be cause for concern, they are perhaps unsurprising given the quality and quantity of US media coverage devoted to these issues. Equally troublesome, but far more perplexing are public beliefs about the alleged relationships between the former Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq, weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and 9/11.

A substantial body of survey data indicates that as late as 2006, a majority of Americans believed both that Iraq possessed WMD, and that Saddam Hussein had 'strong links' to al Qaeda before the US invaded Iraq in 2003. For example, a study conducted in 2004 by the University of Maryland found that 57% of American held to the 'strong links' belief, with 20% affirming direct Iraqi involvement in 9/11 (PIPA, 2004). Polls conducted by Angus Reid (2006) and Harris Interactive (2006) both revealed that 62% of the American public held to the strong links belief in 2004, with the number

increasing slightly to 64% in 2005 and 2006. And while 36% of Americans believed Iraq had WMD in 2005, that number had grown to 50% by 2006 (Ibid). What is particularly noteworthy about the beliefs in question is that they have persisted well after it was revealed that they were based upon spurious information. Numerous investigations took place in the year following the invasion which debunked both the WMD and the Iraq/al Qaeda linkage claims. These findings were widely reported in the media with numerous politicians and pundits critical of the war claiming that the public had been deliberately deceived by the Bush administration. However, rather than reversing, or even mitigating the effects of earlier misinformation, public ignorance about Iraq has either remained steady or actually increased.

American misperceptions about 9/11 find a distorted echo within the publics of numerous countries around the world. That much was revealed in a poll conducted in 2008 by the academic research organization World Public Opinion (WPO). Respondents in seventeen countries were asked the following open-ended question with no response options provided; “Who do you think was behind the 9/11 attacks?” Responses were then grouped into one of the following categories: al Qaeda, the US government, Israel, Other, Don’t Know. The countries polled were Germany, France, Britain, Russia, Italy, Ukraine, Turkey, Egypt, Jordan, Kenya, Nigeria, Taiwan, South Korea, China, Indonesia, and Mexico, along with the Palestinian territories. Of the national publics surveyed majorities in only nine identified al Qaeda as the perpetrator behind the attacks. In no instance did a majority agree on a possible alternative culprit. However, significant minorities in most countries named the US government. The top four in this category were an interesting mix; Turkey (36%), Mexico (30%), the Palestinian territories (27%), and Germany (23%). When responses from all national populations were averaged, 46% of those polled

named al Qaeda as the perpetrator, 15% pointed to the US government, 7% named Israel, 7% cited another culprit, and 25% didn't know (Ibid).

The publics of Middle Eastern countries were more likely than those in other parts of the world to point to a 9/11 perpetrator other than al Qaeda. In the case of the Palestinian territories, while the largest grouping (42%) named al Qaeda, 27% named the US government and 19% named Israel. Nine percent named another perpetrator and 3% 'didn't know'. In Jordan, only 11% named al-Qaeda, the lowest percentage among all countries surveyed. The largest percentage of Jordanians 'didn't know' (36%), while 31% named Israel, 17% named the US, and 4% named another perpetrator. After Jordan, Egypt had the lowest number of respondents (16%) naming al Qaeda, and of all the countries surveyed, it had the largest minority pointing to a specific alternative perpetrator. Eighteen percent of Egyptians indicated that they didn't know who was behind the attacks, 12% cited the US, and 11% fell into the 'other' category. However, 43% of Egyptians named Israel as responsible.

The WPO findings for Egypt hold special interest here. The main reason is that, superficially at least, they appear to have much in common with the previously cited poll results dealing with public perceptions in the United States about Iraq. Most notably, relevant public beliefs in each case take the form of a 'conspiracy theory'; one structured along similar lines. In each country significant numbers of people believe that the 9/11 attacks were facilitated by agents of a foreign state – Iraq versus Israel respectively – attempting to conceal its role in aiding and abetting terror directed against Americans. Furthermore, in each case these beliefs have taken on a mass character. They are held not merely by groups or individuals on the margins of their host societies, but rather by large minorities or slight majorities of each national population. Hence, in terms of both the structure and content of the beliefs in each country, as well as their widespread

acceptance, a clear symmetry is apparent. As will be demonstrated, however, there are also differences between the two situations which are at least as important as the apparent similarities. The most significant of these pertain to the role played by the mass media vis-à-vis the origins, dissemination and perceived credibility of relevant beliefs within each population. The similarities and differences between the two scenarios will be explored at length in the main body of this paper.

The survey findings reviewed above beg several important questions. In the case of the United States, why does such a large portion of the public continue to accept claims about Saddam Hussein's Iraq which are now known to be baseless? If the mainstream media were indeed critical in promoting misguided beliefs on these matters, then why have they not played a similar role in eliminating them? In the case of Egypt, the problem is rather different. Here we must account for the persistence of beliefs which appear to be directly at odds with the goals and outlook of the ruling regime. Egypt has been the largest recipient of American financial and military aid in the world after Israel, and has been at peace with the latter since 1979. In the years following 9/11, Egypt and Israel have moved closer in terms of their foreign policy, particularly with respect to their mutual identification of radical Islam as enemy number one. Assuming that the state-controlled news media in Egypt are at least as uncritical of their government's policies as their counterparts in America are of US state policies, then why have they not done a better job of instilling the 'correct' beliefs and attitudes among the citizenry?

The questions raised above may be subsumed under a more general line of inquiry; why do the conspiratorial beliefs in question *sound true* to so many people within the two national publics of interest? I contend that this question may be productively addressd through appeals to the main premises and lines of argument traditionally invoked by those defending strong versus weak models of media influence

respectively. However, rather than digressing to outline the long history of debates in this area, my intent is to draw upon the most relevant evidence and arguments from each broad perspective in conjunction with attention to the Egyptian and American case studies. As will be demonstrated, there are sound reasons for believing that the mass media in any given society may play either a weak or a strong role in shaping (specific) public perceptions and attitudes, depending upon prevailing social, cultural and political realities. At the same time, I will argue that the insights informing much of the research conducted in this area have often been limited by a relatively narrow focus on such issues as voter behavior, the impact of specific political campaigns, or other phenomena which foreground the importance of partisan politics.

Egypt: a case of weak media effects

Many of those who study the mass media and/or public opinion contend that the media constitute a relatively weak force in shaping popular opinions, attitudes and beliefs. In fact, a considerable volume of literature has accumulated in support of the 'limited media effects' paradigm, dating back to the pioneering work of Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet (1944) dealing with American voter behavior. The latter, along with a large body of research accumulated since that time suggests that such social/cultural factors as family, ethnicity, education, religion, social class, and the local influence of community leaders generally play a much stronger role in shaping public attitudes and beliefs than do the mass media. According to this view, the media are much more likely to reinforce or activate existing views rather than create new ones, an argument which will be shown to hold relevance for the present case study. A related argument frequently raised by those in the weak effects camp is that when members of the public have strong firsthand experience with a given subject, event, or issue, they will be quick to reject media

messages incompatible with those experiences (Newton, 2007, pp. 14-15). As will become clear, this argument is highly salient if one hopes to appreciate the relationship(s) between relevant conspiracy beliefs and media messages in the Middle East in general, and Egypt in particular.

A CBS news report issued on Sept 4, 2002, traced the origins of the widespread belief – one which a Gallup poll revealed had been embraced by a strong majority of Muslims worldwide – that ‘the Jews’ were responsible for 9/11 (Crean, 2002). According to CBS, this belief was sparked by the appearance of stories in two Jordanian newspapers on Sept. 13, 2001, suggesting possible Israeli involvement in the attacks. On Sept. 17, this story-line was picked up and elaborated upon by the television station al Manar in Beirut. Al Manar is owned by the Lebanese Shiite Islamist political party and guerrilla organization, Hezbollah. In a news report on this station entitled ‘The Big Lie’, the claim was made that 4,000 Jews employed at the World Trade Center had not shown up for work on Sept. 11, after receiving warnings of the impending attack from the Israeli government. The 4,000 figure was apparently derived from remarks made by an Israeli ambassador, who had told reporters that his government received 4,000 phone calls from concerned Israelis unable to contact their relatives in New York following the attacks. By the next morning the story was online, after which it spread rapidly across Muslim Web sites and throughout the Islamic world ‘surfacing in newspapers, radio and TV reports and talk shows in Iran, Egypt, Pakistan and beyond’ (Ibid).

Upon initial consideration, the phenomenon of millions of people believing in a conspiracy theory transmitted through mass media and the internet might appear to represent a striking example of strong media effects. As will be demonstrated, however, once one takes into account the recent history of the Arab world, as well as prevailing social/political realities relevant to the more specific case of Egypt, a rather different

conclusion seems more appropriate. Unlike the American example to be explored in the next section, where it will be affirmed that beliefs about Iraqi complicity in 9/11 were essentially created from the top down, the Arab press appears to have been responding to grassroots fears and suspicions about Israel rather than generating them. This is particularly apparent in the case of Egypt, where the evidence suggests a situation in which popular pressure has set limits on acceptable state and media discourse concerning Israel/Palestine. It is in this negative sense that the media may be understood as a weak force in Egyptian society, at least with respect to the beliefs considered here. Simply put, Egyptian state authorities appear unable to utilize the media they ostensibly control to promote public beliefs and attitudes more in tune with Egypt's regional role as an American client state and de facto ally of Israel.

Given that Egypt has fought four wars with the state of Israel, it should come as little surprise that the Egyptian media have not always been friendly towards it. Even today, Israel is regularly criticized in the Egyptian media, even if not as unequivocally or stridently as in the past. Indeed, one might argue that the frequently negative portrayal of Israel in Egyptian and other Arab media helped set the stage for widespread acceptance of the belief that Israel was involved in 9/11. It should be kept in mind however, that nowhere in the Arab world was there a concerted campaign connecting Israel to 9/11 in any way comparable to the one in America concerning alleged Iraqi involvement. It is also worth recalling the WPO poll results cited earlier indicating that in 2008 the belief in some Muslim countries that the US government was behind 9/11 was even greater than belief in Israeli involvement. Furthermore, such beliefs extend beyond the Muslim world – itself much larger than the Arab world – to include Western countries such as Mexico and Germany. Most critically in light of present considerations, it was in Egypt, the Arab

country with the closest ties to Israel *and* the strongest state-controlled media, wherein public beliefs about Israeli culpability were found to be most prevalent.

Egypt is widely recognized as having a poor record with respect to journalistic freedom. The non-governmental organization, Reporters Without Borders (2008) ranked Egypt 146th out of 173 countries on its 'Press Freedom Index'. A recent KAS Democracy Report (2008) notes that the major news media in Egypt are state-run, that virtually all practice self-censorship, and that their editorial staffs are well versed in what may or may not be covered. As further noted in the report, printed media published in foreign languages such as English are the most liberal in orientation and the most likely to be critical of government policies. By contrast, the vast majority of the public get their news from state-controlled broadcast media (radio and television) or from newspapers in Arabic. The latter tend to be more conservative and much less critical of the long-ruling National Democratic Party (Ibid). As numerous observers have confirmed, the most politically dangerous topics for journalists working in Egypt include the issue of the presidential succession, political Islam, and Egyptian cooperation with Israel (KAS, 2008; Freedom House, 2008; Telhami, 2002).

Grassroots identification with the Palestinian cause and anger towards Israel remain widespread across virtually all sectors of Egyptian society, a situation which characterizes much if not most of the Arab world (Shehata, 2004; Telhami, 2002, pp. 97-103, 165). The mass flight and/or expulsion of Palestinians from their homeland to make way for the creation of a Jewish state in 1948 remains widely perceived among Arabs not only as a crime of ethnic cleansing, but also as part and parcel of a larger and ongoing attempt to ensure big power domination of the Middle East. Prior to 1979, it was Egypt which led the most serious challenges to foreign hegemony and Israeli expansion in the region. It engaged in costly wars with Israel in 1948, 1956, 1967 and 1973.

However, in 1979, Egypt became the first Arab state to sign a formal peace treaty with Israel. This treaty, which was negotiated under the auspices of the Carter administration, was seen in much of Arab society as an act of betrayal. It was widely viewed as a successful attempt by the United States to buy Egyptian acquiescence – through annual infusions of financial and military aid – in the face of ongoing Israeli aggression against Arab states (e.g. soon afterward in Iraq and Lebanon), continued Israeli settlement of illegally occupied Arab lands, and denial of Palestinian national rights (Alam, 2006, pp. 111-112; Telhami, 2002, pp. 90, 91, 102, 103).

Despite their tight control over the press and authoritarian approach to governing, the Egyptian authorities have often felt compelled to respond to grassroots pressures on the Palestinian issue. For example, in April 2002 there was intense public outrage when Israeli forces conducted large-scale military operations in several West Bank cities, causing massive destruction in terms of lives and property. Public reaction included student demonstrations on university campuses, protests at mosques, expressions of solidarity with the Palestinians from labor unions and the Artists Syndicate, demands from the Egyptian Pilots Union for the suspension of all flights to Israel, and organized boycotts of American goods by professional and business organizations (Shehata, 2004). These actions almost certainly played a role in motivating the government of Hosni Mubarak to suspend economic and cultural ties with Israel in April (Ibid).

None of this is to say that the state authorities, through the media they control, have not attempted to steer public opinion with regards to relevant developments in the region. For example, during Israel's military campaigns against Hezbollah in Lebanon in the summer of 2006 and Hamas in Gaza in early 2009, the Egyptian media attributed primary blame for the hostilities squarely on the Islamists, a stance which was directly at odds with popular sentiments (Pintak, 2009). In addition, media workers crossing red

lines continue to face potentially serious consequences. On May 2, 2008, a Cairo court sentenced the editors of three independent newspapers to one year in prison and a fine of EGP20,000 (US \$3,600) for criticizing President Mubarak's stance on Hezbollah, along with the positions of other ruling party members including Hosni Mubarak's son, Gamal (Freedom house, 2008). Nonetheless, the Mubarak government must also tread carefully. While it may wish to discredit Islamist organizations it is also forced to compete with them in terms of demonstrating solidarity with the Palestinians. Likewise, the national media may go only so far in identifying with Israeli goals in the region if they hope to avoid damaging their credibility irrevocably.

The Mubarak government remains committed to maintaining Egypt's traditional leadership role in the Arab world. One consequence is that pressure on the state to speak out on behalf of the Palestinians comes not only from within its own public but also from the larger Arab and Muslim societies. For this reason, it is still expedient for the national media to identify with Palestinian grievances and aspirations, even if only in a limited and/or symbolic manner. The recent growth of satellite television and increasing public access to the Internet has complicated matters for the government as well. While most Egyptians continue to receive their news from state-controlled media, growing numbers are joining the millions of other Arabs watching the relatively independent and highly popular Arab news station Al Jazeera, and/or are able to view news from stations in neighboring countries. One result is that unfiltered criticism of Egyptian policies from external sources is more likely to be heard by members of the public (Pintak, 2009; Telhami, 2002). Recent state security initiatives have in turn contributed to public distrust of the state-run media, increasing the appeal of alternative information sources such as the Internet (Ajemian, 2008).

In recent decades, the most outspoken critics both of Egypt's authoritarian form of rule and the state's unwillingness to adopt a stronger stance against Israel have come from Islamist sources, primarily Iran and Hezbollah abroad, and the Muslim Brotherhood at home. Not coincidentally, the Mubarak government shares Israel's hostility towards political Islam. It is particularly committed to containing the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood, an indigenous Islamist movement whose roots in Egypt date back to the 1920s, and which enjoys a wide base of popular support. This task became more difficult after the parliamentary elections of 2005, when the officially outlawed brotherhood won a record number of seats. It was able to accomplish this by running candidates as independents. One noteworthy outcome of the elections was the abrupt cessation of American pressure on Egypt to carry out meaningful democratic reforms (Shehata & Stacher, 2007. p. 8).

Shortly after the Parliamentary elections, the Mubarak government implemented what amounted to its own version of the Patriot Act. In particular, harsh new restrictions were placed on the Muslim Brotherhood's political activities. Many of its members were thrown in prison, financial assets were seized, and many of its charitable institutions were shut down. And despite a lack of hard evidence, a relentless media campaign was undertaken to portray the brotherhood as a terrorist organization with international financing and direct ties to militant groups. The Egyptian authorities have even gone so far as to hold up their actions against Islamists and other alleged enemies of the state as a model for the United States to emulate in its War on Terror (Shehata, 2004, p.8). Given this backdrop, the idea that the Egyptian authorities would prefer to see Israel or anyone else besides Islamist radicals blamed for 9/11 would seem unlikely to say the least. At the same time, it would not be surprising if some among Egypt's ruling elites share the

populist notion of Israeli involvement in the attacks, particularly since Egypt has had firsthand experience with Israeli false-flag operations in the past.

A notable example dates back to 1954. The newly formed nationalist government of Gamal Nasser was attempting to negotiate the removal of British military bases from the Suez, and was also hoping to forge stronger ties with the Americans. These developments worried some in the Israeli political establishment who were concerned that an independent Egypt with good ties to the United States would diminish Israel's own appeal as a useful Western ally. It was in an attempt to sour relations between Egypt and the Western powers that Israeli agents – who included Egyptian Jews recruited by Israel – undertook a string of bombings and arson attacks against American and British interests in Cairo and Alexandria. The intent was to make it appear to be the work of uncompromising nationalists such as those belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood, and hence to make Egypt appear politically unstable and unsuitable as a Western partner. This episode, which later came to be known as the Lavon Affair, was eventually exposed by the Egyptian police, and became a source of embarrassment and recrimination within the Israeli political establishment (Hersh, 1991; Hirst, 2003).

Shortly after the events described above, relations between Egypt and the West did in fact decline. However, the primary reason was the perceived threat to Western interests in the Middle East posed by Nasser's pan-Arab nationalism. In particular, there was growing concern that Nasser-inspired nationalist movements threatened the stability of pro-British, oil-rich monarchies in the Persian/Arabian Gulf. When Nasser nationalized the Egyptian Suez Canal in 1956 – which had previously been administered by Britain and France – the two former colonial powers reacted by joining Israel in an invasion of the Egyptian Sinai. It was pressure from the United States which ultimately forced the three militaries to withdraw, an action which appeared to be motivated by

America's own interest in displacing Britain and France as the dominant foreign power in the region (Hersh, 1991, pp. 41-42; Johnson, 2004, p. 219; Sifry, 1991, p.31). A decade later, at a time when the Nasser regime enjoyed steady backing from the Soviet Union, it was the United States which encouraged Israel to attack Egypt (Cockburn, 1991, pp. 141-154). This resulted in the Six-Day War of 1967, during which Israel seized control of the Egyptian Sinai Peninsula and the Syrian Golan Heights, along with the remainder of historic Palestine – the West Bank and Gaza.

During the Six-Day War, the Israelis conducted another false flag operation which involved an American target, and which again held implications for Egypt. On a clear day, in international waters off the coast of the Sinai Peninsula, Israeli warplanes and torpedo gunships attacked the American naval vessel, the USS Liberty. The state-of-the-art intelligence gathering ship was clearly marked, was flying a large American flag, and bore no resemblance to any Arab craft involved in the conflict. The attack lasted well over an hour and resulted in the deaths of 34 crew members with 171 injured (Scott, 2009). At the time, information surrounding the incident was suppressed by the U.S. State Department – which did not want to embarrass their key ally in the region – as well as by the Israelis. To this day, the Israeli government claims that the attack resulted from a case of mistaken identity. However, evidence formerly suppressed (by the US government) continues to be uncovered which makes this possibility appear extremely implausible (see McGovern, 2009; Scott, 2009).

Possible motivations for the Liberty attack remain a source of debate. In his book *Body of Secrets*, respected journalist James Bamford (2002) notes that that the attack in question took place not far from the coastal town of El Arish, where Israeli soldiers were then engaged in a massacre of Egyptian POWs. Bamford suggests that the assault on the Liberty was intended to prevent the intelligence ship from creating a permanent record of

those events. In light of present considerations, it is worth noting that the El Arish massacre remains a source of popular anger in Egypt to this day (Metres, 1996; *Jerusalem Post*, Mar. 3, 2007). Others have suggested that the attack was motivated by Israel's desire to conceal the full scope of its wartime aims from its American backers (see Cockburn, 1991, p. 152). Evidence does suggest that the Israelis initially hoped that Egypt would be blamed for the attack, possibly to induce American military intervention at a time when Israel's overwhelming victory in the war was still uncertain (Hounam, 2003). Needless to say, the line between 'informed speculation' and 'irresponsible conspiracy theorizing' on such matters is a fine one. A recent article in Al Jazeera written by ex-Marine and military consultant Alan Sobrasky (June 11, 2009) even went so far as to suggest a possible parallel scenario in the case of 9/11.

The significance of the discussion above is not that Israel might actually have been involved in 9/11. If nothing else, the risks of potential discovery of even indirect involvement make such an undertaking extremely unlikely, and there is no sound evidence pointing in this direction. What is pertinent here is that Israel's policies towards the Palestinians combined with its status as a US proxy-state make it a ready object of enmity and suspicion within the Arab world in general and within Egyptian society in particular. As both supporters and critics of the US/Israeli strategic relationship appreciate, Israel's dominance of the Middle East is predicated upon its military usefulness in furthering American interests. Likewise, many in Israel's political establishment recognize the expediency of playing up the threat posed by Islamists and other alleged enemies of the West. In this light, Former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu could only have exacerbated conspiracy thinking in the region when he made statements to the effect that 9/11 had been 'good for Israel', ostensibly because it made

the United States cognizant of the common threat posed to both countries by Islamist and/or Arab fanaticism.

To sum up, the Egyptian government's ability to shape public opinion concerning Israel/Palestine is severely limited by its need to maintain credibility with its citizenry. Hence, while there was no specific attempt by the Egyptian authorities to dispel the belief that Israel was behind 9/11, we may still speak of 'weak media' in this more general, negative sense. As argued throughout this section, Egyptian conspiracy beliefs have arisen within the larger context of regional destabilization and conflict resulting from the Middle East's colonial past, and particularly from the (ongoing) Palestinian refugee crisis brought about by Israel's creation in 1948. The idea that Israel was involved in 9/11, while inaccurate, is not inconsistent with collective Arab experience of Israel as a 'foreign entity' created at their expense as part of a larger strategy of divide and rule in the region. It would be very convenient for the Mubarak government were it successfully able to portray Israel as a valued ally in its efforts to confront a regional Islamist threat. However, given the past and present character of Egyptian experiences with Israel, it seems improbable that the Egyptian state will be effectively able to mobilize the media to this end any time soon.

The United States: a case of strong media effects

In key respects, the belief held by roughly 64% of Americans in 2006 that Iraq provided substantial support to al-Qaeda before the United States invaded Iraq, does not represent a typical case of conspiracy theorizing. As emphasized by Fenster (2007) conspiracy theories are best understood as populist (though typically minority) phenomena which persist despite official attempts to convince adherents that their beliefs are misguided, and which typically involve distrust of both the government and the mainstream media.

By contrast the public beliefs considered here appear best understood as the end product of a successful propaganda campaign. For this reason they make for an appropriate contrast with the Egyptian example since the latter was argued to represent a case of populist ideology based on collective experience, which in turn constituted a constraining influence on both media content and media effects. However, it should also be kept in mind that the American case is complicated by the fact that public credulity towards the wartime claims of the Bush administration has persisted long after these same claims were discredited. For this reason, I will argue that it is necessary both to draw upon and to look beyond traditional arguments for strong media effects on political attitudes in order to better appreciate the case of ‘conspiracy theorizing’ considered here.

Perhaps the best recent support for the powerful media effects hypothesis has come from the research of political scientist, John Zaller (1992, 1999). Zaller’s main premise is that the effects which the mass media have on public attitudes often go undetected not because they are weak, but rather because they are persistent and ubiquitous. If media messages surrounding a politically contentious issue – such as the necessity of engaging in a foreign war such as in Viet Nam or the viability of a domestic social program – are both relatively constant over time in terms of volume of coverage *and* in terms of ideological perspective, then their effects on the public will remain largely invisible. Because their relative influence cannot readily be isolated from that of other factors such as religion, political affiliation, gender, social class, etc. it is very easy to ignore or downplay media messages as a *major* influence on public opinion. However, when the quality and/or quantity of media inputs on a given issue changes abruptly, then the effects on public attitudes become both visible and measurable.

Zaller (1999) defends an additional argument closely related to the one outlined above. Namely, he suggests that media effects may be negated if and when some political

messages ‘cancel out’ others. For example, if the Republic Party were to sustain an anti-national healthcare public relations campaign of roughly equal intensity to the pro-national healthcare campaign of the Obama administration, then if all other factors are held equal the net result on public opinion as a whole should be close to zero. Likewise, one may estimate media effects on opinion by calculating the differential between ideologically conflicting media campaigns in terms of their relative duration and/or intensity. While Zaller (1999) provides powerful models as well as numerous empirical examples to support his arguments, it is not my intent to review them here. Rather, I simply wish to draw attention to their potential relevance as well as their limitations in relation to this case study. It should be noted, however, that in terms of the limitations I address below, these in no way contradict Zaller’s central claim that the mass media frequently exercise strong effects on public perceptions of (political) reality. If anything, the remaining discussion suggests that such influence is often underestimated, even by those arguing for strong media effects.

It is easy to appreciate how the torrent of media commentary leading up to the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 led a large portion of the public to believe both that Iraq had links to al Qaeda and that Iraq was hiding WMD. In fact, the latter two claims were frequently conflated since the potential threat of terrorists getting hold of WMD was a common theme in news reporting during the months leading up to the invasion (Moeller 2004). As noted in a study conducted by the Center for International and Strategic Studies at Maryland, the problem with reporting about Iraqi WMD and terrorism was not that journalists intentionally played the role of propagandists, but rather that the continual repetition of sensational Bush administration claims was both intense and almost completely unaccompanied by any kind of critical commentary. The result was that the news media’s alleged watchdog role was essentially abandoned, allowing the White

House to set the parameters of media discourse (Moeller, 2004, p.7). As McChesney and Bellamy Foster (2003, p. 4) have emphasized, pro-establishment bias is encouraged within professional journalism by a tendency to treat government officials and powerful individuals as the primary legitimate sources of news, by the habit of avoiding controversy via the employment of a news 'hook' or 'peg' (e.g. the threat of terror) on which to hang a story, and by institutional pressures on journalists to 'dig here, not there'.

The main dilemma here is not that the public was led to believe misinformation about Iraqi involvement in 9/11 prior to the invasion of Iraq, but rather the *persistence* of public readiness to accept it as valid. Clearly, such persistence cannot be explained through reference to the conflicting message hypothesis put forward by Zaller (1999). It may well be the case that both the volume and intensity of media messages reinforcing the pro-war claims of the Bush administration were greater than in the case of later news coverage which dismissed those claims. This would certainly help account for the findings of a poll conducted by the University of Maryland (2004) indicating that most Americans remained convinced that the majority of experts believed that Iraq possessed WMD at the time of the 2003 invasion. Nonetheless, the fact that the debunking of pro-war claims came after the invasion began means that we should still expect the later messages to have at least some mitigating effect vis-a-vis the earlier misinformation, even if this falls well short of a complete reversal of public opinion.

One explanation put forward to explain the persistence of American beliefs about Iraqi involvement in 9/11 and/or with WMD, concerns the importance of political partisanship. In fact, a study conducted by the University of Maryland (2004) confirmed that Republicans are far more likely than Democrats to hold beliefs about Iraqi links to al Qaeda. However, it should also be borne in mind that we are presumably dealing with matters of objective fact about Iraqi involvement or non-involvement with 9/11, and that

what such surveys should be measuring is public knowledge *of* such facts as opposed to opinions or attitudes *about* them. For this reason, even strong Republican adherence to the beliefs in question remains problematic. Do the relevant survey results really indicate nothing more than stubborn party loyalty on the part of respondents, or is their something about the pre-invasion claims themselves which makes them seem credible to Republicans? More critically, we must also contend with the reality that there are more Democrats who accept the pro-war claims than there are Republicans who reject them (Ibid). Clearly, there is more at work here than partisan politics alone.

What is missing from much of the political science literature dealing with mass opinion, and what is needed for a better appreciation of the poll results concerning American perceptions of Iraq is adequate attention to media frames and/or forms of collective experience which transcend the ideological boundaries of traditional party politics. Just as Egypt's history as a (formerly) colonized country now caught in a strategically and ideologically contradictory relationship with Israel have created the backdrop against which Egyptian conspiracy theories must be assessed, it seems apt that we should consider the possibility of a similar collective experience informing the perceptions of Americans. In fact, such a shared experience appears not only to exist, but also to represent an inversion of the dynamic visible in the case of Egypt. That is to say, just as Egyptian attitudes have been shaped by a colonial legacy in which Israel has played a key role, American public fears about Iraq/al-Qaeda/WMD have arisen within the larger context of what Said (1994) has termed a 'culture of imperialism'. And inseparable from the latter has been continuous public exposure to wartime propaganda cast in an imperialist mold.

As with other Western Democracies such as Britain and Canada, the American propaganda machine took shape and became a steady feature of public life within the

context of the two world wars (Marlin, 2003). However, in the post-war period it has functioned largely to rationalize (in both senses of the term) America's role as a global power; one which reserves the right to intervene militarily throughout the world to protect its strategic and material interests (Said, 1997; Schiller, 1998). Rather than representing some novel innovation of the George Bush and/or neoconservatives, America's posture in this regard has been characteristic of both Democratic and Republican administrations (Johnson, 2004; Ryan, 1991). In line with this trend, media discourse surrounding American military interventions has tended to conform to a more general narrative structure. Said (1994, p.324) identifies its basic formula as 'one in which America, a force for good in the world, regularly comes up against obstacles posed by foreign conspiracies, ontologically mischievous and "against America"'.

Nowhere has the narrative structure referred to by Said been more pervasive than in news media coverage of the Middle East, the locus of America's most jealously guarded material and strategic interests. As Eqbal Ahmad observed in 1991:

There is more continuity than change in American objectives in the Middle East, and that is why, since the end of World War II, America has discovered more Hitlers there than any other region. Mohammed Mossadegh, Iran's nationalist prime minister, was the first to be portrayed as Hitler. Then it was Gamal Abdel Nasser's turn. His book, *Philosophy of the Revolution*, was described by the U.S. media, including the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, as an Arab equivalent of *Mein Kampf*. Then Yasir Arafat was portrayed as Hitler. Most people do not recall that until he made his dramatic visit to Israel, concluded separate peace with Israel, and became the darling of the American officials and the media, even Anwar Sadat was routinely portrayed as a fascist; allegations were dredged up of his links with the Nazis. And for the purposes of the Gulf War, of course, Saddam Hussein served as the new Hitler. (Ahmad, 1991, p. 10)

More recently, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has joined the ranks of Middle East Hitlers, with ominous implications. Taking note of such trends is important. The passage cited above underscores the point that widespread public beliefs about Saddam's alleged links to WMD and 9/11 cannot be viewed as an isolated reaction to a single

message or specific public relations campaign. Rather, the wartime claims of the Bush administration merge seamlessly with a larger meta-narrative – one transcending Democratic/Republican ideological disputes – within which America's relations with other actors on the global stage take on their symbolic meaning.

In his seminal work on public opinion and American foreign policy, Holsti (2007) makes the case that citizens are best understood as 'cognitive misers' with respect to the manner in which they formulate opinions about foreign policy issues. He argues that in the face of low information and an ambiguous international environment people are likely to rely on a limited number of beliefs through which they make sense of a wide array of facts and events (Holsti, 2007, p. 51). Holsti also takes issue with earlier studies which suggest that the public is highly erratic when expressing opinions on foreign policy issues, displaying little in the way of ideological or even logical cohesion with respect to the structure of their beliefs over time. Instead, he maintains that the cumulative evidence of ongoing survey research indicates that the public displays a high degree of consistency with respect to the structure of their political beliefs. However, this reality has often been obscured in earlier research due to the fact that 'public responses to political issues are not adequately captured by the most familiar bipolar dimensions – liberal to conservative and internationalist to isolationist' Holsti (2007, p.50). However, Holsti shies away from the additional, and I believe critical assertion that public belief structures (and popular ideologies) are formed not only within an environment characterized by information poverty, but also by systemic propaganda.

Herman (2002) makes the important observation that 'selective information is misinformation'. In other words, while the general public may be poorly informed on foreign policy matters due to a lack of adequate context in the news media, this is only part of the story. In addition, there is also the regular omission of certain types of

information, irrespective of its relevance to the issues being covered (see also Herman & Chomsky, 1988; McMurtry, 1999). For example, in the lead-up to both the 1991 and 2003 military operations against Iraq, a great deal was heard about that nation's violations of international law. At the same time there was almost complete silence about America's own very poor record in that regard. Even the fact that the 2003 invasion was itself illegal received very little media attention. Similarly, while it is not uncommon for the public to hear debates among politicians, pundits and foreign policy experts about the practicality of the US government's presumed desire to defend or promote democracy in the Middle East or elsewhere, virtually nothing is heard which might undermine the premise upon which such debates rest. More specifically, the news media generally remain silent about America's long record of destabilizing democracies and/or suppressing pro-democracy social movements around the globe.

Of particular relevance here, the concept of terrorism tends to be used very selectively in the news media. It is a term which is typically invoked only when the US or a close ally is the recipient of a violent attack (Chomsky, 1987; Herman & Peterson, 2006). An alternative would be for journalists to follow the lead of the United Nations, and employ more objective criteria relating to the nature of the act in question; namely the intent to strike civilian versus military targets. In this light it is worth noting that the 2001 attack on the Pentagon, the bombing of the USS Cole in Yemen in 2000, the Khobar Towers bombing (of US military personnel) in Saudi Arabia in 1996, and the 1982 suicide attack on US Marine barracks in Beirut, were or are regularly referred to by the media as acts of terrorism despite the fact that the primary targets in each incident were military. Conversely, the US bombing of a pharmaceutical plant in Sudan in 1998, atrocities committed by the American-backed Northern Alliance in Afghanistan, the deliberate destruction of Iraq's civilian infrastructure in 1991, 'Operation Shock and

Awe' in Iraq in 2003, and Israel's 2006 bombing of homes, infrastructure and UN personnel in Lebanon are virtually never referred to in such terms despite the fact that each involved deliberate attacks on non-military or civilian targets.¹

Just as Foucault has repeatedly demonstrated with respect to dominant scientific and administrative discourses, the narrative devices and media frames which characterize news reporting about such matters as democracy, rogue states, and terrorism serve to render some objects (of public knowledge) visible and others invisible. Likewise, attention to the ideological aspects of news reporting on foreign policy issues – those transcending partisan political disputes – makes it much easier to appreciate why the notion that Saddam Hussein was linked to 9/11 continues to sound true to so many Americans. Why would it not appear likely, if not a straight-forward matter of common sense, that the Hitlers and terrorists of the (primarily Muslim) world will find common cause and co-operate in their designs against America? Are not those who now deny such linkages simply naïve and/or liable to be proven wrong tomorrow? As Holsti (2007) suggests, most citizens likely rely on 'cognitive short-cuts' when formulating opinions about issues of which they have little first-hand knowledge. When one considers the positive (narrative/thematic) and negative (omission of inconvenient facts) ideological content of the news coverage typically available to the public in this regard, the persistence of the beliefs considered here does not seem so surprising.

Concluding Remarks

¹ See Graham (2004), Hans (2002), Herman (1982), Hess (1999), Herold (2004), Johnson (2001, 2004) and Novak (2006) for discussion of these and other cases of US (or US-backed) military attacks on civilians, and the manner in which they were rationalized or ignored by politicians and the media. Johnson (2004, p. 75) makes the additional observation that the US remains the only state ever condemned by the World Court for the crime of terrorism; a result of its support for the Contras and related covert attempts to overthrow the Sandinista government in Nicaragua during the 1980s.

This paper has considered two post-9/11 conspiracy theories, one widespread in Egypt, the other in the United States. Despite important parallels between the two cases, the mass media were argued to have played a decidedly different role vis-à-vis relevant public beliefs in each instance. In the case of Egyptian conspiracy beliefs about Israel, it was maintained that the news media play a weak role in shaping popular opinion. The collective memory of the Egyptian public, its ongoing identification with Palestinian displacement and suffering, and popular mistrust of the Mubarak government have created an atmosphere within which conspiracy theories involving Israel and its (and Egypt's) American backer will likely persist despite state control over most domestic media. By contrast, American conspiracy beliefs about Iraq were understood to have originated from an aggressive governmental propaganda campaign. While few would dispute this assertion, the difficulty was in accounting for the persistence of relevant beliefs after the Bush administration's wartime claims about Saddam Hussein had been discredited.

To shed greater light on the latter issue, attention was devoted to foreign policy trends and corresponding themes in American news reporting which transcend bipartisan ideological differences. It was argued both that imperialist discourse has long been pervasive within the American news media, and that ongoing exposure to it has come to provide an ideological or 'experiential' backdrop analogous to that played by the collective experience *of* imperialism in the case of Egypt. At the same time, both case studies highlighted the fact that popular ideology, state propaganda and mass media discourse may attenuate in ways which are not always readily apparent. Appreciating the manner in which they interact demands close attention to relevant historic, political and social trends and contingencies. Likewise, investigations into whether specific media messages will have weak or strong effects on public perceptions should be accompanied

by careful consideration of the discursive environment within which these messages circulate. Ignoring such issues or adopting too narrow an approach to questions of ‘media impact’ may mean that some of the most important factors contributing to the formation and persistence of mass beliefs will be overlooked.

Stephen Marmura is assistant professor in the Department of Sociology, St Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, Nova Scotia

Bibliography

- Ahmad, E. (1991). Portent of a New Century. In P. Bennis & M. Moushabeck (Eds.) *Beyond the Storm: A Gulf Crisis Reader*. New York: Olive Branch Press, 7-21.
- Ajemian, P. (2008). The Islamist opposition online in Egypt and Jordan, *Arab Media & Society* Winter 2008, Issue 4. Retrieved from <http://www.arabmediasociety.com/index.php>
- Alam, M. (2006). *Challenging the New Orientalism*. New Jersey: Islamic Publications International.
- Angus Reid Global Monitor. (2006). Half of Americans Believe Hussein Had WMD, Poll, July 28, 2006. Retrieved from <http://www.angus-reid.com/polls/view/12681>
- Bamford, J. (2002). *Body of Secrets: Anatomy of the Ultra-Secret National Security Agency*. New York: Anchor.
- Cockburn, A. & Cockburn, L. (1991). *Dangerous Liaison: The Inside Story of the U.S.-Israeli Covert Relationship*. Toronto: Stoddart Publishing Co. Ltd.
- Crean, E. (2002, September 4) The Big Lie: Find Out Why Muslims Think Bin Laden Is Innocent *CBS News*, (Crean, 2002). Retrieved from <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2002/09/04/60II/main520768.shtml>
- Fenster, M. (2008). *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Freedom House (2008). Freedom of the Press – Egypt (2008) Retrieved from http://www.freedomhouse.org/inc/content/pubs/pfs/inc_country_detail
- Graham, S. (2004). Introduction: Cities, Warfare, and States of Emergency. In S. Graham (Ed.) *Cities, War, and Terrorism* (pp. 1-25). Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

- Hans, D. (2001, November 23). Bush's Definition of Terrorism Fits Northern Alliance Like a Glove; TV Interviewers Don't Notice, *Common Dreams News Center*, (Hans, 2001). Retrieved from <http://www.commondreams.org/views01/1123-05.htm>
- Harris Interactive (2004). Strong and Continuing Support for Tough Measures to Prevent Terrorism, The Harris Poll # 17, March 5, 2004. Retrieved from http://www.harrisinteractive.com/harris_poll/index.asp?PID=446
- Harris Interactive (2004). Public Perceptions of Likelihood of Future Terrorist Attack Leads to Continuing Support for Tough Surveillance Measures to Prevent Terrorism, The Harris Poll # 73, Oct. 1, 2004. Retrieved from http://www.harrisinteractive.com/harris_poll/index.asp?PID=501
- Harris Interactive (2006). Belief that Iraq Had Weapons of Mass Destruction Has Increased Substantially, The Harris Poll #57, July 21, 2006. Retrieved from http://harrisinteractive.com/harris_poll/index.asp?PID=684
- Haroum, P. (2003). *Operation Cyanide: How the Bombing of the USS Liberty nearly caused World War III*. London: Vision.
- Herman, E. & Chomsky, N. (1988). *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Herold, M. (2004). Urban Dimensions of the Punishment of Afghanistan by US Bombs. In S. Graham (Ed.) *Cities, War, and Terrorism* pp. 312-329. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Hess, J. (1999, June). Sudan Bombing "Mistake" Inspires Media Indifference, *FAIR*, (Hess, 1999). Retrieved from <http://www.fair.org/extra/9906/sudan.html>
- Hirst D. (2003). *The Gun and the Olive Branch: The Roots of Violence in the Middle East*. (3rd ed.). Oxford: Faber & Faber.
- Holsti, O. (2007). *Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy*. (revised ed.) Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.
- Jerusalem Post (2007, March 3). Egypt wants probe into "IDF massacre", *The Jerusalem Post*. Retrieved from <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1171894560590&pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull>
- Johnson, C. (2001). *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire*. New York: Henry Holt and Company.
- Johnson, C. (2004). *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the end of the Republic*. New York: Henry Holt and Company.
- KAS Democracy (2008). Media and Democracy Vol.II: Egypt, Oct. 24, 2008. Retrieved from http://www.kas.de/upload/Publikationen/2008/dr_egypt.pdf

- Lazarsfeld, P., Berelson, B., & Gaudet, H. (1944). *The People's Choice*. New York: Duell, Sloan, and Pearce.
- Marlin, R. (2003). *Propaganda & the Ethics of Persuasion*. Canada: Broadview Press.
- Metres, K. As Evidence Mounts, Toll of Israeli Prisoner of War Massacre Grows *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, Feb./Mar. 1996. Retrieved from <http://www.wrmea.com/backissues/0296/9602017.html>
- McChesney, R. & Foster, J. B. (2003). The 'Left-Wing' Media? *Monthly Review*, June 2003. Retrieved from <http://www.monthlyreview.org/0603editr.htm>
- McGovern, R. (2009, June 1). Navy Vet Honored, Foiled Israeli Attack. *Consortiumnews.com*, (McGovern, 2009). 2009. Retrieved from <http://www.consortiumnews.com/2009/060109a.html>
- McMurtry, J. (1998). *Unequal Freedoms: The Global Market as an Ethical System*. Toronto: Kumarian Press.
- Moeller, S. (2004). *Media Coverage of Weapons of Mass Destruction. A Report for the Center for International and Strategic Studies at Maryland*. Retrieved from http://www.pipa.org/articles/WMDstudy_full.pdf
- Newton, K. (2007). The Fourth Estate: A Weak Force: Why the Mass Media Are Not so Bad for Democracy as Often Claimed, *WZB-Mitteillugen Heft 115 Marz* 2007. Retrieved from <http://www.wzb.eu/publikation/pdf/wm115/14-17.pdf>
- Novak, R. (2006, September/October). Pass for Israel From Mainstream American Media and Congress, *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs* September/October 2006: 11.
- Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. (2003). Religion and Consensus: Growing Number Says Islam Encourages Violence Among Followers, Poll, July 24, 2003. Retrieved from <http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=189>
- Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. (2006). No Rise in Civil Liberties Concerns, Poll, Jan. 11 2006. Retrieved from <http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=267>
- PIPA Knowledge/Networks Poll. (2004). US Public Beliefs on Iraq and the Presidential Election, Poll, April 22, 2004. Retrieved from http://www.pipa.org/OnlineReports/Iraq/IraqReport4_22_04.pdf
- Pintak, L. (2009). Arab States. In Pippa Norris (ed.) *The Roles of the News Media: Watch-dogs, Agenda-Setters and Gate-Keepers*, Ch. 13. Washington: The World Bank. Retrieved from

- http://ksghome.harvard.edu/~pnorris/books/WorldBank_Roles_of_News_Media.htm
- Reporters Without Borders. (2008). Press Freedom Index 2008, Retrieved from <http://www.rsf.org/en-classement794-2008.html>
- Ryan, S. (1991). Countdown for a Decade: The U.S. Build-Up for War in the Gulf. In Phyllis Bennis, & Michael Moushabeck (Eds). *Beyond the Storm: A Gulf Crisis Reader* (91-102). New York: Olive Branch Press.
- Said, E. (1994). *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Said, E. (1997). *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts determine how we see the rest of the World*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Sabrosky, A. (2009, June 11) Denied infamy: Israeli attack on USS Liberty, *Aljazeera Magazine*, (Sabrosky, 2009). Retrieved from http://aljazeera.com/news/articles/39/Denied_infamy_Israeli_attack_on_USS_Liberty.html**
- Schiller, H. (1998). Striving for communication dominance: A half-century review. in D. K. Thussu (ed.) pp. 17-26. *Electronic Empires*. London: Arnold.
- Scott, J. (2009). *Attack on the Liberty: The Untold Story of Israel's Deadly 1967 Assault on a U.S. Spy Ship*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Shehata, S. (2004). Egypt After 9/11: Perceptions of the United States, *Contemporary Conflicts*, SSRRC March 16, 2004. Retrieved from <http://conconflicts.ssrc.org/archives/mideast/shehata/>
- Shehata, S. & Stacher, J. (2007) Boxing in the Brothers, *Middle East Report* August 8, 2007. Retrieved from <http://merip.org/mero//mero080807.html>
- Sifry, M. U.S. Intervention in the Middle East: A Case Study (1991) In Micah L. Sifry & Christopher Cerf (Eds.) *The Gulf War Reader: History, Documents, Opinions* (pp. 27-33). New York: Random House.
- Telhami, S. (2002). *The Stakes: America and the Middle East: The consequences of Power and the Choice of Peace*. Boulder Colorado: Westview Press.
- United Nations (2006). *Definitions of Terrorism*. UNODC. Retrieved from http://www.unodc.org/unodc/terrorism_definitions.html
- World Public Opinion (2008). International Poll: No Consensus on Who Was Behind 9/11, Poll, July 31, 2008. Retrieved from http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/international_security_bt/535.php?nid=&id=&pnt=535
- Zaller, J. (1992). *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*. New York: Cambridge

University Press.

Zaller, J. (1999). The Myth of Massive Media Impact Revived: New Support for a Discredited Idea. In Diana C. Mutz, Paul M. Sniderman & Richard A Brody (Eds.) *Political Persuasion and Attitude Change* (pp. 17-78). Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.