

Enough lies, the Arab body politic created the ISIS cancer

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Hisham Melhem

Most people are averse to introspection, and rarely engage in self-criticism. Arabs are no different. However, the political culture that developed in the Arab World in the last 60 years, particularly in countries ruled by autocratic regimes, shifted blame from their catastrophic failures in governance to other external, sinister forces. For these countries, self-criticism has become next to impossible.

Over time, this legacy has created fertile terrain for conspiracy theories, delusions, self-deception, paranoia and xenophobia. If you read an Arab newspaper or many a website in the region, you will invariably encounter some of these symptoms. Admittedly, sometimes they can be entertaining, but in most cases they are downright ugly, reflecting deep pathologies of fear.

Conspiracy theories

Conspiracy theories reign usually in undemocratic societies lacking transparent institutions, free and vibrant media and a political culture that does not shy away from dealing with issues that some may consider taboos.

Clinging to conspiracy theories, particularly in times of challenge and uncertainty becomes attractive because it relieves the believers of any sense of responsibility for what is taking place in their midst, and apportion it to hidden and powerful forces beyond their control. Denial of reality and/or responsibility is the other side of conspiracy theories. In this manufactured world others, usually conniving, ill-intentioned and cunning are behind our travails and not us.

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Of course, conspiracy theories also exist in open and democratic societies, but they are usually confined to fringe groups. Just listen to the rants of the extreme right wing in the U.S. about government conspiracies against them including preparing internment camps to incarcerate them. Sometimes sizable numbers of

people believe in conspiracy theories; just witness the number and shifting **conspiracy theories** surrounding the assassination of President John F. Kennedy over the years.

The shocking and unbridled savagery of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which morphed recently into the Islamic State, is a case in point. The unimaginable brutality of this latest manifestation of Political Islam in the Arab world is too much to bear for many Muslim Arabs. So they either deny the atrocities claiming that Muslims would never commit such heinous acts (even while the perpetrators of the crimes assert that their violence is to spread their puritanical twisted version of Islam) or resort to the easier option and pick one of the many conspiracy theories that are being peddled by Intelligence agencies, political groups, journalists, or self-appointed guardians of religious sects and ethnic groups. Conspiracy theories work well when they are peddled by individuals who claim to be defending a group of people such as an ethnicity or a religious sect, against impending danger since it is easier in this case to frame the threat to the group as existential.

ISIS is made everywhere

Even before its swift and bloody control of one third of Iraq, uprooting and killing Christians and Yazidis and occupying Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, ISIS was made everywhere except in Syria or Iraq or by Arabs generally. Depending on one's sectarian background or political leanings, ISIS for many was made in America with a little help – as usual- from the Israelis; others, especially those who loath the Iranian-Syrian-Hezbollah axis would say with equal certainty that ISIS was made in Iran, with the conniving of the Syrian regime. But those who support the Iranian-led axis would assert un-equivocally that ISIS was made by the U.S. in collaboration with a Gulf state, take your pick: Saudi Arabia or Qatar or even Turkey.

In this twisted political environment, evidence or proof to buttress an argument are not necessary or are flimsy at best, and when the conspiracy is denied, the denial is considered a proof.

But since conspiracy theories usually are based on imagined causes and effects and by pointing to those who benefit from a development or an event, it becomes self-evident to some to claim that just because the Assad regime has diabolically benefitted from the war ISIS has waged against the Free Syrian Army and/or other Islamist opposition groups, then Assad is either behind ISIS or is conniving with it directly and operationally.

The recent fighting between ISIS and Assad's forces in Eastern Syria shows that there is no validity to such claims. Those who claim Iran is behind ISIS, because Tehran wants to breakup Iraq or keep it in perpetual struggles, don't like to entertain a simpler view which asserts that Iran's national interests are better served by a stable and allied Iraq that would be dependent on Iran or floats in Iran's political orbit, a reality that would allow Iran to extent its influence from the Gulf to the Mediterranean. Former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Maliki, trying to shift the blame for the disintegration of Iraqi defenses in the North from himself to the Kurds, had claimed that Erbil, the Kurdish capital "**is a headquarters for ISIS, Baathists, al-Qaeda and terrorists.**"

It is true that Gulf countries like Saudi Arabia and Qatar have provided arms and funds to Syrian opposition groups including an array of Islamist organizations in addition to Turkey. Particularly, the large sums of money given by wealthy individuals from the Gulf as aid which may have reached the extremists including al-Nusra Front and ISISEarly on does not mean that the Gulf states have created ISIS, since these states have already designated ISIS as a **terrorist organization**. Moreover, they are preventing their nationals from joining the "Jihad" in Syria and Iraq, and are cooperating with the U.S. Treasury Department to prevent transfer of funds from private bank accounts in Western countries. Recently, the U.S. Treasury Department has designated three Kuwaiti ISIS financial supporters as Specially Designated Global Terrorists.

Stamped: ISIS is made in America

With ISIS stunning ascendancy in Iraq, which forced the Obama Administration to launch limited air strikes against ISIS military formations threatening the lives of thousands of Yezidis, Christians as well as the Kurdish city of Erbil, a new conspiracy theory about the origin and evolution of ISIS swept the region, alleging this time, that no less an authority than former Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton is asserting that ISIS was made in America. And for a while this conspiracy, dominated both the traditional and social media, particularly in Lebanon. Screenshots of fake quotes allegedly from Clinton's memoir "Hard Choices" claiming the US was the brains behind the murderous ISIS were widely exchanged on twitter and on Facebook. Even by the low standards of conspiracy theories in the Middle East this one was particularly jarring.

Of fabricated quotes and a fake Emir

The fabricated quotes attributed to Clinton are so outlandish and surreal, that anybody with any political sense would not believe them even without checking the book. Clinton is alleged to have said that the U.S. has established ISIS in order to divide the Arab world but these plans were thwarted by the Egyptian military coup against the Muslim Brotherhood regime in Cairo, and that the U.S. and its European allies agreed that the Islamic State will be established on 2013/7/5" to be followed by our immediate recognition of this state... but everything collapsed ", after the Egyptian coup. The fake excerpts also claim that the Islamic State was supposed to help Washington in partitioning the Gulf region so that Washington would achieve total hegemony over the oil wells and the maritime lines of the region. This outrageous nonsense was published in whole or in part on websites and some publication, including the reputable Lebanese daily Annahar . A column by one of its contributors contained these lies as well as allegations that Edward Snowden the former NSA analyst has revealed that the Israeli Mossad intelligence service along with the CIA have established ISIS. He also quoted a web site allegedly claiming that an Iranian intelligence service has revealed the true identity of the "Emir" of the "Caliphate" Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, whose real name is Shimon Eilat, a Mossad agent. The only thing secretary Clinton has said about ISIS recently was that the U.S. "failure" to help Syrian rebels early on, has contributed to the rise of ISIS.

These outlandish lies prompted Lebanon's foreign minister Jibril Basil, a man not known for being deliberative; to summon the American Ambassador to Lebanon David Hale to inquire about Clinton's alleged claims. (Had he consulted his embassy in Washington to check the veracity of the claims, he would have saved himself and his country a profound embarrassment). The situation forced the U.S. embassy in Beirut to post a strong denial on its Facebook page: "Any suggestion that the United States ever considered recognizing the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant as anything other than a terrorist organization, or had any role in its creation, is patently false. Allegations circulating in Lebanon to the contrary are a fabrication."

A complex history

Those who have a more charitable view of the prevalence of conspiracy theories in the ME would point out that since the Second World War, the U.S. and its allies did engage in clandestine activities and conspiracies, including fomenting coups, influencing elections and collaborating with unsavory characters in the name of combating communism and radicalism, and that the invasion of Iraq was based on baseless allegations regarding Weapons of Mass Destruction and lies. That is all true, but that does not excuse the wide tendency of many Arabs, including journalists and government officials to believe in outlandish conspiracies without bothering to present evidence. The lies and fabrications spread by many in the Egyptian media before and after the coup of 2013 about the policies and views of U.S. officials towards Egypt, such as accusing the former U.S. ambassador Anne Patterson of urging the Muslim Brotherhood to use violence, or greeting Secretary Clinton on one of her visits to Cairo as "The supreme guide of the Muslim Brotherhood "are a national embarrassment. There is no escaping the fact that most of what is considered political discourse in many parts of the Arab world reflects the paucity of intellectual life in those societies.

Gutted societies

Ever since the 1967 Arab defeat in the war with Israel, Arab politics have been influenced and mostly shaped by various stripes of Islamists, including the radical and violent groups that constitute the antecedent of al-Qaeda and ISIS. Their emergence was in the making for decades. Today most of the politics in various Arab states from the countries of the Maghreb; Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya, through Egypt and on to Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Kuwait, Bahrain and Yemen is highly influenced by Islamists who occupy a shrinking spectrum. Most of the debates are essentially “all in the family” of Islamists kinds of debates. The rise of the Islamists; such as al-Nahda, the Muslim Brotherhood, the various Salafists, the Jama’ a Islamia, Hezbollah, Hamas and later al-Qaeda and ISIS has been facilitated by the depredations of the “secular” Arab regimes, the military strongmen and the one party rule, particularly the depravities of the Baath Party in both Syria and Iraq.

Over decades, the societies of Syria, Iraq, Egypt, Algeria, Yemen, Libya and later on Tunisia have been thoroughly wrecked by the brutality and corruption of these regimes. Arab societies gradually became politically and intellectually arid. Progressives, leftists, liberals and enlightened nationalists who dominated political life in many of these societies for decades were hunted, intimidated and deprived of forming any kind of independent political organization. Civil society was gutted, particularly in Syria and Iraq, where the ruling elites controlled every aspect of social and economic life, such as unions, social associations, universities and other organizations and associations in a way that the colonial order before independence could not dream of. In the meantime, the Islamists, many of whom were also subjected to the same treatment; either went underground or managed through charities and the Mosque to maintain some political viability and a modicum of organization.

The Islamist tide

In the 1970’s and 80’s, the Islamists began to assert themselves politically, claiming that both the State and the other secularists have failed after the 1967 defeat were unable to achieve economic growth. Some began to resort to violence in Egypt and Syria, and the Islamists that the late Egyptian President Anwar Sadat cultivated when he took power in 1970 to counter the Nasserites and the leftists, ended up assassinating him. Later on, more virulent Egyptian Islamists waged a terror campaign against Western tourists and tried to kill President Hosni Mubarak. In the meantime the Islamization of the war against Soviet occupation of Afghanistan where Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Pakistan with the active collaboration of the United States, changed the political dynamics not only in South Asia but also in the Middle East. An ill wind was blowing ushering the coming of a more conservative, austere, brand of the religion which few dared to call the intolerant tide of political Islamism.

By the time the United States invaded Iraq, Saddam Hussein’s wars and domestic depravities have already broken Iraq and totally alienated the Shiites and the Kurds. By the time the Syrian uprising began, the sectarianism of the Assad dynasty, the looting of the state and its resources by a small political and economic elite that included Sunnis and Christians pushed Syria to the point of implosion. The U.S. invasion of Iraq let loose unforeseen forces and dangerous sectarian tendencies and ethnic divisions that exposed to what extent the Iraqi State has been hollowed. And the Syrian uprising, which the regime diabolically succeeded in militarizing and deepening its sectarian- ethnic fissures, has degenerated into the ugliest and costliest civil war since the beginning of the season of Arab uprisings.

ISIS, a cult from hell

It is no longer very useful to talk about Syria and Iraq as unitary states because many people involved in the various struggles there don’t seem to share a national narrative. It is instructive to observe that those who are

ruling Damascus and Baghdad don't seem to be extremely moved to do something about a force that eliminated their national boundaries and in the process occupied one third of each country, and is bent on creating a puritanical Caliphate stretching from Mesopotamia to the Mediterranean. ISIS is exploiting the rage and alienation of the minority Arab Sunni Iraqis by the increasing sectarian policies pursued by Nouri Maliki for 8 years, just as it is exploiting the anger of the Majority Sunni Arabs in Syria who have been marginalized by the Assad dynasty for more than 40 years.

For the time being, ISIS will benefit from this deep Sunni disaffection, and time will tell when its growing nihilism and barbaric ritual killings will drive people to rebel against it. ISIS is al-Qaeda on steroids. ISIS's standards of depravity (mass executions, beheading, and crucifixions puts it way beyond the Taliban in Afghanistan). ISIS is the first modern terrorist organization that acts as a cult, and led by a leader who acts like a leader of a secrete death cult society, a modern day version of the 12th century Hassan-i Sabbah, the Ismaili Persian leader of a small group of zealots sometimes referred to as Hashashin, or "Assassins" who waged a campaign of violence and terror from his mountain redoubt in Northern Persia against the Seljuk Turks. The difference now is that ISIS is not ensconced in a mountain redoubt, but has established a primitive form of governance, with bureaucracies, tax collection and religious courts infamous for meting out horrific death sentences.

ISIS maybe the reject of al-Qaeda, but like al-Qaeda, it is the illegitimate child of modern political Islam that grew and expanded in what the Arabs refer to as البيئة الحاضنة, an "embracing environment." The ugly truth is that the ISIS cancer was produced by a very ill and weak Arab body politic.

Hisham Melhem is the bureau chief of Al Arabiya News Channel in Washington, DC. Melhem has interviewed many American and international public figures, including Presidents Barack Obama and George W. Bush, Secretaries of State Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen, among others. Melhem speaks regularly at college campuses, think tanks and interest groups on U.S.-Arab relations, political Islam, intra-Arab relations, Arab-Israeli issues, media in the Arab World, Arab images in American media , U.S. public policies and other related topics. He is also the correspondent for Annahar, the leading Lebanese daily. For four years he hosted "Across the Ocean," a weekly current affairs program on U.S.-Arab relations for Al Arabiya. Follow him on Twitter : @hisham_melhem

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