

## **Why do they hate them? - Mapping the Arab debate on Islamist terrorism**

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### **1. Introduction**

The events of September 11, 2001 ignited a new discussion about the possible root causes of transnational Islamist terrorism. While some Western observers see Islamist terrorism as a result of and reaction to specific foreign policies of Western countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom others have pointed to the lack of democratic processes and robust civil societies that might provide avenues for political participation.

Given the fact that political, social and religious developments in both Saudi Arabia and Egypt are widely perceived to have profoundly effected the development of Osama Bin Laden’s al-Qaeda organization at least until the events of September 11, 2001, the way columnists of both countries’ leading Arab and English-language newspapers have commented on terrorist events directed at Western (9/11, Madrid 2004, London 2005) as well as regional targets (Egypt 2004 and 2005, Saudi Arabia 2003) highlights the limits and features of the Arab debate on Islamist terrorism. Since all four newspapers (Arabic Al-Ahram and English-language Al-Ahram Weekly in Egypt, Arabic ash-Sharq al-Awsat and English-language Arab News in Saudi Arabia) are more or less directly controlled by the regime itself (Egypt) or influential members of the political elite (Saudi Arabia) the content of their opinion pages as spelled out over a period of four years covering a number of different

terrorist attacks illuminates different ways of securitizing political issues more or less directly associated with the threat of Islamist terrorism.

In the Egyptian context, the Arabic daily Al-Ahram is widely considered to be the pro-government flagship of Egyptian print media that offers more intellectual depth than other government publications. Its English-language sister-publication Al-Ahram Weekly covers contemporary Egyptian politics, economics and culture as well as international events from an Egyptian perspective with an obvious foreign audience in mind (including Western academics and journalists without the knowledge of Arabic). While it is therefore al-Ahram's task to shape the attitudes of Egyptian opinion leaders, Al-Ahram Weekly has the potential to influence the perceptions of international observers about contemporary Egypt.<sup>1</sup> The attempt to create sufficient credibility among the international audience explains why the regime is perceived as granting Al-Ahram Weekly more leeway in the discussion of sensitive political issues such as the domestic support for Islamism and the (distant) future of genuine political reform in the country.

## **2. The international arena: Securitizing ideologies vs. rationalizing “national interests”**

### **2.1. US Middle East Policy**

#### **2.1.1. The image of “Western aggression”**

What is striking about the way both Egyptian newspapers cover domestic and international terrorist incidents involving Islamist terrorists is the fact that a certain core set of arguments is presented without regard to the particular attack's context. Among those arguments stands out the portrayal of a “Western aggression” against the Arab and Muslim world which, depending on the author, might also include references to either US policies or the foreign policies and often the very existence of the state of Israel.

Al-Ahram's treatment of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and its political fallout might serve as a vivid example of the “construction” of an image of Western, particularly US hostility toward the Arab world. Al-Ahram's daily columnist Salih Muntasir and guest commentator Muhyi ad-Din 'Amirmur claimed that on September 11 the United States tasted the “fire which it burned others with”<sup>2</sup> and “experienced for the first time on its soil a

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<sup>1</sup> For a recent example of Western scholars who think that reading „Al-Ahram Weekly“ helps them explore „Arab public opinion“ see Peter A. Furia/Russell E. Lucas, Determinants of Arab Public Opinion on Foreign Relations, in: International Studies Quarterly, 2006, 50, 585–605.

<sup>2</sup> Salih Muntasir, Mahām Bush (Bush's Missions), in: Al-Ahram, 16 September 2001.

situation of war, which many countries had suffered from that had been exposed to American bombardments in the last century, from Germany to Japan, from Vietnam to Baghdad.”<sup>3</sup>

According to renowned daily commentator Salama Ahmed Salama Islamist terrorism was simply a reaction to Western provocation with the US in particular being responsible for “planting the seeds of terrorism in the Middle East (by endorsing Israel’s policies),”<sup>4</sup> a statement he reiterated after the terrorist attacks in Sharm el-Sheikh in July 2005.<sup>5</sup> After 9/11, he zeroed in on President Bush’s by now famous call to decide “whether you are with us or against us”. According to Salama, this meant that “neutrality is not allowed” and the “Arab countries have no right to discuss, let alone object to, American policies”.<sup>6</sup> While the Bush administration’s policies in themselves are controversial enough, Salama’s commentary underlines the scope of their misrepresentation in the Arab world. A careful reading of President Bush’s address to the Congress and the Nation on 20 September 2001 does not support Salama’s thesis of US call for total subordination. Instead, President Bush’s statement was directly targeted at those states which might fall under the category of active (Syria, Sudan, and Iran) or passive sponsors of terrorism (Pakistan and Saudi Arabia):

„We will starve terrorists of funding, turn them one against another, and drive them from place to place, until there is no refuge or no rest. And we will pursue nations that provide aid or safe haven to terrorism. Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists. From this day forward, any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime.”<sup>7</sup>

This paragraph rests on the notion that with the increasing threat of “new” transnational terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda and their exchange of expertise and material with “traditional” terrorist organizations like Hezbollah, the tendency of Middle Eastern governments to support violent organizations at one point or the other to gain leverage over regional or non-regional rivals can lead to a direct threat to US and Western security and could therefore not be tolerated anymore. For those US commentators who supported a hard-line approach towards the governments of Syria, Iran and the Sudan this paragraph and especially the phrase “From this day forward” even left open the option of a rapprochement

<sup>3</sup> Muhyi ad-Din ‘Amirmur, *Intiba’ātu ‘an infijārāt `amrīkī* (Impressions of the American explosions), in: *Ash-Sharq al-Awsat*, 19 September 2001.

<sup>4</sup> Salama Ahmed Salama, *Sore Spots*, in: *Al-Ahram Weekly*, No. 553, 27 September – 3 October 2001.

<sup>5</sup> “The terror being inflicted on the region by the US, the UK and the rest of Europe is what feeds local violence.” Salama Ahmed Salama, *Tributaries of terror*, in: *Al-Ahram Weekly*, No. 753, 28 July - 3 August 2005.

<sup>6</sup> Salama Ahmed Salama, *Bleak Prospects*, in: *Al-Ahram Weekly*, No. 551, 20-26 September 2001.

<sup>7</sup> See George W. Bush, *Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People*, Washington, D.C. 20. September 2001, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html>, accessed 22 March 2006.

with the United States based on the respective regime's self-interest in survival.<sup>8</sup> Since this phrase therefore contained an inadvertently strong argument against the Iraq war, the Bush administration had to go to such great lengths at demonizing the regime of Saddam Hussein to demonstrate that it could not be held to the same standard as other former or current state sponsors of terrorism. Those readers of Salama Ahmed Salama's column who did not take it upon themselves to search for the original wording of President Bush's address would nevertheless understand President Bush as dividing the world into two opposing camps, an image Osama Bin Laden relies on for his recruitment efforts. His "analysis" can therefore serve as a particularly illuminating example of how anti-Western nationalist and Islamist discourses overlap in the Arab world.<sup>9</sup> Arab nationalism and Islamism share a focus on transnational identities and rely on the construction of the "hostile West" to enforce the identities they stress.

A common motif of this kind of Occidentalism is the image of the "West" as an entity that constructs "Islam" and "the Arabs" as enemies. In both his English and Arabic columns the aforementioned Egyptian commentator Salama Ahmed Salama depicted a "war hysteria" that had supposedly generated the search for a "scapegoat" and "waves of racist hatred" against Arabs and Muslims living in the West.<sup>10</sup> Prominent Lebanese commentator Samir Attallah shared this sentiment and used his column in *Ash-Sharq al-Awsat* to claim right at the same time that "the Arabs in America feel that they are being targeted like the Jews in Germany before the war."<sup>11</sup>

The sentiments of these senior commentators with strong Arab nationalist convictions overlap with Palestinian and Islamist claims about US and Israeli policies. *Ash-Sharq al-Awsat* allowed former PLO press officer Bassam Abu Sharīf to add his critique of what he perceived to be "Ariel Sharon's attempts to exploit the criminal operations in America" to influence American public opinion against Muslims and Arabs,<sup>12</sup> and provided Egyptian Islamist Fahmi Howeidi with the opportunity to call for an "international alliance against hatred" on its pages.

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<sup>8</sup> For examples, see James Risen/Tim Weiner, 3 New Allies Help C.I.A. in Its Fight against Terror, in: NYT, 30 October 2001, Robin Wright/James Gerstenzang, Sudan, a Bin Laden Haven, Cracks Down on Extremists, in: LAT, 27 September 2001.

<sup>9</sup> In response to the military strikes President Clinton had ordered against targets in Sudan and Afghanistan in 1998, Salama had criticized what he considered to be the "double standards" of the United States, the "organized genocide of the Iraqi people", and the "elimination of the Albanian Muslims under the protectorate of NATO" as reasons for the bombings of U.S. embassies in Eastern Africa. Salama Ahmed Salama, Fertile Ground, in: *Al-Ahram Weekly*, Nr. 390, 13-19 August 1998.

<sup>10</sup> Salama Ahmed Salama, Sore Spots, in: *Al-Ahram Weekly*, No. 553, 27 September – 3 October 2001; Salama Ahmad Salama, Circle of retaliation, in: *Al-Ahram*, 15 September 2001.

<sup>11</sup> Samir Attallah, *Qira'atun fi l-rukam: min Kabul ila niu yurk* (Reading the clouds: from Kabul to New York), in: *ash-Sharq al-Awsat*, 20 September 2001.

<sup>12</sup> Bassam Abu Sharif, *Šarūn yastaghil al-'amaliyāt al-igrāmīya fi 'Amrīka* (Sharon exploits the criminal operations in America), in: *Ash-Sharq al-Awsat*, 19 September 2001.

Contrary to what some Western observers might expect, Howaidi was not talking about the hatred that prompted nineteen young men to commit mass murder, but what he described as the “anti-Islamic hatred” instigated by the “Jewish lobby”. Adopting Edward Said’s approach he selectively quotes examples of isolated acts of hate crimes and journalistic statements to construct the image of a “himla” (campaign) that continues the very narrative of Muslim victim hood which terrorist recruiters feed upon.<sup>13</sup>

A striking feature of the Egyptian regime’s English news outlet Al-Ahram Weekly is the extent to which “critical” Western approaches are incorporated. It regularly features Western commentaries, chief among them Edward Said and Noam Chomsky, that share the basic assumptions of nationalist and Islamist representatives of the Arab debate. For Edward Said Western discourses about “terrorism” and “freedom” are mere “abstractions” that hide the “mostly sordid material interests” of the “oil, defence and Zionist lobbies now consolidating their hold on the entire Middle East”.<sup>14</sup> He therefore saw the pending attack of an US-led alliance on Afghanistan as mainly aimed at consolidating “a strategic arc for the US from the Gulf to the northern oil fields that will be very difficult for anyone in the future to pry loose.”<sup>15</sup> Diaa Rashwan, equipped with additional authority through his position at the Anwar as-Sadat founded Al-Ahram Centre for Political and Strategic Studies, claimed that the attacks of 9/11 could not have been committed by Osama Bin Laden’s al-Qaeda. Those nineteen individuals listed by the FBI as the probable hijackers were simply too advantaged in their social status as to fall under the typical category of Islamist suicide attackers. Moreover, “(t)he skills and capabilities required for organising and executing such attacks suggest the involvement of parties that enjoy a great deal of power within America’s main security and military institutions.”<sup>16</sup> The answer to the necessary question of why those institutions would ever commit such a crime can in his view be found in the fact that the United States is looking for a pretext to create a military foothold into the resourceful region of Central Asia.<sup>17</sup> After the attacks in Riyadh, Rashwan charged that the “way in which Washington declared its war on terror (made) [...] it seem very much like a war on Islam or the Islamic world”, without further substantiating these charge.<sup>18</sup>

Said’s and Rashwan’s stereotypical portrayals of US Middle East policy does not differ markedly from the assessment of prominent Saudi Islamist Safar al-Hawali, who in his most

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<sup>13</sup> Fahmi Howaydī, *Daw’a li-tahāluf ad-duwalī did al-Kirāhiyā* (Call for an international alliance against hatred), in: *Ash-Sharq al-Awsat*, 17 September 2001.

<sup>14</sup> Edward Said, *Collective passion*, in: *Al-Ahram Weekly*, No. 552, 20-26 September 2001.

<sup>15</sup> Edward Said, *Collective passion*, in: *Al-Ahram Weekly*, No. 552, 20-26 September 2001.

<sup>16</sup> Diaa Rashwan, *A war over resources*, in: *Al-Ahram Weekly*, No. 552, 20-26 September 2001.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Diaa Rashwan, *Qualifying al-Qa’eda*, in: *Al-Ahram Weekly*, No. 639, 22 – 28 May 2003.

famous book “Kissinger’s Promise: American Goals in the Gulf” (*Wa’d Kissinger: al-`Ahdāf al-`Amrīkīya fī-l-Khalīj*) had called upon the citizens of Saudi Arabia to resist what he termed the “invasion of crusaders”<sup>19</sup> and who came to be mentioned by Osama Bin Laden in his 1996 declaration of war. Al-Hawali’s use of the term “crusader” has a similar connotation as Said’s determination to see and construct an “age-old religious hostility to ‘Islam’” which leads him to the easily falsifiable claim that “no one thinks of holding seminars on Christianity (or Judaism for that matter) and violence”.<sup>20</sup>

Noam Chomsky’s take on the events of 9/11 provides a vivid example of how the moral relativity of some post-modern “analysis” of Western policies fits perfectly into the debate allowed and supported by authoritarian Arab governments. To his opening remark that “(t)he terrorist attacks were major atrocities” he adds the qualification that “(i)n scale they *may* not reach the level of many others – for example, Clinton’s bombing of the Sudan with no credible pretext, destroying half its pharmaceutical supplies and killing unknown numbers of people.”<sup>21</sup> As someone who claims to be an expert on linguistics he must be well aware of the fact that the way he structured these sentences indicates that he is not willing to rule out that the unprovoked attack on thousands of civilians deserves less criticism than the morally and legally questionable, yet limited attack on a pharmaceutical plant that, at least according to public accounts of those involved, was based on the assumption that it might lead to the prevention of further terrorist attacks and was timed in such a way as to reduce the number of civilian casualties to the greatest extent possible.<sup>22</sup> In that sense, Chomsky’s piece is another example of how the hegemonic Arab discourse’s one-sided attempts to criticize Western counterterrorism policies inadvertently allows Osama Bin Laden as well as the attackers of London and Madrid to think that they can rightfully engage in their violent attacks on civilians as part of a “war” of equals.

One of Al-Ahram Weekly’s editorials on the 2004 attack on the tourist resort at Taba on the Sinai peninsula tried to establish a link to the events in Iraq where „Anglo-American forces, Iraqi resistance groups, armed terrorist organisations parading under the Islamic banners and, of course, intelligence operatives from various countries, are busily wreaking wholesale demolition of the political, economic and social infrastructure of an entire people.”<sup>23</sup> It is noteworthy that this analysis again not only establishes a moral equivalency between the involved Western parties and terrorist organizations, but also perpetuates the image of a

<sup>19</sup> Mamoun Fandy, *Saudi Arabia and the politics of dissent*, New York/ N.Y. 1999, p. 64.

<sup>20</sup> Edward Said, *Collective passion*, in: Al-Ahram Weekly, No. 552, 20-26 September 2001.

<sup>21</sup> Noam Chomsky, *On the bombing*, in: Al-Ahram Weekly Online, No. 552, 20-26 September 2001.

<sup>22</sup> Daniel Benjamin/Steven Simon, *The Age of Sacred Terror*, New York/N.Y. 2002, p. 357ff

<sup>23</sup> *Days of remorse*, in: Al-Ahram Weekly, No. 712, 14 - 20 October 2004.

“Western” attack on the Arab/Muslim world. US attempts to create indigenous democratic institutions in Iraq are not mentioned. Instead Al-Ahram speaks of “machinations revolving around Sudan” which at that time witnessed gross human rights abuses heavily criticized in Western, but not in Egyptian newspapers, as further reasons for the violence on the Sinai.<sup>24</sup>

Commenting on the terrorist attacks in London, al-Ahram’s editors stressed that for them the „tyranny and terrorist nature of the destructive nature of Western occupation of Iraq” was “obvious”. At the same time, this would, in their view, not justify the killing of innocent in countries far away from Iraq and Palestine.<sup>25</sup> In a similar vein Arab News carried an opinion-editorial published by Salim Lone in The Guardian in which he raised the question of whether terrorist attacks were really more “barbaric” than the “crimes against humanity” that supposedly took place in “Fallujah, Najaf, Qaim, the mountain villages of Afghanistan, (and) Jenin” and claimed that “the principal victims of terror and the US-British aggressions disguised as a response to it are Muslim countries.”<sup>26</sup>

The dominance of the side of the debate which supports the narrative of a confrontation between “Western aggressors” and “Muslim victims” has a profound impact on public opinion in the region. A survey conducted by the Program on International Policy Attitudes at the University of Maryland from December 2006 to February 2007, revealed a strongly negative view of Egyptians towards the US government (93%) which stood out strongly against the highly negative views of Moroccans (76%), Pakistanis (67%), and Indonesians (66%).<sup>27</sup> When asked about what they viewed as the ultimate goal of the so-called war on terror, 55% of the Egyptians asked considered it to be the political and economic domination to control Middle East resources, 31% saw the weakening and division of the Islamic religion and its peoples and only 9% the protection of the United States against further terrorist attacks.<sup>28</sup> 92% of Egyptians asked supported the notion that it is a goal of the United States “to weaken and divide the Islamic world”.<sup>29</sup> This corresponds with the relatively strong Egyptian support (45%) of the notion of an inevitable “violent conflict between Muslim and Western cultures” in comparison to the more optimistic views in Morocco (28%), Pakistan (21%), and Indonesia (13%).<sup>30</sup> The convergence of nationalist and Islamist discourse on US “arrogance” is exemplified by the fact that 90% of Egyptians support what they consider to be

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Al-‘Irhāb wa-l’Irhāb ul-madād .. matā tantahī hādhā ad-dā`ira al-jahnamīya? (Terrorism and Counterterrorism ... When does this vicious circle end?), in: Al-Ahram 14 July 2005.

<sup>26</sup> Salim Lone, Iraq: Withdrawal Is the Only Way to Curb Terrorism, in: Arab News, 13 July 2005.

<sup>27</sup> Muslim Public Opinion on US policy, Attacks on Civilians and al Qaeda, World Public Opinion.Org, Program on International Policy Attitudes at the University of Maryland, April 2007, p. 4.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. p. 6.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. p. 5.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. p. 24.

al Qaeda's attempt to "stand up to America and affirm the dignity of the Islamic people".<sup>31</sup> The same survey showed 56% of responding Egyptians admitting to share al-Qaeda's "attitudes towards the USA", with only 31% not sharing it and 14% not having an opinion about it.<sup>32</sup>

### 2.1.2. Deconstructing hostile imagery and the necessity of bilateral cooperation

The arguments of the nationalist and Islamist side of the debate stand in stark contrast to liberal Egyptian commentator Muhammad as-Sayyid Sa'īd's critique of the "gloating and lack of sympathy" towards the victims of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. In a reflection of his sensitivity toward the boundaries of the debate in the Arab world he limited his assessment to an unnamed "a small minority of people" and linked his moral-based critique with a utility-based argument about the possible negative effects such gloating might have for the PLO in particular and the Arabs in general.<sup>33</sup> In his critique, as-Sayyid Sa'īd was joined by fellow Egyptian commentator Mamoun Fandy who used his column in *Ash-Sharq al-Awsat* to pounce on those who criticize the "crimes" of 9/11 while at the same time trying to rationalize them. For him the fact that US politicians defended American Muslims and Arabs in an hour of "greatest rage and grief" symbolizes the "humanity" of US society.<sup>34</sup>

Abdel-Moneim Said, liberal columnist and director of the Al-Ahram Centre for Political and Strategic Studies, declared the "claim that horrors happening to Muslims go unnoticed" to be "as common as it insidious", helping to create a "culture of alienation" which the organizers of terrorist attacks feed upon.<sup>35</sup> Hala Mustafa, editor-in-chief of Al-Ahram's quarterly journal "al-Dimuqratiya", pointed to the dangers associated with the convergence of nationalist and Islamist discourses. In direct reference to the dominant Arab debate, Mustafa not only questioned the usefulness of conferences which "are little more than show business", but also warns adherents of pan-Arab ideologies who might share some of the Islamist "analysis" of contemporary Middle East politics that it would be "risky" to hope "that the grandiosity of jihad would revitalize their own quests."<sup>36</sup> After the terrorist attacks in London on 7 July 2005, 'Abdallah 'Abd as-Salam had already issued a stinging critique of those "who hurry to criticize terrorism against civilians only to add that it is our duty to remember that the West is

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid. p. 15.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. p. 14.

<sup>33</sup> Muhammad as-Sayyid Sa'īd, *Jarīma did al-Insānīya* (Crime against humanity), in: Al-Ahram, 15 September 2001.

<sup>34</sup> Mamoun Fandy, *Min ghair "lākin"* (Without "But"), in: *Ash-Sharq al-Awsat*, 17 September 2001.

<sup>35</sup> Abdel-Moneim Said, *Why the killing?*, in: Al-Ahram Weekly, No. 753, 28 July - 3 August 2005.

<sup>36</sup> Hala Mustafa, *No to terrorism*, in: Al-Ahram Weekly, No. 754, 4 - 10 August 2005.

currently conducting a crusade against the Arabs and Muslims.” For ‘Abd as-Salam this translates into telling the terrorists that their cause is just and that they “only err with your targets”.<sup>37</sup> For him the only crime that is worse than a terrorist attack is the kind of talk that tries to involve Muslims and Arabs in a holy war.<sup>38</sup> He points out that in the Western world „millions demonstrated against the Iraq war“, terrorist attacks in London occurred when the leaders of the Western world were discussing debt relief for many Muslim majority African countries and that the people in the West had been competing with each other to support the mostly Muslim victims of the Tsunami catastrophe in late 2004.<sup>39</sup>

Ash-Sharq al-Awsat’s less confrontational coverage of US policies can be explained by the different nature of Saudi Arabia’s relationship with the United States as well as the fact that the pro-Western representatives of Saudi Arabia’s political elite control this news outlet. While Egypt’s importance is more or less a direct consequence of the US interest in the security of Israel turning the Arab Israeli conflict into the essence of the bilateral relationship, the Arab Israeli conflict is more of a nuisance for US Saudi relationship.<sup>40</sup> In contrast to the generally highly charged tone of Al-Ahram, Ash-Sharq al-Awsat’s editorial board did not stop at criticizing President Bush’s use of the term “crusade” when describing his administration’s approach in the war on terrorism. Instead, it did not fail to mention the fact that he visited the Islamic centre in Washington, D.C. to declare that terrorism was not part of the true essence of Islam.<sup>41</sup> While Al-Ahram allowed the prominent left-wing commentator Mohammed Sid-Ahmed to inform his readers that the United States had used atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki simply to “avenge Japan’s destruction of its Pacific fleet in Pearl Harbor”<sup>42</sup>, Ash-Sharq al-Awsat’s well-known female commentator Hadi al-Husayni used the historical example of Pearl Harbor to foretell a US victory in the war on terror. She points to Japan’s Supreme Commander Isoroku Yamamoto’s remark that the attack on Pearl Harbor would ultimately lead to Japan’s defeat. While Sid-Ahmed tries to highlight what he perceives to be US “irrationality” in dealing with threats to its security, al-Hussein claims that “those who

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<sup>37</sup> ‘Abdallāh ‘Abd as-Salām, Kalām `irhābī (Terrorist Words), in: Al-Ahram, 9 July 2005.

<sup>38</sup> ‘Abdallāh ‘Abd as-Salām, Kalām `irhābī (Terrorist Words), in: Al-Ahram, 9 July 2005. He uses the literal translation “harb muqadisa” not its Islamic equivalent “Jihad”.

<sup>39</sup> ‘Abdallāh ‘Abd as-Salām, Kalām `irhābī (Terrorist Words), in: Al-Ahram, 9 July 2005.

<sup>40</sup> William B. Quandt, *The United States and Egypt. An Essay on Policy for the 1990s*, Washington, DC 1990, p. 5. „The prevailing idea is that Egypt is too important to be left to its doom – and too dangerous to be allowed the opportunity to realize its full potential.” See Ali H. Hillal Dessouki, *External Factors and Development in Egypt*, in: Dan Tschirgi (ed.), *Development in the Age of Liberalization. Egypt and Mexico*, Cairo 1996, 159-168, p. 163.

<sup>41</sup> Khutūrat ul-Kalām fī l-`Ayyām il-Harija (The importance of words in critical days), in: Ash-Sharq al-Awsat, 19 September 2001.

<sup>42</sup> Mohamed Sid-Ahmed, *Reproducing 9/11*, in: Al-Ahram Weekly, No. 639, 22 – 28 May 2003.

dared to commit these terrorist deeds sowed the seeds of their own destruction”<sup>43</sup> and adds support for a sweeping reaction.<sup>44</sup> Ahmed Taheri followed the same logic as Vice-President Dick Cheney’s in some public statements by portraying the attacks of 9/11 as a result of widespread perception of US “weakness” that had been fed by the images of the 1979 US embassy hostage taking in Iran and the 1983 Beirut bombing just like Goebbels and Yamamoto thought they had spotted a weakness before the US entry into the second world war.<sup>45</sup>

Othman ar-Rawaf, member of the Maglis ash-Shura, Saudi Arabia’s unelected consultative council, combined support for the US led „war on terror“ with a call for a dialogue between the Western and the Islamic world that should also aim at highlighting “Islam’s rejection of violence and extremism” as well as at stressing Muslim human rights in the face of “Zionist terrorism”.<sup>46</sup> One week later, he mentioned that police in Western countries had protected Muslims, while emphasizing that Muslim countries shared economic and strategic interests with the West.<sup>47</sup>

## **2.2.The Arab Israeli conflict**

One central theme of the debate around the events of 11 September 2001 has been the question of its possible perpetrators. Al-Ahram’s daily columnist Salih Muntasir considered himself not to be reckless in presuming that “Americans” instead of Palestinians or other Arabs had been involved in the planning and execution of the terrorist attacks. To support his view, he pointed to the lack of operational capabilities of possible Arab attackers, the constant surveillance of suspicious Arabs living in the United States, the skill of the pilots as well as the “fact” that the explosion resulting from the impact of the second airplane must had been caused by a “very explosive chemical on board” the plane. This led him to conclude with a reference to the execution of Timothy McVeigh on June 11, 2001 who was sentenced to death for the terrorist attack on a federal building in Oklahoma City.<sup>48</sup> While Al-Ahram’s editors

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<sup>43</sup> Hadi al-Husayni, Al-Ma’siq al-Muthallath ... wa-r-radd al-Hāsim (The threefold dilemma and the firm reaction), in: ash-Sharq al-Awsat, 14 September 2001.

<sup>44</sup> “Cruise missiles and aerial attacks from aircraft carriers will not destroy terrorism. Terrorism is a “dirty” deed, which, unfortunately, necessitates dirty deeds.” Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Amir Taheri, Hasharat Wultaīr ... wa Pīrl Harbur (Voltaire’s insect and Pearl Harbor), in: Ash-Sharq al-Awsat, 14 September 2001.

<sup>46</sup> Othman ar-Rawaf, Lā Khiyār ‘Amām ‘Amrīka `illā l-harb (America has no choice but war), in: Ash-Sharq al-Awsat, 18 September 2001.

<sup>47</sup> Othman ar-Rawaf, Min wast al-thulmi d-dimar daw’atun li-ta`kidi s-salam wal-hiwar (From the midst of the darkness of destruction a call for the confirmation of peace and dialogue), in: Ash-Sharq al-Awsat, 25 September 2001.

<sup>48</sup> Salih Muntasir, al-Fā’il Amrīkī (The Culprit is American), in: Al-Ahram, 13 September 2001.

issued a more cautious reference which followed remarks about al Qaeda's history of attacking US interests in their editorial of the same day,<sup>49</sup> they urged a possible future commission investigating the attacks to look into the possibility of an "infiltration" (tasallul) of US security services.<sup>50</sup>

For Salama Ahmad Salama it was "illogical" to assume that those "small terrorist cells" that had the ability to attack "an embassy here and a ship there" should be related to the events of September 11 which, in his view, carried all the hallmarks of the involvement of intelligence agency planning.<sup>51</sup> Commentator Sa'id 'Abd al-Khaliq asserted that the discussion of possible Arab perpetrators has been a result of the fact that „sixty percent“ of all US TV-channels were financed by the „Zionist lobby“.<sup>52</sup> Ibrahim Higazi talks about a wide range of possible culprits that range from the Serbs to the Japanese Red Army, but does not forget to express "in view of the powerful Jewish Lobby in America" "his hope" that the investigation into the attacks will consider "many directions".<sup>53</sup> Regardless of the identity of the attackers, he urged the "American people" to take off the "Zionist blinkers" to realize that the "terrorism that produced the panic and fear of 11 September" is the same as the one which has been befalling the Palestinians since 1948.<sup>54</sup> While one might be able to read this as a suggestion that Higazi would like to point to the fate of Palestinians refugees, he makes sure that his readers understand that his concern is about the very existence of the state of Israel, which he describes as the "true villain" whose "terrorism" has fathered the terrorism the United States had to suffer from on September 11.<sup>55</sup> Karim Baqr Adwani urged to distinguish between "terrorism" and "liberation struggle". He claimed that the Zionist lobby pushed the United States to precipitously enter a war "with no limit in time and space."<sup>56</sup> Palestinian Bilal al-Hasan, former deputy editor-in-chief of the Pan-Arab oriented, yet Lebanese dominated al-Hayah, joined in with selected quotes from Israeli newspaper articles to proof the "racist Israeli framing" of the terrorist attacks on the United States, for which he used the neutral term "events".<sup>57</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Al-Irhāb yadrab bi-quwa (Terrorism hits with full force), in: Al-Ahram, 13 September 2001.

<sup>50</sup> Mādā Jarā fī l-Wilayāt al-Muntahida? (What happened in the United States?), in: Al-Ahram, 13 September 2001.

<sup>51</sup> Salama Ahmad Salama, Circle of retaliation), in: Al-Ahram, 15 September 2001.

<sup>52</sup> Sa'id 'Abd al-Hāliq, Awlamat al-Irhāb (The Globalization of Terrorism), in: Al-Ahram, 15 September 2001.

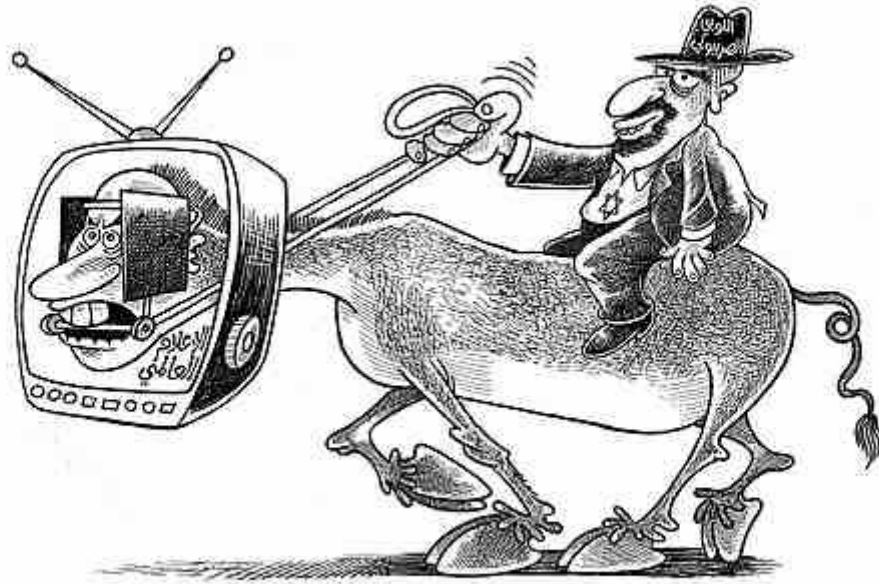
<sup>53</sup> Ibrahīm Higāzi, Rahmatu llāh alā dahāyā irhāb 11 sibtimbir al-amrikīyīn (May God take pity on the American victims of terrorism), in: Al-Ahram, 14 September 2001.

<sup>54</sup> Ibrahīm Higāzi, Rahmatu llāh alā dahāyā irhāb 11 sibtimbir al-amrikīyīn (May God take pity on the American victims of terrorism), in: Al-Ahram, 14 September 2001.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Karīm Baqr `Adwānī, As-Sadma wa-l-masdūm wa-murāja'al-mawgi'a (The Push and the Pushed and the painful revision), in: Ash-Sharq al-Awsat, 15 September 2001.

<sup>57</sup> Bilāl al-Hasn, Siyagha isra'īliya 'ansariya l-hadath al-'amrikī (The racist Israeli framing of the American events), in: Ash-Sharq al-Awsat, 17 September 2001.



Ash-Sharq al-Awsat Cartoon, 15 September 2001: The writing on the left says “World Media”, the one on the hat on the right “Zionist lobby”.

This discussion of possible culprits of the events of September 11 demonstrates how the “myth” of American omnipotence helps sustain further “myths” about misdeeds attributable to it.<sup>58</sup> At the beginning of 2007, 9% of Egyptians still thought that the US were “behind the 9/11 attacks” with another 29% suspecting Israel.<sup>59</sup>

Turāth Ibātha made one of the bluntest statements in the form of a direct address to Israel which he accused of being the one solely responsible for the events of September 11:

“It is you, and no one besides you, who blew up the Pentagon in America and shattered the World Trade Center and set up a fire at the White House [...] It is you who burned the American planes and their passengers. It is you, whose distinguishing mark it is to be an artificial state created from a wound in the

<sup>58</sup> In April 2007, 57% of all Egyptians (as compared to 18% of Indonesians) considered “nearly all” current world events to be “controlled by the US”, with further 32% (42% of Indonesians) judging that “most” events fall into this category. See Muslim Public Opinion on US policy, Attacks on Civilians and al Qaeda, World Public Opinion.Org, Program on International Policy Attitudes at the University of Maryland, April 2007, p. 4.

<sup>59</sup> 28% considered al Qaeda to be the perpetrator and another 29% were not sure. Muslim Public Opinion on US policy, Attacks on Civilians and al Qaeda, World Public Opinion.Org, Program on International Policy Attitudes at the University of Maryland, April 2007, p. 17.

world and its rubbish. It is you who brought about this great catastrophe for America, you and no one else. It is you with your bestial, dreadful behaviour.”<sup>60</sup>

Although they choose a more subdued tone, Al-Ahram’s editors followed a similar logic by explaining the terrorist attacks of Riyadh, Madrid, London and Sharm al-Sheikh with the “colonialist occupation of Iraq” and the “blind partisanship toward Israel” as well as the latter’s “crimes against the Palestinians” and “its threat to the Arab countries”.<sup>61</sup>

What is remarkable about this is the fact that while the emergence of al-Qaeda can hardly be explained by the Arab-Israel conflict the statements of Osama Bin Laden and Arab nationalist commentaries have helped create an impression that this would be the case. In his declaration of war against the “American occupiers of the land of the two holy places”, Osama Bin Laden marked his move from Sudan back to Afghanistan in August 1996.<sup>62</sup> In his declaration of war, Bin Laden describes the 1996 Israeli attack on a UN-refugee camp in Lebanese Qana as another example of a long series of “aggressions” committed by an alliance of “Zionists and crusaders” supported by a “conspiracy between the United States and its allies under the cloak of the United Nations.”<sup>63</sup> Immediately following this nod toward the Arab world’s hegemonic discourse Bin Laden introduces his real concern. The “occupation of the land of the two holy places” amounted to no less than “the biggest of all aggressions” which Muslims had to suffer from “since the prophet’s death”.<sup>64</sup> Here, Bin Laden makes it clear that the presence of a couple of thousand of US military personnel on territory that in contrast to the area around Median and Mecca historically has had little significance but for the emergence of the Wahhabi sect of Islam is a “bigger aggression” than the deplorable loss of civilian lives.

The issue of the Arab-Israeli conflict highlights one feature of the Arab debate on Islamist terrorism. Islamist terrorists as well as nationalist and Islamist commentators engage in a discourse that is increasingly detached from reality and marked by the exchange of handy justification of the murder of civilians for the chance to securitized ideological preference by linking it to the security threat of terrorism. Another problem associated with this form of discourse becomes clear when one takes a closer look at Al-Ahram’s post-Riyadh editorial

<sup>60</sup> Turāth Ibātha, Isra`il wa laisa ghairahā (Israel, and no one besides her), in: Al-Ahram, 17 September 2001.

<sup>61</sup> Al-irhāb ... al-bint al-murr li-ghiyāb il-`adāla (Terrorism ... the bitter plant of injustice), in: Al-Ahram, 17 May 2003; Tajfif Manābi` l-irhāb ... kaifa? (Drying up the sources of terrorism ... how?), in: Al-Ahram, 15 Mai 2003; Al-Islāh al-watanī li-muwājihat natā`ij al-harb w al-ya`s wal-irhāb (Domestic reform in the face of the results of the war and the despair and the terrorism), in: Al-Ahram, 17 March 2004; Tafjirāt lundun wa-lhāja lil-āliyāt jadīda li-mukāfihat il-`irhāb (The London explosions and the necessity of new instruments in the fight against terrorism), in: Al-Ahram, 9 July 2005.

<sup>62</sup> See Bin Laden’s 1996 Fatwa, [http://www.pbs.org/newshour/terrorism/international/fatwa\\_1996.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/terrorism/international/fatwa_1996.html), on 27 November 2003.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

which pointed out that “there is no doubt that every terrorist action against innocent civilians in a Muslim country, when it does not commit any injustices and his territories are not occupied such as is the case in the Arab Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, is a criminal act.”<sup>65</sup> This statement is noteworthy insofar as it leaves open the option of “justifiable terrorism”, i.e. violence against innocent civilians in case either one of the two aforementioned preconditions are not met. A quick glance at Osama Bin Laden’s statement makes it clear that he considers the situation in Saudi Arabia to be in violation of those two preconditions. This editorial therefore provides another example of how those commentators dominating the Arab debate, in their attempt to leave open justifiable causes as to not have to criticize Palestinian terrorism, creates a half-hearted condemnation of terrorism which sounds stricter than it actually is. In the end, this translates into a situation where 81% of Egyptians view al-Qaeda as “pushing the United States to stop favoring Israel in its conflict with the Palestinians”, which is something 95% of the respondents support.<sup>66</sup>

In what sense does the increasingly authoritarian Egyptian government benefit from this discourse? By portraying Islamist terrorism as the result of Western policies, the Egyptian government tries to rid itself of any kind of responsibility, thereby circumventing tough questions of whether the lack of venues for peaceful political participation, the increasing dominance of narrower interpretations of anti-modern religious thinking as well as the anti-Western hegemonic discourse itself might be factors in the emergence of Islamist terrorism. Additionally, by linking Islamist terrorism to regional issues such as the Arab-Israeli conflict and the war in Iraq, Egypt’s intellectual and political elite can make the claim that Cairo’s long-established diplomatic *bona fides* allow it to play a central role in any meaningful attempts of dealing with this national security concern for Western countries.

It is therefore not surprising that every major terrorist incident of the last six years is followed by an editorial in Al-Ahram calling for an international conference under Egyptian auspices.<sup>67</sup> After September 11, Ibrahim Nafie, Al-Ahram’s editor-in-chief, hailed Hosni Mubarak as “the first world leader to caution that terrorism had become one of the most pernicious forms of organised crime” and called for an international conference that amongst other things

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<sup>65</sup> Al-irhāb ... al-bint al-murr li-ghiyāb il-’adāla (Terrorism ... the bitter plant of injustice), in: Al-Ahram, 17 May 2003.

<sup>66</sup> Muslim Public Opinion on US policy, Attacks on Civilians and al Qaeda, World Public Opinion.Org, Program on International Policy Attitudes at the University of Maryland, April 2007, p. 15.

<sup>67</sup> Tafjīrāt madrīd al-irhābīya (Madrid’s terrorist explosions), in: Al-Ahram, 13 March 2004; Lā budda min ta’āwun duwalī jadīd li-muqāwama al-irhāb (There is no way around new international cooperation to fight terrorism), in: Al-Ahram 18 March 2004; Ibrahim Nafie, Beyond narrow interests, in: Al-Ahram Weekly, No. 712, 14 - 20 October 2004, Jasā’ Misr (Egypt’s revenge), in: Al-Ahram, 9 October 2004, Mu’tamar duwalī lil-irhāb durūra ’ājila (An international conference on terrorism ... is an urgent necessity), 10 October 2004; Call for a conference on terror, in: Al-Ahram Weekly, No. 751, 14 - 20 July 2005; al-Mu’tamar duwalī lil-irhāb durūra ’ājila (The international conference on terrorism is an urgent necessity), in: Al-Ahram, 26 July 2007.

worked toward to a distinction between “terrorism” and (Palestinian) “national liberation” and addressed the fact that “all too often Western nations have used asylum as a pretext to protect and support terrorist groups”.<sup>68</sup> At this point, the fact that Islamist preachers of terrorism had been able to abuse European pre-Madrid/London reluctance to expel them to their human rights abusing home countries, is used to create the image of the “West” employing terrorism for its own ends.

Nafie’s declaration that Egypt as a “pivotal regional power” could provide the Arab world with a “voice in channelling international anti-terrorist efforts” underscores the extent to which official Egyptian terrorism discourse is dominated by attempts to demonstrate this country’s regional and global importance. From a European perspective, Nafie’s claim that Egypt, which has been subject to a special investigation of the United Nations committee set up under the authority of the global convention against torture, possesses a “storehouse of ideas concerning the legal and logistical requirements for organising a global conference to formulate a comprehensive international anti-terrorist convention” immediately raises the question of whether those “ideas” are compatible with global human rights norms. The Arab-language Al-Ahram followed a similar logic based on the wide-spread portrayal of anti-Muslim sentiment by praising President Mubarak for raising his voice against the “calls for revenge” that supposedly singled out Arabs and Muslims in the Western world. According to Al-Ahram, Western governments can proof their good will towards the Muslims and Arabs by agreeing to an international conference under Egyptian auspices.<sup>69</sup>

While the attack in Riyadh coincided with secretary of state Colin Powell’s attempt to gather regional support for the “Road Map” to peace between Israelis and Palestinians,<sup>70</sup> the symbolism associated with the attacks in Taba<sup>71</sup> and Sharm ash-Sheikh<sup>72</sup> benefited the regime insofar as it provided the opportunity to highlight Egypt’s regional role. Thus, the image of an anti-Muslim West serves the interests of the authoritarian regime in Cairo by bolstering the latter’s call for an opportunity to polish the domestic and international credentials of a regime whose dictatorial crack-down on any form of non-violent (Islamist and liberal) dissent to ensure his son’s smooth accession to power runs counter to any universally accepted human rights norm.

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<sup>68</sup> Ibrahim Nafie, Towards a credible strategy, in: Al-Ahram Weekly, No. 552, 20-26 September 2001.

<sup>69</sup> Sawt ul-`Aql (Voice of Reason), in: Al-Ahram, 17 September 2001.

<sup>70</sup> Ibrahim Nafie, Double-edged sword, Al-Ahram Weekly, No. 639, 22 – 28 May 2003.

<sup>71</sup> Mu` tamar duwalī lil-irhāb durūra `ājila (An international conference on terrorism ... is an urgent necessity), 10 October 2004.

<sup>72</sup> Subhī `Asīla, al-`Irhāb wa-d-dūr al-`iqīmī (Terrorism and Egypt’s regional role), in: Al-Ahram, 24 July 2005.

'Atif al-Ghamri presents another version of the image of Israel as an actor that not only provokes terrorism with its policies, but also benefits from its spread. According to his analysis, the spread of terrorism activities in the region in response to the US presence in Iraq, benefits Israel insofar as the domestic destabilization of countries such as Egypt clears the way for Israel's drive toward regional dominance.<sup>73</sup> Here, domestic disturbances are delegitimized through the link with foreign interests.



Ash-Sharq al-Awsat's cartoon from 22 September 2001 highlights a typical attempt to delegitimize Islamist terrorism by associating it with the interests of Israel. Al-Irhab (Terrorism), in: Ash-Sharq al-Awsat, 22 September 2001

Ash-Sharq al-Awsat adopted a similar approach in response to both the events of September 11 as well as the attacks of May 2003 in Riyadh. Its editorial board and prominent Lebanese columnist Samir Attallah portrayed the Sharon government as the cause and greatest beneficiary of the US “catastrophes”<sup>74</sup> and lambasted the perpetrators of the attack on the housing compounds in Riyadh for engaging in “meaningless” terrorism at a time of “sensitive circumstances” associated with the war in Iraq which necessitated “solidarity among all Muslims and Arabs, between governments and people.”<sup>75</sup>

<sup>73</sup> 'Ātif al-Ghamrī, 'Irhāb .. harb `am jarīma (Terrorism .. War or Crime), in: Al-Ahram, 27 July 2005.

<sup>74</sup> Awda alā bad' (Return to the beginning), in: Ash-Sharq al-Awsat, 17 September 2001; Isra'il wa wa 'l-Fursa s-Sāhina", in: Ash-Sharq al-Awsat, 14 September 2001; Samir Attallah, Rasāsatu dh-dharī'a (Bullet of Excuse), in: Ash-Sharq al-Awsat, 14 September 2001.

<sup>75</sup> Al-Irhab lan tantasir (The terrorism will not prevail), in: Ash-Sharq al-Awsat, 14 May 2003.

### 3. The domestic arena: Supporting vs. challenging the authoritarian status quo

#### 3.1. The role of Islam(ism)

In his newspapers' only initial reaction to the events of September 11, 2001, Arab News' Editor in Chief, Khaled al-Maena, tried to deflect the examination of possible links to Saudi Arabia and the way Islam is taught there with his remark that „terrorists have no religion and country“.<sup>76</sup> This statement was in line with conservative Saudi minister of the interior Prince Naif's announcement in October 2001 that no “western smear campaign” would prevent the Saudi government from “following the sharia”.<sup>77</sup> One year later, he publicly stated that he considered “the Zionists” to be responsible for the attacks of 9/11 and called the Muslim Brotherhood the origin of all problems in the region. This statement reflected a central streak of internal Saudi discussions. In order to absolve the Wahhabi clerics of any responsibilities for the domestic escalation of violence, their defenders point to the fact that the method of takfir, i.e. the denunciation of other Muslims as infidels, had been “invented” by the radical 1970s splinter groups of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>78</sup>

Again, the events of May 2003 proved to broaden the boundaries of what was acceptable to discuss in the Saudi context. This situation was made possible through the fact that – in contrast to Egypt – the schism between proponents and opponents of political and societal reforms is not equivalent to the frontline between regime and opposition, but is represented in both. This enabled Arab News to describe the attackers as „the new fascists“.<sup>79</sup> The idea of linking Islamism with Fascism which President Bush had been heavily criticized for was picked up by Amir Taheri, himself a staunch supporter of the Bush administration's stalled democratization drive, who saw similarities between Islam and Fascism inasmuch both would emphasize the abstract community at the expense of the individual, with Islamist thinkers like Khomeini, Qutb and Mawdudi being “more influenced by Western totalitarian ideologies than by classical Islamic thought.”<sup>80</sup> Arab News urged its readers to come to terms with the fact that “we have a terrorist problem here” and criticized Saudi Arabia for having tried to ignore the domestic aspects of the events of 11 September 2001, instead clinging to the “fantasy” of “Israeli” or “CIA” involvement. It also criticized any attempt to differentiate between

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<sup>76</sup> Khaled al-Maena, Catch the criminals!, in: Arab News, 13 September 2001.

<sup>77</sup> See Khaled al-Maena/Javid Hassan, Prince Naif denies al-Qaeda links in Kingdom, in: Arab News, 21 October 2001.

<sup>78</sup> Interview, Imam Muhammad Islamic University Riyadh, 20 November 2005.

<sup>79</sup> The Enemy Within, in: Arab News, 14 May 2003.

<sup>80</sup> Amir Taheri, The Next Great Import from West, in: Arab News, 29 May 2003.

“acceptable” terrorism in Israel and Russia and the terrorism taking place in Saudi Arabia and called for putting an end to the “cult of suicide bombings.”<sup>81</sup> Arab News picked up its line of argumentation again when it called for a campaign not only against those who “organize” terror, but also those who “inspire” and “refuse to condemn” it.<sup>82</sup> Sheikhs like Ahmad al-Khaldi, Nasser al-Fahd und Ali al-Khudair who had called upon Saudi citizens not to cooperate with the security services in their attempt to investigate the May 2003 attacks were put under arrest until they finally distanced themselves from any kind of anti-regime violence.<sup>83</sup> Interestingly, the paper quoted Interior Minister Prince Naif with his vow to pursue those religious leaders deemed responsible to “instigate hate and terrorism.”<sup>84</sup> Observers like Michael Scott Doran see Naif more or less directly allied with those elements of the religious establishment that have professed sympathies for Osama Bin Laden’s world view.<sup>85</sup>

The new boundaries of the Saudi debate were highlighted again in Ash-Sharq al-Awsat’s commentaries on the terrorist attacks in London. British guest commentator Adel Darwish, who publishes in *The Independent*, *The Daily Telegraph* and *Time*, described al Qaeda’s goal to be “terrorism for the sake of terrorism” and called upon the leaders of the Arab countries, their political parties, religious dignitaries (first among them al Azhar), and intellectuals to condemn terrorism unequivocally: “We await the condemnation of every form of terrorism from top of the mosques’ pulpits.”<sup>86</sup> Ash-Sharq al-Awsat’s Amir Taheri detected the basic problem to be the “speech of those, who divide humanity into ‘believers’ and ‘non-believers’ and spread hatred of other religions”. According to him, it is therefore necessary to develop a “new religious speech” which stresses the value of “human existence” and the “value of life”.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> *The Enemy Within*, Arab News, 14 May 2003.

<sup>82</sup> *Stand Up to Evil*, Arab News, 16 May 2003.

<sup>83</sup> See Raid Qusti, *Al-Khaldi Recants Controversial Fatwas*, in: Arab News, 15 December 2003, <http://www.arabnews.com/?artid=36477> accessed on 17 December 2003.

<sup>84</sup> *Stand Up to Evil*, Arab News, 16 May 2003.

<sup>85</sup> Doran, Michael Scott (2004), *The Saudi Paradox*, in: *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 83, No. 1, 35-51

<sup>86</sup> Adel Darwish, *Ayuhā l-muslimūn: Lā tataradadū fī `idānat il-`irhāb* (O, you Muslims: Do not hesitate to condemn terrorism), in: *Ash-Sharq al-Awsat*, 8 July 2005.

<sup>87</sup> Amir Taheri, *hujum Lundun ... thamaratu t-tataruf al-marira* (The London attacks ... bitter fruit of extremism), in: *Ash-Sharq al-Awsat*, 8 July 2005.

### 3.2. Political Reform

The second benefit of the prevailing Arab discourse on the origins of Islamist terrorism is the fact that Western support for local and regional calls for indigenous political reform can be easily discredited by the nationalist intellectual allies of the authoritarian regimes.

A couple of days after the attacks of September 11, Al-Ahram published an editorial which covered a long list of issues that had to be addressed in the fight against terrorism. In the domestic front, its authors counted among the most important things equal political, social, and judicial rights, the development of an open democratic system which provides the opportunity for political engagement for all citizens as well as efforts against unemployment.<sup>88</sup> While this might sound like an invitation for constructive Western engagement the immediately following section stresses, couched in the terms of international “reform”, the limits of any Western influence. The call to respect the “sovereignty of countries and peoples”, to distance itself from the arrogance of power (*ghatrasat ul-quwa*) as well as the violation (*intihāk*) of the rights of other powers closely resembles those empty phrases which Middle Eastern potentates and their nationalist allies use to deflect any external call for or support of domestic reforms in their countries.

Again, the Egyptian regime could rely on the support of nationalist commentators. Hani Shukrallah criticized “Western pundits” and Arab neo-liberals for their suggestion that Arabs and Muslims should start looking for domestic reasons for terrorist violence. Instead, he claims that events such as “the Taba bombings are directly and most profoundly connected to the ongoing butchery in Palestine and Iraq at Israeli and American hands.”<sup>89</sup> In another opinion piece that, at least according to its headline, aimed to establish the culprits for the murder of Egyptian diplomat ash-Sharif in Iraq, Salama Ahmed Salama manages to feature all the typical elements of the dominant voice of the Arab debate in an ideal-type manner:

“Maybe it has been the essential mistake in the treatment of the phenomenon of terrorism that the whole world marched after the American understanding, which was prevalent after the events of September and which considered terrorism as a revelation of the backwardness, tyranny and ignorance in the Arab and Muslim world. Therefore its solution was the transport of the battle into the heart of the region, beginning with the assault on Afghanistan, leading to the occupation of Iraq, and the decree of a reform program,

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<sup>88</sup> Mu’ājalat asbāb ul-irhāb durūra li-ijtithātha min al-‘ālam (The treatment of the causes of terrorism requires its uprooting from the world), in: Al-Ahram. 15 September 2001.

<sup>89</sup> Hani Shukrallah, Leaps of Logic, in: Al-Ahram Weekly, No. 712, 14 - 20 October 2004.

whilst the true causes of terrorism have been ignored. They are rooted in the fights which were triggered by the colonialist, expansionist Israeli existence and what resulted from it.”<sup>90</sup>

Here, Salama not only tries to discredit the Greater Middle East Initiative, which was launched by the Bush administration to support political reform in the region, but also denies Israel’s right to exist, describing it as the source of all problems plaguing the region.

The Bush administration had modelled its Greater Middle East Initiative after the Helsinki process and the Conference of Security and Cooperation in Europe of the 1970s and 1980s. It offered every state from Morocco to Pakistan support for their attempt to join the World Trade Organization as well as privileged arrangements in the field of national security with the United States and Europe in exchange for economic and political reforms.<sup>91</sup>

Egyptian President Mubarak was one of the strongest critics of the initiative which had been prematurely leaked through the Arab Newspaper al-Hayat. In unusually harsh terms, Mubarak accused the Bush administration of ignoring “the region, their countries, populations and societies” as well as their “sovereignty” and warned about the “chaos” which would be associated with political freedom.<sup>92</sup> His foreign minister Ahmed Maher stressed that reform could only originate from „within“ the Arab countries and that the solution of the Arab-Israeli conflict would have to take precedent.<sup>93</sup> Maher’s successor Ahmed Abdoul Ghaith criticized the decision of the member states of the G 8 summit to extend invitations to Turkey and Afghanistan to participate in the so called “Forum for the Future”, which was supposed to be at the heart of the re-modelled “Broader Middle East Initiative”. The participation of the non-Arab Turkey and Afghanistan posed a direct challenge to Egyptian nationalism:

„They might think that Turkey might be a model for a number of Arab countries to follow. (...) With Afghanistan, maybe they want to teach the Afghans how to pursue our own model. I think we are at least 200 years in advance of Afghanistan. The social and economic development of Egypt is by far a century or two ahead of Afghanistan.”<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Salama Ahmad Salama, Li-Mādhā qutila as-safir? (Why was the ambassador killed?), in: Al-Ahram, 10 July 2005.

<sup>91</sup> Robin Wright/Glenn Kessler, Bush Aims For 'Greater Mideast' Plan, in: WP, 9 February 2004.

<sup>92</sup> Egypt Counters US Initiative, in: AN, 2 March 2004, <http://www.arabnews.com/?artid=40437> 18 March 2004; Neil MacFarquhar, Arab Leaders Seek to Counter U.S. Plan for Mideast Overhaul, in: NYT, 4 March 2004; Steven R. Weisman/Neil MacFarquhar, U.S. Plan for Mideast Reform Draws Ire of Arab Leaders, in: NYT, 27 February 2004.

<sup>93</sup> See Gamal Essam El-Din, Reform and Reformulating, in: Al-Ahram Weekly, 19-24 February 2004, Nr. 678, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2004/678/eg3.htm>, 26 February 2004.

<sup>94</sup> See Glenn Kessler, U.S.'s Mideast Democracy Forum Faulted, in: WP, 21. September 2004.

Saudi foreign minister Prince Sa'ud al-Faisal pointed to what he considered to be the unattractiveness of a democratization plan modelled after the Helsinki process. In a speech at the European Policy Center Sa'ud blamed this process for the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the fact that its inhabitants had, for the last two decades, belonged to the most "unfortunate" peoples.<sup>95</sup> At their February 2004 meeting, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah declared that reforms could never be "imposed from outside the Arab world" and should be in line with what they termed "Arab identity".<sup>96</sup>

With the help of their media allies, authoritarian regimes such as the one in Cairo can discredit any external support for domestic reform initiatives or any external criticism of their ruthless crackdown on peaceful political dissent.

#### 4. Conclusion

These findings lead to a new hypothesis which obviously merits further testing involving a larger number of news outlets not only from the print, but the TV and Internet media as well: the common debate about whether the Arab public shows strong signs of hostility toward Western countries because of what those countries "are" or "do" is potentially misleading since, given the biased "constructiveness" of Western policies in the Arab debate, it might be that the view of public that does not enjoy the Western benefits of a free media on what "the West" "does" is ultimately shaped by the prejudices and misinformation of those who either despise "the West" for what it "is" or for its support of political reform in the region.

This research endeavour also highlights an interesting overlapping of various lines of argumentation common to critical Western "Saidian" approaches to the study of terrorism, the Arab hegemonic debate and Islamist terrorists' arguments in favour of killing civilians. In their attempts to deconstruct "the West" and its policies, critical approaches operate with some of the images of and insinuations to "hidden" Western interests which are a common feature of Arab nationalist and Islamist vocabulary and conspiracy theories. At the end of this process of intellectual cross-fertilization stands a pattern of constructing "hostile others" (in this case "the West") which critical Western approaches originally set out to expose.

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<sup>95</sup> Kingdom Warns US against Imposing Reforms, in: Arab News, 20 February 2004, <http://www.arabnews.com/?artid=39792>, 26 February 2004.

<sup>96</sup> See P.K. Abdul Ghafour, 'No Reforms Under Foreign Pressure', in: Arab News, 2 March 2004, <http://www.arabnews.com/?artid=40442>, 3 April 2004; P.K. Abdul Ghafour, Riyadh and Cairo Reject Imposed Reforms, in: AN, 25. February 2004, <http://www.arabnews.com/?artid=40098>, 26 February 2004.