The printed Arabic media offer hardly any critical review of the social and political settings in the Arab world that may help to explain the emergence of violent Islamism and news events, and comments on the post–September 11 events vary from elaborations of the marked inconsistencies in US foreign policies to the popular conspiracy theories in which ‘international Zionism’ is blown up to mythical proportions. A few intellectuals, however, opt for a more open and frank approach to the issues involved, including some who had been accused in the past of endorsing militant Islamism.

Just before the American-British retaliation against Afghanistan, the Arab daily Al-Hayat published a series of articles on Usama bin Laden and his Al-Qaeda network. Based on interviews with members of Al-Qaida, the author, Kamil at-Tawil, a Lebanese journalist living in London, offers an in-depth discussion of the development of Al-Qaida in Afghanistan and beyond from 1988 onwards. He explains the portrayal of Bin Laden as a jihadi against Western influence in the Arab world, but rather as one against the ‘unjust Arab rulers’; anti-Americanism was a later consequence of the Second Gulf War. Bin Laden’s failure to establish an Islamist network operating from the Gulf region, specifically Saudi Arabia, led him to Afghanistan in 1990, to the Sudan from 1991 to 1996, and then back to Afghanistan where he remained until the September 11 attacks.

At-Tawil argues that the radicalization of the Al-Qaida network was the result of a new leadership network, headed by two former members of the Egyptian Jihad – Ayman az-Zawahiri and Abu Hafs al-Misri. The goals now included the expulsion of the U.S. troops from the Afghanistan Peninsula and the liberation of Jerusalem. The new direction taken by the Al-Qaida network was illustrated by the Al-Qaida declaration of war against the US in 1996, and the enactment of a fatwa to legitimize the suicide attacks against the American and Israeli armies and civilians.

Unfortunately, the frankness of these Al-Hayat articles is not representative of the Arab press reporting on the September 11 attacks and their underlying causes. Readers of Arab newspapers are either confronted with vague explanations or ideological remarks on Islamism and the relationship between the Arab world and the West, usually accentuating the US support of radical Islamist groups in the 1980s and 1990s and criticizing Western policy regarding the Arab-Islamic world. Other articles emphasize the peaceful nature of Islam and the faithfulness of the Muslim ummah. The internal and regional factors causing the emergence of radical Islamist movements are rarely discussed. Criticism of the West is so frequent and in such obscure disregard of the context that one may conclude that despite the prevailing condemnation of the September 11 attacks, there is an implicit justification. Bin Laden’s popularity among the Arab peoples is believed to stem from his willingness to deal with significant problems (e.g. Palestine) and his ability to reach the ‘arrogant American’ a lesson.

The conspiracy

Conspiracy theories, of which there are three basic patterns, comprise another component of common argumentation. The first assumes that American intelligence orchestrated the September 11 attacks, with the intention of justifying an already planned attack on the Arab and Islamic ummah. The second claims that the Christian Occident orchestrated the attacks to create a pretext for cleansing the West from its Muslim residents. This theory is further supported by the apparent smear campaigns against the United Arab Emirates, a part of the Western media’s line of argumentation does the first legal steps taken against Islamist groups in Europe. The third mostly appears in Arab media and is based on the assumption that the West is dominated by international Zionism. It is claimed that the attacks were carried out by Israeli intelligence in order to justify the brutal behaviour of the Israeli administration against Palestinians in the occupied territories. To this effect, a rumour circulated that all Jewish employees of the World Trade Center were mysterious absent on September 11. This theory represents a return to the Arab public’s most frequently used explanation for any crisis situation: ‘it’s the Jews’ fault.’ Whether it be the spread of the HIV-virus in the Arab region or the Arab-Israeli conflict as sufficient justification for the war, or the poor © Copyright ISIM, 2002