

Conspiracy and Misperception Belief in the Middle East and North Africa

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Abstract

Misperceptions and conspiracy theories about foreign powers and religious and ethnic groups can inflame intergroup conflict and distort public opinion, especially in divided and contentious regions like the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Why do people acquire and maintain these false or unsupported beliefs? This study reports the results of a novel survey experiment examining conspiracy beliefs in the MENA region. We find that belief in conspiracy theories about the West, Jews, and Israel is widespread and strongly associated with generalized anti-Western and anti-Jewish attitudes, especially among individuals with high political knowledge. However, both experimental and observational data indicate that these beliefs do not appear to be the result of feelings of powerlessness — our findings provide little support for the hypothesis that a lack of control makes people more vulnerable to conspiracy theories.

Short title: Conspiracy and Misperception Belief in MENA

Keywords: Conspiracy theory, misperception, Middle East, North Africa, control, motivated reasoning

Supplementary material for this article is available in the appendix in the online edition.

Replication files are available in the JOP Data Archive on Dataverse (<http://thedata.harvard.edu/dvn/dv/jop>).

This study was conducted in compliance with relevant laws and was approved by institutional review boards at Dartmouth College and American University.

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Conspiracy theories and historical misperceptions can inflame tensions between groups and contribute to conflict (Bar-Tal 2000; Lewandowsky et al. 2013). For instance, conspiracy theories about American, Jewish, or Israeli actions often play a prominent role in the politics of the developing world, especially the Middle East and North Africa [MENA] (Gray 2010; Jamal et al. 2015). Many people in the region deny that Arabs carried out the 9/11 terrorist attacks (e.g., Gentzkow and Shapiro 2004) and view the rise of ISIS as a Western or Israeli plot (e.g., Mackey 2014). However, we still know relatively little about how people acquire these false or unsupported beliefs and why they seem to hold on to them so tenaciously.

Though many factors can affect the tendency to engage in conspiratorial thinking (e.g., Oliver and Wood 2014; Uscinski, Klofstad, and Atkinson 2016), we focus on psychological theories which argue that people believe in conspiracy theories as a means to restore feelings of control over their life situation or circumstances. Previous research finds that people induced to feel a lack of control are more likely to perceive illusory patterns and to endorse conspiracy theories (Whitson and Galinsky 2008), including ones about political enemies (Sullivan, Landau, and Rothschild 2010). These findings may be especially relevant in MENA, a region where people often lack control over many aspects of their lives due to, e.g., physical or economic threats, religious restrictions, gender inequality, or a lack of democracy.

It is also important to consider the potential role of information flows and directionally motivated reasoning in promoting conspiracy belief, however. People tend to seek out and process information with a bias toward existing attitudes and beliefs, including false or unsupported conspiracy theories (e.g., Oliver and Wood 2014; Uscinski, Klofstad, and Atkinson 2016; Flynn, Nyhan, and Reifler 2017). In particular, anti-Western and anti-Jewish rhetoric is widespread in news coverage and statements from elites in MENA and could help explain the seeming prevalence of conspiracy theories there about the U.S., Jews, and Israel. We specifically consider how this relationship varies by political knowledge and education (e.g., Zaller 1992), two factors that could increase resistance to myths but may also the likelihood that people are aware of these messages and use them to form attitude-consistent beliefs (Nyhan 2010; Gentzkow and Shapiro 2004).

To evaluate these accounts, we conducted a novel survey experiment in MENA measuring the correlates of conspiracy beliefs and examining the effects of feelings of powerlessness on those beliefs. Given the theoretical novelty of the lack of control hypothesis and normative concerns with priming anti-Western/anti-Jewish feelings, our study manipulates the salience of feelings of low or high control. We first test whether anti-Western and anti-Jewish attitudes are associated with belief in salient conspiracy theories and misperceptions and examine whether that association varies with political knowledge and education (a research question [RQ]). Second, we test whether self-reported feelings of control are negatively correlated with belief in conspiracy theories and whether reminders of feelings of low control increase belief in conspiracy theories and misperceptions (relative to feelings of high control). Finally, we test if the relationship between feelings of control and belief in conspiracy theories and misperceptions varies by attitudes toward the West.

Our study, which was conducted with respondents in Egypt and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), yields four key findings. First, adherence to conspiracy theories is widespread. More than 80% of respondents believed two or more of the conspiracies we tested were “somewhat” or “very accurate.” Second, belief in these conspiracy theories, which concern the U.S., Jews, and Israel, is strongly associated with anti-Western and anti-Jewish attitudes. Third, this finding is not attenuated by political knowledge; instead, the relationship between anti-Jewish attitudes and conspiracy/misperception belief is actually stronger among people with higher knowledge. However, neither self-reported measures nor an experimental manipulation provide evidence that feelings of control affect conspiracy beliefs, contradicting the powerlessness hypothesis.

Experimental design and sample

YouGov MENA fielded the study, which was approved by IRBs at Dartmouth College and American University, from March 21–April 2, 2016.¹ The study was conducted online in Arabic after

¹The analysis below was preregistered (<http://egap.org/registration/1796>); all deviations are labeled.

being translated from an English instrument; both versions are provided in Online Appendix A. Our sample consisted of 1,007 respondents from Egypt and 1,008 from KSA (approximately 30% of the latter are non-Saudi nationals), two important countries in the region with sufficiently large numbers of YouGov MENA panelists.² As we describe in Online Appendix B, the sample skews young, male, and educated; respondent characteristics are balanced across conditions.

During the pre-treatment portion of the survey, respondents were asked about their feelings of control over their lives (an observational measure of potential vulnerability to conspiracy theories). These items loaded on separate factors corresponding to feelings of low and high control so we constructed separate scales (following our preregistration). We also measure anti-Western attitudes (favorability toward the U.S., the U.K., and Americans) and anti-Jewish attitudes (favorability toward Jews and Israel) to evaluate the potential role of directional motivations in conspiracy theory belief.³ We next asked participants to complete a state anxiety inventory and a knowledge scale measuring their knowledge of international politics and history that could be comparably measured across countries (see Online Appendix B for wording).

Participants were then randomly assigned to a placebo condition, or to low and high control conditions testing the theory of conspiracy theory vulnerability described above. Respondents in the control manipulation conditions were asked to list several experiences in which they felt little or no control (or complete control) and then asked to describe the experience in which they felt the least (or most) control in a brief essay. After a manipulation check, respondents evaluated the accuracy of six false or unsupported conspiracy theories that circulate in the region on a four-point scale.⁴ Finally, we asked about attitudes towards democracy, ISIS fighters, and the West.

²Though heterogeneity exists in the region, Egypt and KSA are relatively typical; e.g., measured levels of Holocaust denial are similar to MENA averages (Anti-Defamation League 2014).

³These were measured unobtrusively in large batteries and split into two scales because they loaded on separate factors. Christian favorability did not clearly load on either and was omitted.

⁴Reverse-coded items did not load on the same factor and are thus excluded.

Results

Belief in anti-Western and anti-Jewish conspiracy theories in Egypt and KSA appears to be widespread (see Figure B1 for survey marginals by country). For instance, 67% of respondents indicated the claim that “The United States is secretly trying to help the Islamic State (ISIS) take power in Syria and Iraq” is “somewhat” or “very accurate,” as did 52% for “Jews carried out the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks.” Overall, more than 80% endorsed two or more conspiracy theories.⁵

We first consider the association between conspiracy theory beliefs and anti-Western or anti-Jewish attitudes. Model 1 in Table 1 shows that pre-treatment anti-Western and anti-Jewish attitudes are strongly associated with mean conspiracy/misperception belief in a model that includes country fixed effects as well as demographic covariates ($p < .01$). These relationships are not significantly moderated by education (model 2), but they do appear to be moderated by political knowledge (model 3). In the table and in Figure 1, we follow Hainmueller, Mummolo, and Xu (N.d.) and interact the attitude measures with tercile indicators for political knowledge to avoid interpolation or extrapolation. The results are not clearly linear for anti-Western attitudes (left panel of Figure 1). However, we find that the association between anti-Jewish attitudes and conspiracy/misperception belief does *increase* with political knowledge (right panel of Figure 1). It is approximately linear and we can reject the null of no difference in marginal effects between the low and high knowledge terciles ($p < .05$).

An exploratory analysis of individual outcome measures reported in Table B4 is consistent with a motivated reasoning interpretation of these results. Unfavorable views of the West are most strongly associated with beliefs about ISIS and the 9/11 attacks, while unfavorable views of Jews and Israel are strongly associated with claims about the Holocaust and Jewish conspiracies.⁶

⁵These estimates correspond with other surveys. For instance, our estimate of 68% endorsing Holocaust denial corresponds to 62% (Egypt) and 78% (KSA) in Anti-Defamation League (2014).

⁶Compared to respondents in Egypt (a RQ), conspiracy beliefs are lower conditional on observables among Saudis in KSA ($p < .01$) but higher among non-Saudis in KSA ($p < .05$).

Table 1: Conspiracy belief associations with anti-Western/Jewish attitudes

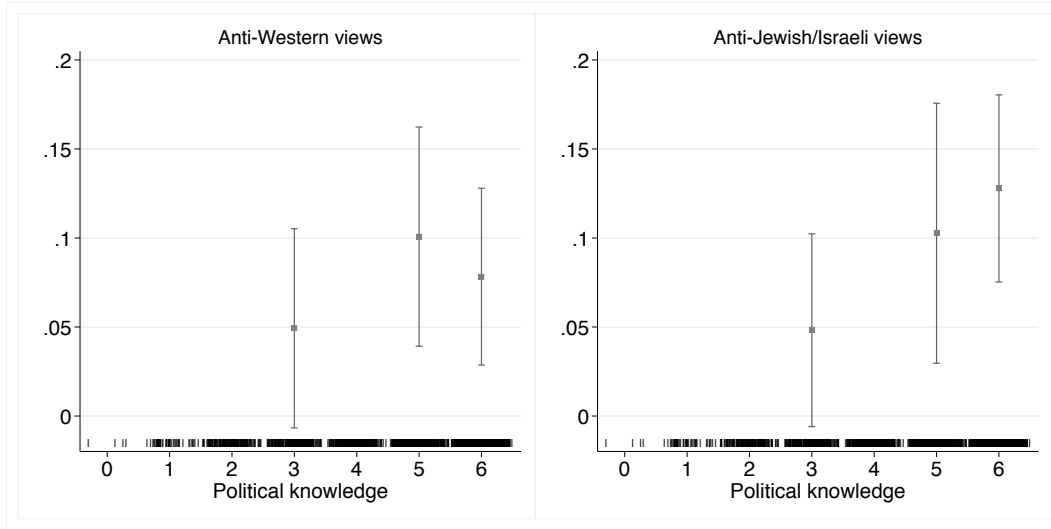
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Unfavorable to West	0.073*** (0.017)	0.079*** (0.030)	0.049* (0.029)
Unfavorable to Jews/Israel	0.092*** (0.017)	0.074*** (0.025)	0.048* (0.028)
Age	0.003** (0.001)	0.003** (0.001)	0.002 (0.001)
Male	0.036 (0.031)	0.037 (0.031)	0.004 (0.032)
Unemployed	-0.078 (0.057)	-0.080 (0.057)	-0.069 (0.057)
College	0.036 (0.035)	-0.076 (0.109)	0.017 (0.036)
KSA resident	-0.112*** (0.036)	-0.113*** (0.036)	-0.099*** (0.036)
Non-Saudi in KSA	0.103** (0.047)	0.103** (0.047)	0.082* (0.047)
Unfavorable toward West × college		-0.008 (0.035)	
Unfavorable toward Jews × college		0.032 (0.030)	
Medium political knowledge			0.192*** (0.040)
High political knowledge			0.137*** (0.037)
Unfavorable to West × medium knowledge			0.051 (0.042)
Unfavorable to West × high knowledge			0.029 (0.038)
Unfavorable to Jews × medium knowledge			0.054 (0.046)
Unfavorable to Jews × high knowledge			0.080** (0.038)
Constant	2.732*** (0.060)	2.733*** (0.060)	2.715*** (0.060)
R ²	0.05	0.05	0.07
N	2015	2015	2015

* $p < .10$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$; OLS coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses.

Feelings of control and conspiracy belief

We next consider whether feelings of a lack of control promote conspiracy belief. To test H2a, model 1 in Table 2 estimates the correlation between self-reported feelings of either low and high control and conspiracy/misperception belief in a model that includes the country fixed effects and

Figure 1: Marginal effects on conspiracy/misperception belief by knowledge tercile



Estimates from column 3 in Table 1. Rug plot indicates the density of observations by knowledge level. Marginal effects are plotted at the median knowledge level by tercile.

Table 2: Effects of control on conspiracy belief

	Pre-treatment self-report	Experimental manipulation
Low control	0.042** (0.017)	-0.011 (0.037)
High control	0.069*** (0.016)	-0.032 (0.036)
Demographic covariates	Yes	Yes
R ²	0.02	0.01
N	2015	2015

* $p < .10$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$; OLS coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses. Full table with demographic covariate coefficient estimates in Online Appendix B (omitted for space).

demographic controls described above. Model 2 instead tests H2b using our experimental treatments that reminded people of feelings of either low or high control.⁷

The results do not provide clear support for the lack of control hypothesis. Self-reported feelings of low *and* high control are positively associated with conspiracy belief in observational data

⁷For expositional reasons, we report a model with demographic covariates to match model 1. However, the results of our preregistered model omitting them are identical.

(model 1; $p < .05$ and $p < .01$, respectively). We are reluctant to engage in post hoc speculation about this unexpected result but it clearly does not clearly support our hypothesis. Moreover, our experimental treatment effect estimate for our low control manipulation is null relative to both the high control condition (the preregistered hypothesis test) as well as the baseline condition (a RQ) in both the combined (Table 2) and individual item results (Table B7). Finally, we find no evidence that the association with self-reported feelings of control in model 1 of Table 2 or the effect of the control treatments in model 2 are moderated by anti-Western or anti-Jewish attitudes (results available upon request). H3a and H3b are thus not supported.

As we show in Figure B2, we cannot attribute the null result to the failure of our experimental manipulation. A planned auxiliary analysis finds that feelings of control were higher in the high control condition than the low control condition ($p < .01$) as well as the baseline ($p < .05$). We also cannot attribute this result to our use of a composite measure of conspiracy/misperception belief — see the exploratory item-level analysis in Table B7. Finally, these results also do not differ significantly between KSA and Egypt (a RQ; see Table B8).

Finally, Table B9 shows that the effect of the manipulation on attitudes towards democracy, sympathy for ISIS fighters, and attitudes toward the West is null (a preregistered RQ).⁸

Conclusion

In this study, we examine the prevalence and causes of belief in conspiracy/misperception belief in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), a region where such beliefs are widespread and politically influential. We show that belief in conspiracy theories and misperceptions about Jews, Israel, ISIS, 9/11, and the Holocaust are widespread in both Egypt and Saudi Arabia. These beliefs are strongly associated with anti-Western and anti-Jewish attitudes, especially among people with higher political knowledge who may be more likely to form and maintain attitude-consistent beliefs. However, we find no support for the claim that feelings of a lack of individual control

⁸We deviate from our preregistration to include covariates, but results are identical if excluded.

contribute to conspiracy theory belief, contradicting the hypothesis that feelings of powerlessness may contribute to the seeming prevalence of these beliefs in the region.

Several important caveats to these findings should be noted. First, our study was administered online, which should help to minimize potential response bias, and avoided potentially sensitive questions about Islam or the governments in Egypt and KSA. As with any survey, however, we cannot fully rule out the possibility of social desirability bias (a particular concern for studies in authoritarian countries). In addition, participants were disproportionately young, male, and educated. It is of course possible that our findings would differ with a more representative sample that feels less control over their lives. They might also differ in other MENA countries. However, the groups that our sample overrepresents are politically important in these countries and the region. Indeed, the combination of increased education, poor economic prospects, and Internet access helped create the conditions for the Arab Spring (e.g., Lynch 2011).

A more fundamental question is how to interpret the high levels of conspiracy theory and misperception belief we observe? While we cannot rule out expressive responding, there is reason for doubt. First, the pervasiveness of conspiracy belief in the region has been established in extensive reporting and commentary as well as other surveys. Second, evidence from the U.S. suggests that while incentives may affect guessing strategies for difficult quantitative questions (e.g., Bullock et al. 2015), belief in a highly salient conspiracy theory (i.e., the “birther” myth) does not appear to be driven by expressive responding (Berinsky 2017). Nevertheless, subsequent studies should probe the sincerity of respondents’ reported beliefs.

Finally, researchers should seek to better understand the mechanism for the relationship we observe. The observational association we observe is consistent with a motivated reasoning explanation, which would echo the findings from many studies in the U.S. and other contexts. Nonetheless, we cannot rule out endogeneity — some individuals could come to hold these feelings *because* they believe in conspiracy theories about the U.S., Jews, and Israel. Similarly, we suggest above that anti-Western and anti-Jewish/Israeli television and Internet content could provide a mechanism for this relationship if people seek out attitude-consistent content that promotes conspiracy theories.

However, it is also possible that media exposure is a confounder if people are exposed to content that produces negative feelings toward those groups and also promoting conspiracy theories about them. Future studies should consider how to experimentally manipulate directional motivations in an ethical manner. It would also be valuable to create research designs that could better establish the role of media exposure in this relationship.

Ultimately, though research has focused on the U.S. and Europe, our findings indicate the need for further study of conspiracy theories in the developing world, including the Middle East and North Africa, where they often play a key role in politics.

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