

**Personal Control, Political Control, and Belief in Conspiracy Theories:
Evidence from the Islamic World**

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Abstract:

In recent years, there has been a surge of scholarly interest in public belief in conspiracy theories. In addition to motivated bias against the perpetrator, one of the key explanations for their broad appeal is perceived powerlessness and personal lack of control. In this article, we argue that the perception that an individual lacks personal control is different from, and less relevant than, the perception that a potential conspirator *has power and control*. In many Middle Eastern countries, for example, the notion that the U.S. has vast control over world events is widespread, helping to fuel the appeal of anti-American conspiracy theories. We test our argument using existing public opinion data about several American-centric conspiracy theories in four major Islamic countries – Egypt, Morocco, Pakistan, and Indonesia. The results confirm that perceptions of U.S. control have a significant impact independent of views of the U.S. or perceived personal lack of control. These results show that conspiracy theories thrive when perceived motives and perceived means align, and hint at the costs of actors overinflating their strength in world politics.

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In a recent poll fielded by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, over 50% of the respondents across five North African countries – Egypt, Libya, Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco – said that the Islamic State organization was actually created by the U.S. (Konrad Adenauer Foundation 2015). While this may appear surprising, conspiracy theories like these flourish in every society. Indeed, famous examples in the U.S. involve powerful and unseen forces assassinating John F. Kennedy, concealing alien contacts, faking the moon landing, concocting HIV/AIDS, and conducting 9/11. Yet such narratives may be even more prevalent in other regions of the world, such as the former Soviet countries, Latin America, and the Middle East and Islamic world. Moreover, the spread of these theories can have substantial political consequences; studies have linked them to avoidance of “pro-social behaviors” like vaccination, recycling, and voting, and even to support for political violence (Jolley and Douglas 2014a and 2014b; Uscinski and Parent 2014).

Why do people believe in such conspiratorial narratives? While early scholars tended to pathologize these beliefs as the creations of an “uncommonly angry mind” (Hofstadter 1971), a recent surge in research on the topic has provided two sets of answers. One approach holds that conspiracism is the product of psychological predispositions such as mistrust, authoritarianism, superstitiousness, and particularly powerlessness and loss of control (Swami et al 2010, 2011). Another approach focuses on political ideologies, like liberalism and conservatism, and argues that conspiracism is a form of ideologically-driven motivated reasoning (Miller, Saunders, and Farhart 2016). We argue that, while both of these approaches have merit, they are missing an important ingredient: perceived conspirator control. Because conspiracy theories often allege sweeping attempts to control the course of major world events by a few people, citizens must believe that a potential conspirator has vast power and control. Thus, a core part of conspiracy theorizing is not so much the belief that an individual *lacks* control, but the perception that the

potential conspirator *has* it.

In order to investigate our argument, we use a multi-wave public opinion survey fielded by the University of Maryland's Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) across several major Muslim-majority societies – Morocco, Egypt, Indonesia, and Pakistan – in 2007 and 2008. In so doing, we are able to provide one of the few examinations of the factors which might drive support for conspiracy theories outside of the well-studied cases of the U.S. and UK, and extend this literature into the Islamic world. The PIPA surveys include questions about several popular U.S.-centric conspiracy theories in the Islamic world, as well as a wide variety of psychological predispositions and political perceptions useful in understanding their appeal. In particular, they contain questions about both types of control of interest to us in this paper – that is, individuals' perceptions of personal control over their own lives, as well as their perceptions of U.S. control over world events and global affairs.

We find that, while ideology matters, so too do perceptions of the conspirator's control. In particular, across three different types of popular anti-American conspiracy theories, we find that the best predictors are anti-American and Islamist attitudes, but that perceived U.S. control over world affairs significantly boosts their appeal as well. Additionally, the effect of perceived U.S. control is stronger the “grander” the alleged conspiracy, as we shift from perpetrating 9/11 to stealing Middle Eastern oil or working to weaken and divide the Islamic world more broadly. In contrast, perceptions of a lack of personal control over one's life is not a significant factor in support for any of the three theories.

These results have important implications for both theory and policy. Theoretically, they suggest that belief in conspiracy theories thrives when perceived motive (a potential conspirator is *evil*) and perceived means (a potential conspirator is *powerful*) align. Policy-wise, they hint at

the perils of states acting in ways that make societies (either foreign or domestic) think they are omnipotent and omniscient. While this may help deter rivals from challenging them, it can also provide fertile ground for conspiracy theories among the populations that observe these signals. In the arena of conspiracy theories and attempts to counter conspiracy theories, then, the results suggest counterintuitively that strength may in fact be a weakness.

Existing Explanations of Conspiracy Theories:

First, we must identify what a ‘conspiracy theory’ is. Following Sunstein and Vermeule, we define a conspiracy theory as “an effort to explain some event or practice by reference to the machinations of powerful people, who attempt to conceal their role (at least until their aims are accomplished) (2009: 205).” Of course, real conspiracies do sometimes occur. But, at the same time, many if not most alleged conspiracies do not. Nonetheless, the claims in our paper do not rest on the truth or falsity of any given conspiracy theory, as we simply suggest that conspiracy theories represent a special and consequential category of public beliefs and seek to understand the factors that drive individuals to accept and reject them.

While early scholarship on conspiracy theories was explicitly normative, treating them as the domain of political paranoia and other psychopathologies (Hofstadter 1964), there has been a recent surge of empirical research on their appeal with the recognition that they often enjoy wide mainstream support. For example, one recent study revealed that about half of American citizens support at least one major conspiracy theory, and that this is as true of the right as it is of the left (Oliver and Wood 2014). In addition, scholars have found that people who believe in one theory tend to believe in others as well, suggesting that there is a general individual tendency to engage in conspiracy theories, or “conspiracist ideation” (Swami et al 2011). Facts and trends like these

have cried out for explanation, sparking a flurry of studies in social psychology, political science, sociology, and communications to better understand the phenomenon.

Two key explanations have emerged out of this new empirical literature. One perspective emphasizes the general personality profiles and psychological predispositions that incline people toward conspiracy theories. For example, Swami et al (2010) examines the psychological factors that best predict support for key conspiracy theories and finds that factors like political cynicism, defiance of authority, and “Big 5” personality dimensions like agreeableness are most important. Meanwhile, Oliver and Wood (2014) in a thorough study of popular belief in conspiracy theories in the U.S. find that two types of orientations best explain them: “Manicheanism” or attraction to simplistic and dualistic good and evil narratives, and “magical thinking” or belief in supernatural and paranormal phenomena. Moreover, another key psychological explanation argues that it is a sense of powerlessness or lack of control that encourages people to embrace conspiracy theories and other similar phenomena (Whitson and Galinsky 2008). While these and other studies differ on the relative weight of alternative personality traits or psychological tendencies, they coalesce around the idea that it is those general traits and tendencies that most shape one’s willingness to indulge in conspiratorial thinking or conspiracist ideation.

In contrast, other scholars have critiqued this literature for being insufficiently political, and for not paying attention to the role of political ideology and ideologically-driven motivated reasoning in fostering endorsement of conspiracy theories (Miller, Saunders, and Farhart 2016). In fact, a number of studies show that ideological attachment is a strong predictor of support for allegations of conspiratorial behavior by one’s political opponent (e.g., Nyhan 2009, Nyhan and Reifler 2010, Uscinski and Parent 2014, Uscinski, Kloafstad, and Atkinson 2016). Essentially, this line of thinking suggests that conspiracy theories are driven by a “wanting to believe” that

one's opponent is illegitimate, hostile, and even evil. For example, strong Republicans are much more likely to believe that Barack Obama was born outside the U.S. (the "birther" conspiracy), while strong Democrats are far more likely to believe that 9/11 was an "inside job" perpetrated by the Bush-Cheney administration (the "truther" conspiracy) (Uscinski, Klofstad, and Atkinson 2016). These beliefs serve to reinforce their ideological worldview, justify continued animosity toward their opponent, and rationalize their political fortunes. Such tendencies can be enhanced by factors like political knowledge, which increases the ability of people to reason toward their desired conclusions (Miller, Saunders, and Farhart 2016).

The Role of Perceived Conspirator Control:

We argue that while both of these perspectives are valid, they are missing a key variable: perceptions of political power and control by the conspirator. Our premise is simple: in order for conspiracy theories to make sense, the suspected conspirators must be seen as capable of putting their malign plans into action. This is no small feat given the nature of most conspiracy theories. Consider the following example sketched out in Miller, Saunders, and Farhart (2016: 828):

In order to believe, for example, that President Obama was not born in the United States, one must believe in a vast conspiracy of people working to hide the President's true birth records, and that those people are willing to keep those lies and behaviors to themselves over a long period of time.

While the authors use this to illustrate the effect of mistrust on conspiracism, it also offers a nice illustration of the necessity of the conspirator's perceived control. To support the Birther theory, one must not only have disliked and distrusted the Obama administration, but also thought that it was politically powerful and capable enough to execute a vast conspiracy and cover-up effort for

months or years. More starkly, for someone to believe in *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, the standard anti-Semitic conspiracy theory about Jewish global domination, he or she must not only have a deeply negative view of Jews, but also believe that Jews hold immense power and control over the course of global affairs.

This issue is important because perceptions of an actor's political power and control can vary widely across individuals or societies. This is clear in international relations literature such as "image theory," which holds that a state's perceived intentions and its perceived capabilities can both vary and create durable images among foreign publics (Herrmann 2013), as well as in literature on threat perceptions more broadly, in which the two crucial dimensions that determine perceptions of threat are an actor's warmth (i.e., intentions) and its competence (i.e., capabilities) (Sides and Gross 2013). In practice, one need only think of the extent to which American citizens have divergent perceptions of the power of their own federal government, or foreign populations have divergent perceptions of the capabilities of the U.S., to grasp the level to which perceptions of power are variable and malleable. While this is a critical point in international relations, it has not been incorporated into research on the sources of conspiracy theories, which accounts for the role of the conspirator's perceived intentions (i.e. ideology) but not its perceived capabilities (i.e. control) despite their key role in conspiratorial narratives and beliefs.

In regions like the Middle East, for example, there are sometimes vast – almost unlimited – ideas of American (and, in different countries, Israeli, Iranian, and Saudi) control. In a study of the role of misperception in the two Iraq Wars, for example, Duelfer and Dyson (2011) note that "Saddam saw U.S. intelligence as *close to omniscient*, [which made him] believe that the United States knew he possessed no weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and so was engaged in some kind of elaborate bluff or ruse" (73-74). While the CIA was in fact far from all knowing, this in-

flated perception of American power had direct consequences for Saddam's willingness to take U.S. actions at face value or suspect conspiratorial behavior. Similarly, in the words of Libya's Muammar Gaddafi, "Never mind about saying who will rule and who will be foreign minister and who will be minister of the economy – this is a foregone conclusion. No person can form a government unless he consults the American embassy" (Pipes 1996: 109). Gaddafi's expansive perceptions of U.S. control make it easy for him to attribute any unwelcome development to an American-led conspiracy.

Combining the discussion of the key existing explanations for belief in conspiracy theories with the addition of the role of perceived conspirator control, we have three main hypotheses that can be tested. The first stresses general psychological orientations toward conspiratorial thinking. While the literature highlighted several of these, we focus on the role of perceived lack of control over one's life as arguably the most prominent (we add several others later as robustness checks). The second focuses on attachment to political ideologies that view the conspirator negatively and negative attitudes toward the conspirator in general. And the third, as outlined above, emphasizes the role of perceptions of the conspirator's political control as a key part of conspiratorial beliefs. To sum up, then, we have the following as main hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1 (Internal control): Support for conspiracy theories is associated with perceptions that one lacks control over own's one life.

Hypothesis 2 (Political ideology): Support for conspiracy theories is associated with attachment to political ideologies opposed to the conspirator.

Hypothesis 3 (External control): Support for conspiracy theories is associated with perceptions that the conspirator has political control.

Additionally, we might imagine that the importance of perceptions of conspirator control varies by the type (or scope) of the conspiracy in question. In particular, conspiracy theories that allege responsibility for a specific calamity (JFK's assassination, the moon landing, 9/11) would require less political control than those that allege a "grand conspiracy" in which the conspirator assiduously aspires to broader goals such as seeking to "destroy religion, subvert society, change the political order, and undermine truth itself" (Pipes 1996: 9). In such grand conspiracy theories like the *New World Order* and the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, we would expect perceptions of the conspirator's control to play an even larger role. Thus:

Hypothesis 4 (External control X conspiracy scope): The effect of perceived conspirator control is larger the greater the alleged conspiracy.

Conspiracy Theories in the Islamic World:

We study these issues in the context of the contemporary Middle East and Islamic world. While the emerging empirical literature on the drivers of conspiracy theories has focused mainly on the well-trodden cases of the United States and other select Western countries such as the UK, conspiracy theories thrive in every part of the world, such as Latin America, former Soviet states, and perhaps especially the Middle East and wider Islamic world, where they have been described as "pervasive" (Brown 1984: 234), "widespread" (Fuller 1991: 21), "innumerable" (Brown 1980: 67), and "almost universal" (Field 1994: 167). Yet while there have been in-depth qualitative and

anecdotal treatments of conspiracy theories in the Middle East (see, e.g., Pipes 1996, Gray 2010), as well as polling results showing high aggregate levels of support for popular examples (such as those involving 9/11 or ISIS), there have been almost no quantitative studies about the *sources* of popular support for conspiracy theories in the region. We view this as an additional way in which our study contributes to the fast-growing empirical literature on conspiracism.

While conspiracy theories in the Middle East and the wider Muslim world – as elsewhere – take many different forms, a review of the qualitative literature suggests that the most common antagonists populating them are two: the U.S. and Israel. Of course, this should not be a surprise, given the Islamic world’s historical experience of Western colonialism, conflicts with Israel, and American interventionism, the (resulting) spread of anti-Zionist and anti-American attitudes, and the secularist authoritarian regimes as well as Islamist movements both that continue to use these issues for their political benefits (e.g., Blaydes and Linzer 2012). In fact, the qualitative literature offers a thorough treatment of conspiracy theories and conspiratorial thinking among key figures such as Gamal Abdel Nasser, Muammar Gaddafi, Saddam Hussein, Ayatollah Khomeini, Osama Bin Laden, and their regimes and organizations, which often center around plots by the “Zionists and Crusaders” (e.g., Pipes 1996). These theories often revolve around the role of the two states’ powerful intelligence agencies – the CIA and the Mossad – and cover a wide range of topics and themes, chief among them efforts to establish a “Greater Israel,” reinstitute Western colonialism, steal Middle Eastern oil wealth, and weaken and divide the Islamic world, as well as achieve any number of lesser or intermediate goals. Meanwhile, while other regional powers such as Iran and Saudi Arabia also feature in many of these conspiracy theories, as of course do the local regimes and opposition forces themselves, they are often – though not always – seen as colluding with or the acting as the “puppets” of their broader American-Israeli “masters.”

Empirical Strategy:

In order to examine these hypotheses, we use public opinion data from the Islamic world gathered by the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) at the University of Maryland. Specifically, PIPA fielded a series of nationally representative surveys across four major Islamic countries – Egypt, Pakistan, Morocco, and Indonesia – in 2007 and 2008. These surveys provide some key advantages for our purposes. First, they cover a diverse range of Islamic countries and were fielded across multiple years, helping us conduct a broader investigation of these dynamics than we would be able to do by just exploring one specific country or year. Second, they contain questions on a number of widespread conspiracy theories in the Islamic world that vary in scope. Third, they offer substantial batteries of questions about respondents' psychological orientations and predispositions and their political attitudes and perceptions. Of particular note for our study, the surveys include questions on both perceived “internal control” and “external control,” as well as views of the U.S. and other potential conspirators.³

We use three questions from the surveys about three different conspiracy theories as our primary dependent variables in this study. The first of these questions is “*Who do you think was behind the 9/11 attacks?*” The question was open-ended but coded into the following responses: *Al Qaeda/Bin Laden/Islamic extremists, the U.S. government, Israel, Iran, any other state, any other organization, or other Arabs/Saudis/Egyptians*. Of those who responded to this question, 41.4% said Al Qaeda, 51.4% said the U.S. or Israel, and 7.13% gave one of the other responses.

In our main models, we coded Al Qaeda/Bin Laden/Islamic extremists (the official narrative) as

³ Radnitz and Underwood (2011) argued that analyzing well-known conspiracy theories such as those we investigate here is problematic as the relevant data might undercount support for these theories if respondents are reluctant to be seen as supporting them. Yet this concern is less of an issue in the Middle East and Muslim world where 9/11 conspiracy theories (Gentzkow and Shapiro 2004) and those involving U.S. support for militants (Konrad-Adenauer Foundation 2015) are widely popular. In the context, where shifting attention from (authoritarian) domestic causes of violence and instability towards the supposedly malign intentions of external actors constitutes the ‘safe’ option of explaining political events (Berger and Behr 2009), social desirability bias might be working *toward* expressing support for conspiracy theories in the Arab world.

a 0 and the U.S. or Israel (the primary regional conspiracy theory) as a 1.⁴ This captures the fact that the “Zionists” and “Crusaders” are often seen as inseparable agents working hand-in-glove to conspire against the Islamic world (e.g., Pipes 1996, chs. 6-8).

The second question we utilize as a DV is whether respondents agree with the statement: “*America pretends to be helpful to Muslim countries, but in fact everything it does is really part of a scheme to take advantage of people in the Middle East and steal their oil.*” The respondents could choose from the following options: *Agree strongly, Agree somewhat, Disagree somewhat, or Disagree strongly.* This question captures a common theme in conspiracy theories in this part of the world involving Western powers plundering the region’s natural resources. For example, one of the principal conspiratorial narratives for the Iraq War in the Middle East is that it was a scheme or ruse for the U.S. to steal the country’s vast oil wealth.

The third question we used was as follows: “*Thinking now about U.S. actions around the world, please tell me if you think the following are or are not U.S. goals: To weaken and divide the Islamic world.*” Respondents could choose from the following: *Definitely a goal of the U.S., Probably a goal of the U.S., Probably not a goal of the U.S., or Definitely not a goal of the U.S.* This question captures another common trope in regional conspiracies theories: that they aim to keep the Muslim world weak and divided – splitting it into small states and pitting them against each other in costly conflicts like the Iran-Iraq War – so as to ensure constant internal strife and an inability to challenge Western power.

Together, these three questions present a nice opportunity to explore the sources of belief in popular conspiracy theories inside the Islamic world. The use of three questions gives us more leverage over the phenomenon than we would gain by using one, and helps us avoid overreliance

⁴ We excluded the other four options, which are quite rare, because it is not clear whether they represent something closer to the official story or the main alternative – that depends on which other states or organizations respondents had in mind. However, the results remain substantively similar either way.

on any one particular conspiracy theory that might drive the results. Moreover, the theories differ in subtle but important ways: the 9/11 conspiracy question is the most narrow and focused in that it is a single event which may have had relatively modest goals (invading one country), while the other two questions suggest more ongoing and sweeping plans to economically exploit (steal oil) or politically dominate (divide Islam) the region more broadly.

In order to explain the sources of popular support for these conspiracy theories, we use a number of different questions from the surveys. To capture the hypothesis (H1) about the role of a perceived lack of personal control, we use the following question: “*Some people feel they have completely free choice and control over their lives, while other people feel that what they do has no real effect on what happens to them. Please use this scale where 1 means ‘none at all’ and 10 means ‘a great deal’ to indicate how much freedom of choice and control you feel you have over the way your life turns out.*” The mean of this question in the sample is 7.14, which suggests that most people believe they have substantial if not total control over their life.

Meanwhile, to capture our hypothesis about the role of political ideology and animosities toward the conspirator (H2), we use two different sets of questions from the PIPA surveys. First, in order to measure respondents’ anti-American or pro-American orientations, we constructed an index of anti-Americanism based on their views of the American government, American culture, and American people ($\alpha=0.70$). Unsurprisingly, we expect respondents with more anti-American orientations to be more receptive to all three conspiracy theories. Second, any model which aims to measure the impacts of ideology on support for conspiracy theories in the Islamic world has to account for support for Islamism. Indeed, one of the central political cleavages across the Islamic world is between Islamists – who generally favor a greater involvement of Islam in politics – and their secularist opponents, and there is evidence that Islamists tend to have more skeptical views

of the West and the U.S. in particular (Blaydes and Linzer 2012). Thus, we constructed an index of support for Islamism based on respondents' views about the strict application of *Shari'ah* law and unification of the Islamic world into a single Caliphate, both of which are key Islamist goals in the region ($\alpha=0.72$). Like anti-Americanism, we expect support for Islamism to be associated with more support for all three of the conspiracy theories.⁵ For the purposes of our analyses, we scaled both indices from 0 to 1. The means were 0.70 and 0.71, suggesting that respondents held relatively anti-American and Islamist views on average.

Finally, to capture our argument about the impact of perceived conspirator control (H3), we use the following question: "How much of what happens in the world today would you say is controlled by the U.S.?" The responses were very little, some, most, or nearly all. When rescaled from 0 to 1, the mean value in the sample was 0.70 suggesting that respondents had a relatively high perception of American control over world events. This is unsurprising in light of many of the quotes and anecdotes in this study, which illustrate that the perception that the U.S. has vast control over international politics is widespread in the Islamic world. In the words of Talal Naji, deputy secretary general of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine–General Command (PFLP-GC): "Everything that happens in the region emanates from the United States and Israel" (Pipes 1996: 141). We expect that those who think the U.S. has more control will be more likely to endorse all three of the conspiracy theories.

⁵ There is also a second reason why the inclusion of support Islamism appears warranted. Conspiracy theories have long been a staple of Islamist rhetoric. Leading early Islamists such as Hassan al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, and Sayyid Qutb, intellectual forefather of those who disagreed with the movement's commitment to non-violence, both agreed on the existence of a Western conspiracy be it in the form of the 'crusading imperialism' of the British or Americans, or 'international Zionism' who all sought to destroy Islam as their seemingly strongest competitor (Soage 2009: 301, and Soage 2008). More recently, Osama Bin Laden accused the 'Zionist Crusader Alliance' of 'plundering' the region's riches (1998) and Abu Bakr Baghadi promised the defeat of 'the Jews and Crusaders' at the hand of the so-called Islamic State (Site 2014). This pattern is not wholly surprising in light of the fact that fundamentalist groups are more likely to follow the type of Manichean worldview which Oliver and Wood (2014) found to be so closely related to the willingness to adopt conspiracy theories.

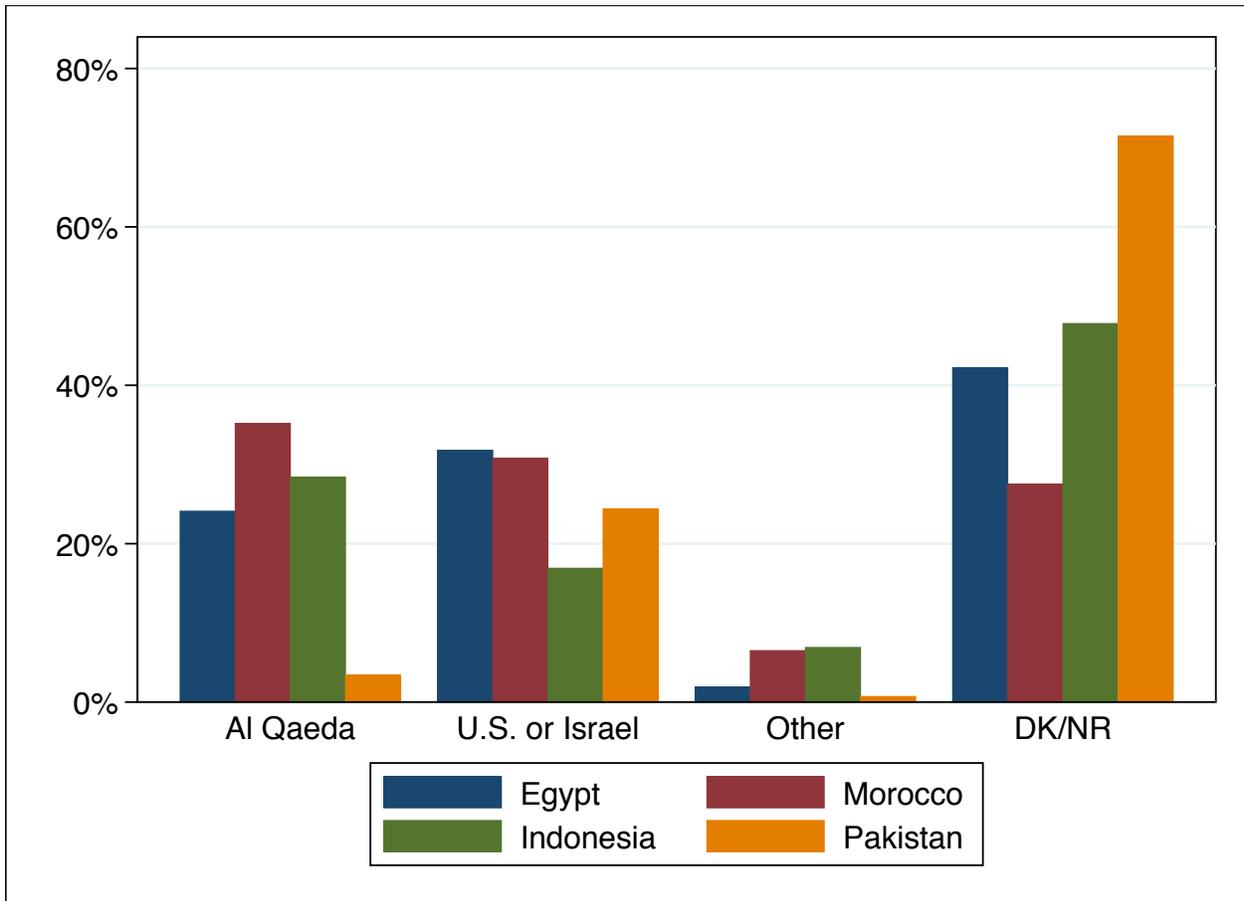
We also include a number of other measures in our models. First, we include a question about the perceived effect of 9/11 on the Islamic world, as those who view its consequences as a greater disaster may be more likely to blame them on external actors. Additionally, we include a number of demographic covariates that may influence support for conspiracy theories, including age, gender, education, internet use, and country and year dummies. Education and internet use are of particular interest, as they have been previously linked to support for conspiracy theories in empirical research (e.g., Gentzkow and Shapiro 2004, Stempel, Hargrove, and Stempel 2007). Additionally, one of the arguments in the qualitative regional literature focuses on the role of the “new media” and rise of internet penetration as helping to spread conspiracy theories throughout the region (Gray 2010).

Descriptive Analysis:

Before attempting to examine individual-level support for these conspiracy theories, we first show their levels of appeal across countries to provide a descriptive sense of the outcomes. Figure 1 shows the respondents’ answers to the question about who perpetrated 9/11. As can be seen, the most common response was don’t know/no response, particularly in Pakistan where it was offered by the majority of the sample. Statistical analysis of these Pakistani non-responders shows that they are disproportionately likely to be uneducated, rural, female, non-internet users, and inattentive to international news, suggesting that this may be a case of lack of knowledge as opposed to social desirability bias. In any case, exclusion of Pakistan from the analysis does not substantively change the results. Of those who responded, meanwhile, we can see that there is a roughly equal distribution between the official story (20.5%) and the main regional conspiracy theory of the U.S. or Israel (25.4%). Looking cross-nationally, we can see that it is in Morocco

and Indonesia where the official story holds the most sway, and Egypt and particularly Pakistan where the conspiratorial alternative is more attractive.

Figure 1: Beliefs about Who Perpetrated the 9/11 Attacks

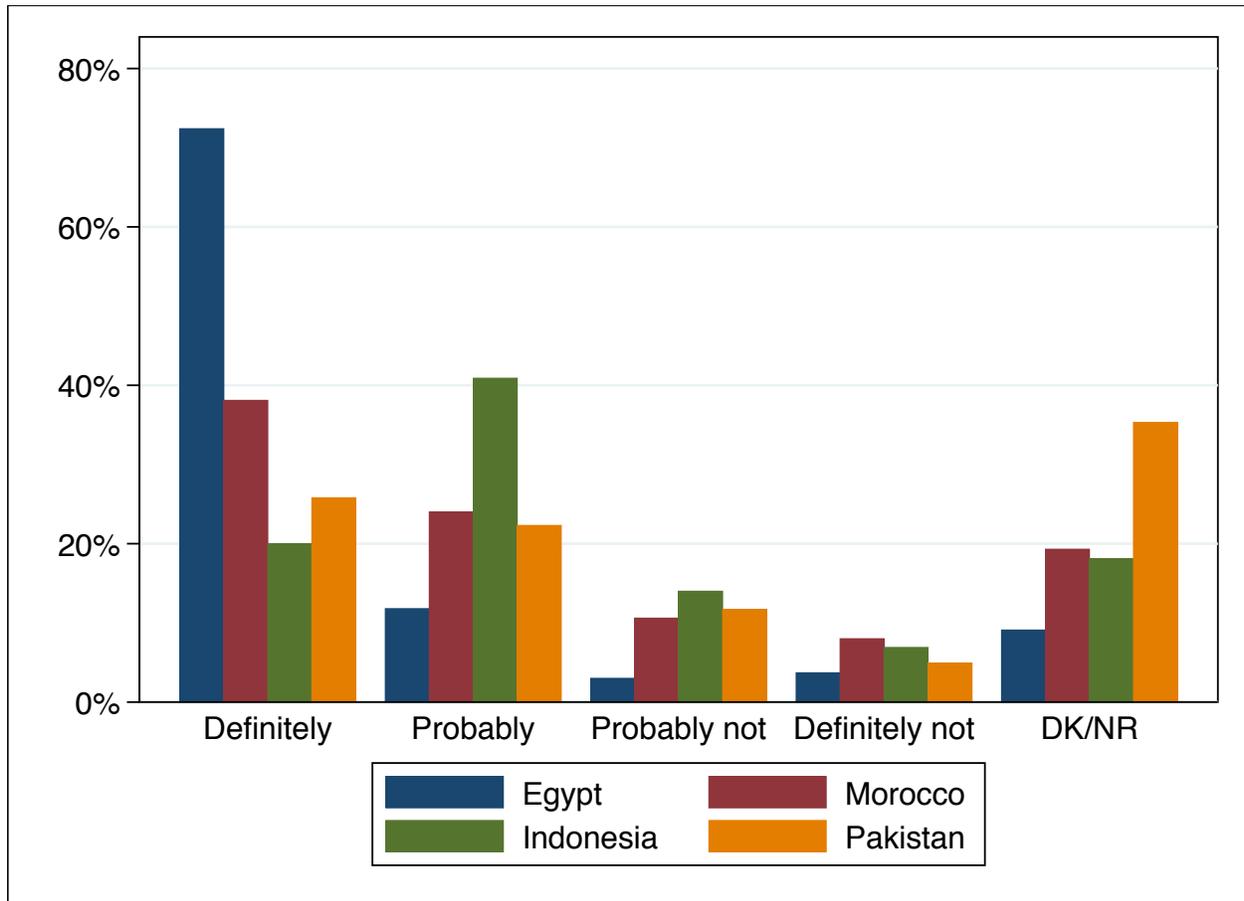


Source: PIPA 2007 and 2008 “Muslim Public Opinion” surveys. The question wording was: “Who do you think was behind the 9/11 attacks?” The question was open-ended, but coded into: Al Qaeda/Bin Laden/Islamic extremists, the U.S. government, Israel, Iran, any other state, any other organization, or other Arabs/Saudis/Egyptians.

Figure 2 shows levels of support for the conspiracy theory that the U.S. is surreptitiously working to steal Middle Eastern oil across the cases. Overall, respondents showed high levels of belief in this conspiratorial narrative, with the most common responses being that they strongly (41.3%) or weakly (23.8%) agree with it. Comparing across different countries, we can see that there is the greatest suspicion of a grand scheme to steal regional oil resources in the Arab world

(Egypt and Morocco), and relatively lower belief in the conspiracy theory in the periphery of the Islamic world (Indonesia and Pakistan).

Figure 2: Belief that U.S. is Scheming to Steal Middle Eastern Oil

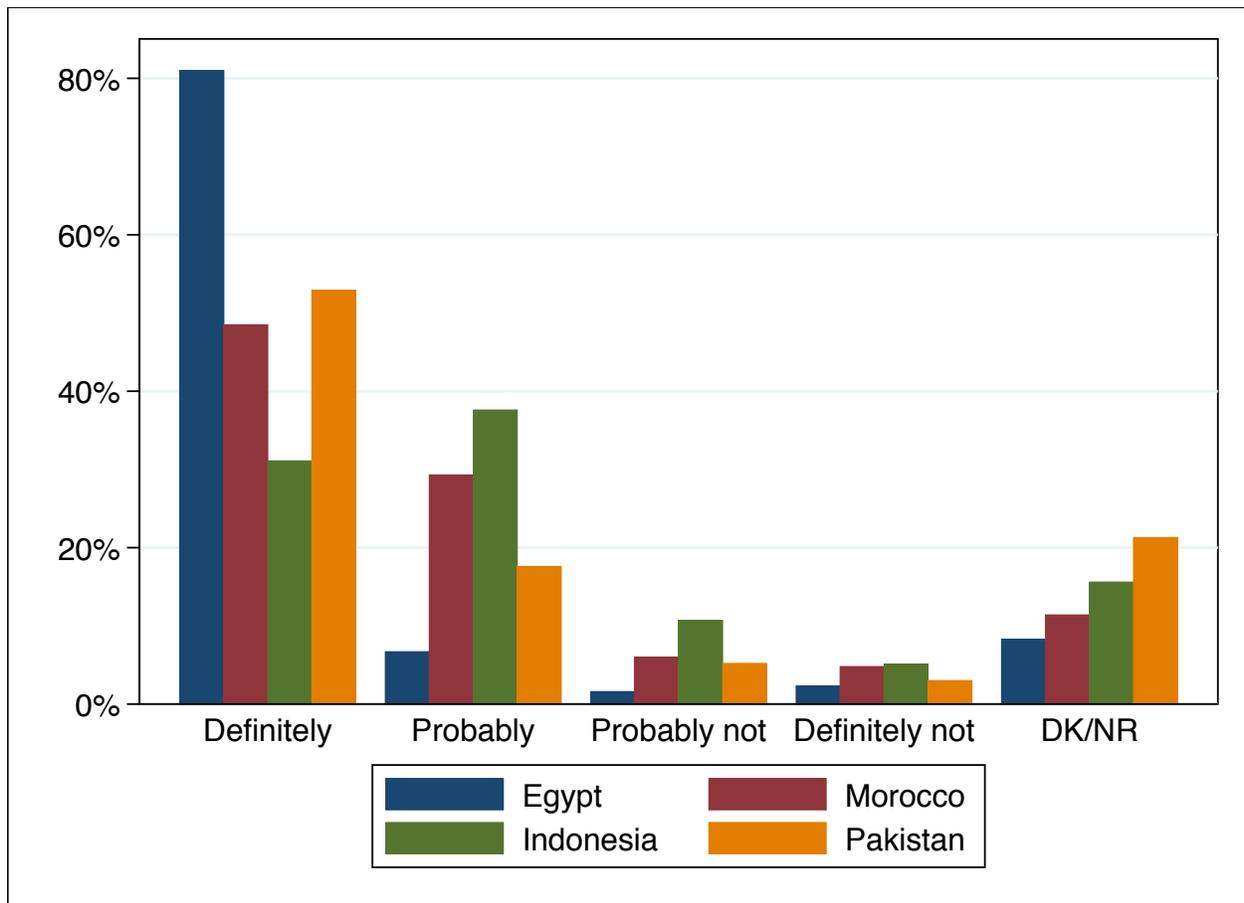


Source: PIPA 2007 “Muslim Public Opinion” surveys. The respondents were asked how much they agreed with the following statement: “America pretends to be helpful to Muslim countries, but in fact everything it does is really part of a scheme to take advantage of people in the Middle East and steal their oil.” The response options included: Agree strongly, Agree somewhat, Disagree somewhat, or Disagree strongly.

Finally, Figure 3 displays the levels of support for the conspiracy theory that the U.S. is working to weaken and divide the Muslim world across the four countries. Overall, support for this theory is very strong, with the majority of the sample saying that keeping the Islamic world weak and divided is definitely (55.3%) or probably (21.0%) an American goal. Popular support for this theory reaches its peak in Egypt, where around 80% of the population is convinced that

the U.S. has this as an objective. In contrast, endorsement of the “divide and conquer” theory is lowest in Indonesia, where it is embraced by roughly 30% of the population.

Figure 3: Belief that U.S. is Working to Weaken and Divide the Islamic World



Source: PIPA 2007 and 2008 “Muslim Public Opinion” surveys. The question wording was: “Thinking now about U.S. actions around the world, please tell me if you think the following are or are not U.S. goals: To weaken and divide the Islamic world.” The response options included: Definitely a goal, Probably a goal, Probably not a goal, or Definitely not a goal.

Overall, the figures reveal that there is substantial support for some of the most popular U.S.-centric conspiracy theories in the Islamic world. In most cases, these ideas garner support from a majority of the population, particularly in countries with higher levels of anti-American sentiment like Egypt and Pakistan. Yet, the fact that there is broad support in Islamic countries

for conspiracy theories involving 9/11 and U.S. foreign policies is not unexpected. We have to remember that recent studies have shown that conspiracist beliefs are quite widespread (Oliver and Wood 2014), and that conspiracy theories involving 9/11 also find considerable support in the U.S. Indeed, between one fifth (Oliver and Wood 2014) and one third (Stempel, Hargrove, and Stempel 2007) of the entire country and one in two New Yorkers (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009) believed that U.S. government officials planned or at least deliberately failed to prevent 9/11 in order to facilitate war in the Middle East. Still, it appears that such conspiracy theories receive even higher levels of support in the Islamic world. More importantly, this support may have different sources and dynamics in the Islamic world than it does in the U.S. Accordingly, we turn to the analysis of this support in the following section.

Main Results:

Table 1 presents the primary results of the analyses. For ease of interpretation, the models shown here were estimated using OLS with all of the variables recoded from 0 to 1 (though these choices do not substantively alter the results). As can be seen, the strongest predictors of support for all three conspiracy theories are respondents' ideological orientations (anti-Americanism and Islamism) and their perceptions of American control. Indeed, support for Islamism and perceived American control are statistically significant across all three models, while the anti-Americanism index is statistically significant in Models 2 and 3 and falls just outside conventional significance levels in the first model. In plain english, this means that anti-American and Islamist respondents – as well as those who view America as having more control – are all significantly more likely to endorse common conspiracy theories about U.S. deception surrounding 9/11, Middle Eastern oil, and the division of the Islamic world. This provides empirical support for H2 (political ideology)

and H3 (external control). In contrast, perceived control over the course of one's own life (H1) is not a significant predictor of support for any of three theories.

Table 1: Sources of Support for Three Popular Conspiracy Theories in Egypt, Morocco, Indonesia, and Pakistan

	9/11 Perpetrated by U.S. or Israel	U.S. Scheme to Steal Middle East Oil	U.S. Goal to Weaken and Divide Islam
Personal Control	-0.05 (0.04)	0.02 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.01)
American Control	0.11** (0.03)	0.09*** (0.02)	0.11*** (0.01)
9/11 Negative Effect	0.12*** (0.03)	-0.00 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.01)
Anti-Americanism	0.07 (0.04)	0.17*** (0.02)	0.16*** (0.01)
Support for Islamism	0.07* (0.03)	0.13*** (0.02)	0.16*** (0.01)
Age	0.01 (0.03)	0.00 (0.02)	-0.00 (0.01)
Gender	0.02 (0.02)	0.02* (0.01)	0.02** (0.01)
Education	0.06* (0.02)	0.04** (0.02)	0.02* (0.01)
Internet Use	-0.03 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)
Pakistan	0.36*** (0.03)	-0.19*** (0.02)	-0.09*** (0.01)
Indonesia	-0.10*** (0.03)	-0.18*** (0.02)	-0.13*** (0.01)
Morocco	-0.05 (0.03)	-0.13*** (0.02)	-0.08*** (0.01)
2008	-0.07** (0.02)		0.02 (0.01)
Constant	0.30*** (0.06)	0.57*** (0.04)	0.59*** (0.02)
Observations	2847	2695	4585
R^2	0.124	0.181	0.205

Results from OLS regressions. Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Moreover, we can also look at the question of whether perceptions of political control has differential effects across the different conspiracy theories (H4). Overall, there is some indication that this is the case, as the “external control” measure is more significant in the “oil scheme” and “divide Islam” conspiracy theories, as opposed to the narrower 9/11 case which may be linked to global or regional domination or to more modest ambitions. Still, the American control variable is statistically significant across all three models, with similar effect sizes. Thus, we can at most offer limited or qualified support for H4.

A few other results are worth noting as well. Believing that 9/11 had a negative effect on the Islamic world significantly elevates support for the theory that it was perpetrated by the U.S. or by Israel, but not for either of the other two conspiracy theories. This can be seen as falling in line with the “ideologically-motivated losers” argument of Miller, Saunders, and Farhart (2016), in that the more individuals see their community as having “lost” or suffered from a tragic event, the greater their psychological need to blame the defeat on their opponents. This also serves as a nice intuitive litmus test for our models in that we would expect this question to be more closely linked to the 9/11 theory than the other two, and this expectation is borne out. Demographically, men are more likely to back the “oil scheme” and “divide and conquer” theories, while the more educated are more likely to endorse all three theories. While higher education is linked to lower conspiracism in the U.S. (Uscinski and Parent 2014), our results mirror findings suggesting that it is connected to higher conspiracism in other parts of the world (Gentzgow and Shapiro 2004). This is likely because education is proxying for political awareness or knowledge (Zaller 1994), which enables people to more successfully engage in motivated reasoning that can buttress their conspiratorial beliefs. Finally, we find that internet use has little impact on popular belief in any

of the theories, calling into question arguments that link conspiracism to the rise of “new media” in the developing world (e.g., Gray 2010).

Robustness Checks:

In order to boost confidence in the results, we conduct two key sets of robustness checks. First we replicate these analyses using two alternative models – (ordered) logistic regression and analysis of variance – in order to ensure that our core findings are not sensitive to model choice. The results are presented in the Appendix (Tables A1-A2). Overall, our results are substantively similar across OLS, logit/ordered logit, and ANOVA. Some secondary results do differ slightly with ANOVA, in that individual control significantly predicts belief in one of the three theories. However, the core findings of political ideology and American control remain significant across all three outcomes regardless of model choice.

Second, we add a number of additional covariates in order to account for other variables that may impact the results. To begin with, we add additional potentially relevant psychological predispositions (desire for certainty, sense of optimism, and sense of danger) given that existing studies have found a variety of psychological variables to shape conspiracist beliefs (Table A3). Then, we add additional political variables related to the West and Islam to ensure that we have fully captured the ideological cleavages that may affect our results (support for Western values, views of Osama Bin Laden, and approval of Muslim groups that attack Americans) (Table A4). And finally, we add several other demographic factors that may shape respondents’ willingness to embrace conspiratorial narratives (urbanity, religiosity, and international news consumption) (Table A5). Across all three cases, the results hold up quite well to these strict tests. Indeed, the core results are significant in eight of the nine ensuing models, falling just outside conventional

significance ($p=0.06$) in one of them. Overall, these robustness checks help increase confidence that the results are not an artifact of model selection and specification.

Conclusion:

The Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Tony Hurwitz, during his travels as a Middle East correspondent, recounts a conversation of his in the 1980s with a young Iranian named Ibrahim in downtown Tehran. “You see how America controls everything,” the young man reportedly told him, rattling off a list of American conspiracies in the region. Hurwitz then continues on, adding that the man’s assertions seemed very plausible to him given his current surroundings: “*Standing before the massive edifice of the U.S. embassy [in Tehran], it wasn’t hard to see how such notions had taken root*” (1991: 249) [emphasis added].

This anecdote illustrates the central argument of our paper: conspiracy theories arise not only due to one’s general psychological orientations or ideological and partisan beliefs, but also the belief that the conspirator has political power or control. Drawing on International Relations scholarship on image theory and the sources of threat perception, we argued that both an actor’s perceived capabilities *and* its perceived intentions play key roles in fueling conspiratorial belief. We examined our argument using public opinion surveys from four major Islamic countries that included questions about several popular U.S.-centric conspiracy theories as well as a rich set of political, psychological, and demographic factors thought to influence their popularity. Overall, the results of our analyses show that support for these theories is largely driven by respondents’ political orientations (anti-American and Islamism) and their perceptions of U.S. control, rather than own perceived control or other basic psychological predispositions. In this sense, we argue

that conspiracy theories gain popularity when the perceived motives (*evil*) and perceived means (*powerful*) of a potential conspirator like the U.S. converge.

These results have some key takeaways for theory and policy. Theoretically, the study of conspiracy theories has gained substantial attention in recent years, but scholars tend to focus on general psychological traits (Oliver and Wood 2014) or ideological motivated reasoning (Miller, Saunders, and Farhart 2016) in accounting for them. A few studies supplement these approaches with a role for “situational triggers” (Radnitz and Underwood 2011), but these tend to be fairly narrow and event-specific factors such as the level of uncertainty around a given assassination. Our results suggest that broader and more deeply *political* features of the contextual environment are important ingredients of conspiracism as well, particularly the perceived political power and control of the potential conspirator. Perceived capabilities, power relations, and political control should thus be factored into future research on conspiracism.

Policy-wise, the findings also suggest some intriguing implications for those who wish to reduce the prevalence of conspiracy theories. In particular, in the arena of international relations, it suggests that while communicating and demonstrating the scope of one’s power may serve the goal of deterring foreign governments, it may also provide fertile ground for conspiracy theories among their populations. Public shows of force such as massive military drills, “shock and awe” style military interventions, and chest-thumping political rhetoric on the international stage may all promote the impression that an actor is “ten feet tall,” and that any unwelcome or unexpected development must be of its own design. In this sense, the old maxim to “speak softly and carry a big stick” might have an additional and unexpected political benefit in this area.

That said, the study does have a couple of critical limitations that underscore the need for future research in this area. First, it raises the question of where perceptions of an actor’s amount

of political power or control come from in the first place. In the case of perceived U.S. control in the Middle East and wider Islamic world, for instance, much of this perception is based in reality – the U.S., UK, and Israel have often sought to exercise their full political and military control in the Middle East, including through conspiratorial means (from the Sykes-Picot Agreement to the Lavon Affair to Operation Ajax). However, at the same time, the notion that “America controls everything” is often greatly exaggerated, particularly in the contemporary climate in which it is often reacting to regional events like the Arab Spring as opposed to dictating them (Morey et al 2012, Byman 2013). Ultimately, we do not take a firm stance on this issue, and leave it to future studies to explore the various sources of perceived political control, including objective material conditions, information streams and political propaganda, political ideologies which may in turn shape empirical beliefs, and personal lived experiences.

Second, while the theoretical argument is general in nature, the empirical evidence comes from several major cases in the Islamic world. We viewed our extension of the literature into this part of the world as an added secondary contribution, but future work should attempt to examine the extent to which its insights might travel to the West or other regions. Do varying perceptions of the U.S. federal government’s power, even among American gun owners, shape their belief in conspiracy theories about authorities planning to take away their firearms? Likewise, do variable perceptions of Russia’s political control and cyber capabilities among Hillary supporters explain their willingness to accept the theory that it “hacked” voting machines? While such expectations are plausible, future research should endeavor to study the extent to which our “external control” argument works in practice in more developed societies.

Lastly, one other potential concern is that the relationship between conspiratorial beliefs and perceived conspirator control goes both ways. That is, it may be not only that perceiving an

actor as more powerful makes you more likely to think it was involved in conspiracies, but also that thinking that an actor perpetrated a conspiracy makes you view it as more powerful. We do not claim to fully resolve this issue, but do believe that perceptions of an actor's political power and control are more general and antecedent than belief about its role in a particular conspiracy. Indeed, the fact that perceived control can be used for multiple purposes and likely has multiple sources gives us some confidence about the posited relationship. However, this is a final area in which additional research would be quite beneficial, as one could experimentally manipulate an actor's control and examine the extent to which it increased beliefs in its conspiratorial behavior. An especially interesting design might involve manipulating an actor's (e.g., Russia's) perceived intentions and its perceived capabilities and examining the extent to which these independently – or interactively – affected beliefs about its conspiratorial behavior. We leave it to future studies to build on our results and pursue these promising avenues.

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Appendix:

Table A1: Replication of Base Results with Logistic and Ordered Logistic Regressions

	9/11 Perpetrated by U.S. or Israel	U.S. Scheme to Steal Middle East Oil	U.S. Goal to Weaken and Divide Islam
Personal Control	-0.24 (0.17)	0.10 (0.17)	-0.04 (0.15)
American Control	0.52** (0.16)	0.70** (0.15)	0.99*** (0.12)
9/11 Negative Effect	0.54*** (0.12)	0.01 (0.12)	-0.03 (0.11)
Anti-Americanism	0.38* (0.19)	1.34*** (0.18)	1.73*** (0.15)
Support for Islamism	0.31* (0.15)	1.03*** (0.15)	1.54*** (0.13)
Age	0.07 (0.14)	-0.07 (0.15)	0.04 (0.13)
Gender	0.10 (0.08)	0.15 (0.08)	0.14 (0.07)
Education	0.30** (0.12)	0.30* (0.12)	0.16 (0.10)
Internet Use	-0.12 (0.09)	0.10 (0.11)	-0.01 (0.09)
Pakistan	2.28*** (0.20)	-1.71*** (0.14)	-1.50*** (0.12)
Indonesia	-0.36** (0.11)	-1.61*** (0.11)	-1.73*** (0.10)
Morocco	-0.18 (0.13)	-1.16*** (0.13)	-1.26*** (0.12)
2008	-0.30** (0.10)		0.23** (0.08)
Constant	-1.04*** (0.28)		
1 st Cutpoint		-1.50*** (0.26)	-1.70*** (0.23)
2 nd Cutpoint		-0.33 (0.26)	-0.52* (0.23)
3 rd Cutpoint		1.19** (0.26)	1.06*** (0.29)
<i>N</i>	2847	2695	4585
Pseudo- <i>R</i> ²	0.10	0.12	0.16

Results from logistic (M1) and ordered logistic (M2-3) regressions. Standard errors in parentheses
 * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table A2: Replication of Base Results with Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) Regressions

	9/11 Perpetrated by U.S. or Israel		U.S. Plot to Steal Middle East Oil		U.S. Goal to Divide and Weaken Islam	
	F	η	F	η	F	η
Personal Control	1.0	0.00	2.6**	0.01	1.9	0.00
American Control	3.2*	0.00	6.8***	0.01	22.0***	0.01
9/11 Negative Effect	5.9***	0.01	2.9*	0.00	7.5***	0.01
Anti-Americanism	3.1**	0.01	8.9***	0.03	17.6***	0.03
Support for Islamism	3.9***	0.01	8.5***	0.02	30.3***	0.04
Age	2.3*	0.00	0.3	0.00	0.2	0.00
Gender	0.6	0.00	2.7	0.00	5.3*	0.00
Education	1.9	0.00	2.9	0.00	2.8	0.00
Internet Use	5.0*	0.00	0.5	0.00	0.0	0.00
Pakistan	129.4***	0.00	99.0***	0.04	63.5	0.01
Indonesia	27.8***	0.01	134.6***	0.05	162.3	0.03
Morocco	9.5**	0.00	62.4***	0.02	39.2	0.01
2008	8.1**	0.00			3.5	0.03
Observations	2847		2695		4585	
Adjusted R^2	0.13		0.20		0.22	

Results from ANOVA regressions.

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table A3: Replication of Base Results with Additional Psychological Covariates

	9/11 Perpetrated by U.S. or Israel	U.S. Scheme to Steal Middle East Oil	U.S. Goal to Weaken and Divide Islam
Personal Control	-0.07 (0.04)	0.02 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)
American Control	0.11** (0.04)	0.10*** (0.02)	0.12*** (0.01)
9/11 Negative Effect	0.11*** (0.03)	-0.01 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.01)
Anti-Americanism	0.07 (0.04)	0.17*** (0.03)	0.16*** (0.02)
Support for Islamism	0.09** (0.03)	0.13*** (0.02)	0.15*** (0.01)
Age	-0.00 (0.03)	-0.00 (0.02)	0.00 (0.01)
Gender	0.01 (0.02)	0.03* (0.01)	0.02** (0.01)
Education	0.06* (0.03)	0.04* (0.02)	0.02 (0.01)
Internet Use	-0.03 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)	0.00 (0.01)
Pakistan	0.35*** (0.03)	-0.18*** (0.02)	-0.08*** (0.01)
Indonesia	-0.10*** (0.03)	-0.17*** (0.02)	-0.13*** (0.01)
Morocco	-0.09* (0.04)	-0.13*** (0.02)	-0.07*** (0.02)
2008	-0.07** (0.02)		0.02 (0.01)
Certainty	-0.02 (0.05)	0.03 (0.03)	-0.00 (0.02)
Optimism	-0.05 (0.04)	0.00 (0.02)	0.02 (0.01)
Danger	0.04 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.01)
Constant	0.35*** (0.08)	0.53*** (0.05)	0.59*** (0.03)
Observations	2657	2474	4298
R^2	0.123	0.188	0.210

Results from OLS regressions. Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table A4: Replication with Additional Psychological and Political Covariates

	9/11 Perpetrated by U.S. or Israel	U.S. Scheme to Steal Middle East Oil	U.S. Goal to Weaken and Divide Islam
Personal Control	-0.06 (0.04)	0.03 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.02)
American Control	0.10** (0.04)	0.10*** (0.02)	0.10*** (0.01)
9/11 Negative Effect	0.12*** (0.03)	-0.01 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.01)
Anti-Americanism	0.07 (0.05)	0.15*** (0.03)	0.11*** (0.02)
Support for Islamism	0.10** (0.04)	0.08** (0.02)	0.06*** (0.01)
Age	0.01 (0.03)	0.01 (0.02)	0.01 (0.01)
Gender	0.02 (0.02)	0.02 (0.01)	0.02** (0.01)
Education	0.08** (0.03)	0.05** (0.02)	0.02* (0.01)
Internet Use	-0.03 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)	0.01 (0.01)
Pakistan	0.36*** (0.03)	-0.15*** (0.02)	-0.03* (0.01)
Indonesia	-0.10** (0.03)	-0.15*** (0.02)	-0.10*** (0.01)
Morocco	-0.13** (0.04)	-0.10*** (0.03)	-0.02 (0.02)
2008	-0.08** (0.02)		0.02* (0.01)
Psych. Additions	✓	✓	✓
Western Values	0.01 (0.05)	-0.19*** (0.03)	-0.25*** (0.02)
Support for OBL	-0.02 (0.04)	-0.01 (0.02)	-0.02 (0.01)
Anti-Am. Terrorism	-0.02 (0.03)	0.02 (0.02)	0.03* (0.01)
Constant	0.36*** (0.09)	0.61*** (0.06)	0.69*** (0.03)
Observations	2358	2095	3622
R ²	0.119	0.219	0.260

Results from OLS regressions. Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table A5: Replication with Additional Psychological, Political, Demographic Covariates

	9/11 Perpetrated by U.S. or Israel	U.S. Scheme to Steal Middle East Oil	U.S. Goal to Weaken and Divide Islam
Personal Control	-0.13** (0.05)	0.02 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.02)
American Control	0.09* (0.04)	0.05 (0.03)	0.07*** (0.02)
9/11 Negative Effect	0.08* (0.03)	-0.00 (0.02)	-0.00 (0.01)
Anti-Americanism	0.03 (0.05)	0.13*** (0.03)	0.09*** (0.02)
Support for Islamism	-0.02 (0.04)	0.13*** (0.03)	0.07*** (0.02)
Age	0.03 (0.04)	0.01 (0.03)	0.00 (0.01)
Gender	0.04 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)	0.02** (0.01)
Education	0.07* (0.03)	0.02 (0.02)	0.00 (0.01)
Internet Use	-0.02 (0.02)	-0.02 (0.02)	0.00 (0.01)
Pakistan	0.37*** (0.03)	-0.18*** (0.03)	-0.04** (0.01)
Indonesia	-0.17*** (0.04)	0.00 (.)	-0.11*** (0.02)
Morocco	-0.09* (0.05)	-0.12*** (0.03)	-0.04* (0.02)
2008	-0.03 (0.03)	0.00 (.)	0.02 (0.01)
Psych. Additions	✓	✓	✓
Political Additions	✓	✓	✓
Urbanity	0.03 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)	0.02** (0.01)
Prayer Frequency	0.04** (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.02*** (0.01)
News Consumption	0.06 (0.07)	0.01 (0.05)	-0.01 (0.03)
Constant	0.28* (0.12)	0.61*** (0.08)	0.63*** (0.04)
Observations	1910	1473	2907
R ²	0.128	0.189	0.233

Results from OLS regressions. Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$