

# DIANA AND ARAB CONSPIRACY

by Daniel Pipes and Hilal Khashan

WHEN THE MERCEDES LIMOUSINE crashed in Paris during that awful night two months ago, reaction in most of the world dwelt on the sad fate that had befallen Diana, Princess of Wales. But not so in Egypt and the rest of the Arab Middle East.

There, the presence of Diana's Egyptian companion, Emad Mohammed al-Fayed, known as Dodi, gave the event a political and religious cast, which inspired media coverage of a far different nature. If Western journalists mused on the purported drunkenness of the driver and whether the paparazzi had distracted him, their Arabic-speaking counterparts overwhelmingly agreed that, as a Beirut weekly put it, "There is no doubt about the presence of a conspiracy behind the death of Diana." Arabic-language publications promoted elaborate, ever more fanciful theories about the event. What to the world at large was a tragic automobile accident, to the Arabic press was a plot. Even official bodies joined in this apparent consensus: Libya's National Commission for Human Rights declared, "Only children believe that it was an accident."

Speculation in the Arab world focuses on three issues: why the couple had to be killed, who committed the crime, and how it was pulled off. As to the first of these questions—Why were they killed?—nearly all theories concern Dodi's father and religion. The father, Mohammed al-Fayed, is a highly controversial Egyptian-born tycoon who lives in London and owns, among other properties, the Harrods department stores. He has been embroiled in the shady side of British politics and for years has sought British citizenship, which, despite his persistent efforts, he has failed to win.

Arab journalists seized on these facts in their search for an explanation. Clearly, they reasoned, the notion that this foreign upstart should be step-grandfather to the heir of the English throne was too much for the royal family. So, it dispatched the upstart's son. The press saw confirming evidence everywhere, as in, for example, the extravagant funeral for Diana, which a Cairo magazine read as "new evidence about the role played by Buckingham Palace in this diabolic conspiracy."

Other explanations have to do with Dodi's Islamic faith. Diana had to be killed because the British government could not accept the involvement of the future king's mother with a Muslim Arab; or her marrying him; or her converting to Islam; or her giv-

ing birth to a Muslim child. An Egyptian security guard, quoted in the *Los Angeles Times*, put it

simply: "In the West, they hate Muslims."

What makes the Arab press especially intriguing is the manner in which it builds on its own hypotheses, reporting the merest whimsy as solid fact. Some journalists assumed that Diana had already converted to Islam: "Recite the Fatiha [the opening chapter of the Koran] for the soul of Diana," read one Egyptian headline, implying that she was a Muslim at the time of her death. Said another, "Murder was the easiest solution for the British government to deal with a Muslim princess." One account asserted that Diana had agreed to wear the *hijab*, Islamic modesty clothing, on her head. Others stated as fact that Diana was pregnant by Dodi.

Diana's presumed pro-Islamic attitude prompted more than a few Middle East journalists to portray her in a tragically romantic light. "Diana's life was the price of her love for Dodi," wrote one. Or, Diana was the "martyr of Arab love." The death "ended an Arab midsummer's dream," commented an Egyptian daily. Some writers made Dodi's Middle Eastern identity central to his appeal. Zulfuqar Qubaysi, a columnist, wrote that "Diana was impressed with al-Fayed the son and fell in love with him and wanted to marry him because of his romantic Arab nature, because he was Egyptian, Arab, and Muslim." Her decision sealed her life.

Now: Who killed Diana? By nearly all accounts, British intelligence did. Why in Paris? Obviously, to kill her outside Britain and so deflect attention from the British authorities. For good measure, Libyan strongman Moammar Qadaffi charged French intelligence with being complicit in the crime. Other suspects mentioned include British racist organizations, some of Mohammed al-Fayed's many enemies, and the enemies of Dodi's maternal uncle, arms merchant Adnan Khashoggi.

And how was Diana killed? The motorcyclists obviously were not photographers—how can one ride and take pictures at the same time? Instead, a drunk security officer at the Ritz Hotel was deliberately given the car to drive. Or the car was tampered with after having disappeared a year earlier—it locked in at over 190 kilometers per hour and could not be slowed down. Alternatively, somebody fiddled with the automobile's brakes. Finally, professional killers—those on motorcycles with their photographer's props—were hired to assassinate Diana and Dodi in a James Bond-style operation.

The Arab press excoriated the royal family with

gusto. The queen of England, it said, eulogized Diana only after she herself became a suspect in the "assassination." In the poetic words of a Cairo weekly, "They murdered the Princess and attended her funeral." So too the press lit into the British character. "Racism against Islam," screamed one magazine cover. "English racism till death," screamed another.

Nor were all conclusions theoretical. Some writers discerned foreign-policy implications in the accident, arguing that the couple's death confirmed that Europe was searching for a new enemy after the collapse of the Soviet Union and had decided to launch a religious war, in which the car crash was the opening salvo. A Libyan agency called for a commercial boycott of Great Britain and France as payback for their governments' complicity in the double-murder.

Why did Middle Easterners almost automatically assume a plot? Several explanations suggest themselves. First, the accusations against the royal family roughly reflect what a Muslim family might do if the roles were reversed. When Qaddafi accuses the Windsors of staging "an arranged crash," piqued that "an Arab man might marry a British princess," he inadvertently reveals what his own feelings would be if his daughter were to marry a British man. Muslim girls are forbidden to marry out of the faith or to marry a social inferior, and the police logs are brimming with cases where families have murdered their daughters or sisters for breaching these cardinal precepts. (Right now, a prominent case in Great Britain involves a Pakistani family very publicly intent on killing its daughter for her marriage to a Christian. The hunted couple, in hiding, has written a book about their ordeal, *Zena and Jack*.) Thus does the Middle Easterner's suspicion of foul play in Paris project his own outlook.

Second, vehicular accidents take place relatively often in the Middle East. Saddam Hussein, for example, almost killed Yasir Arafat in 1969 after the PLO slighted Iraqi leadership of the Arab cause. Days after this criticism, an Iraqi army truck rammed into Arafat's car, breaking his arm. During Saddam's reign, over a dozen important figures have left the scene in like manner, most notably the dictator's defense minister, who was also his brother-in-law. After this incident, Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak reportedly sent Saddam a letter demanding that the death be the last such "accident."

Third, Arab press reports viewed Diana's affair

with Dodi as "an Egyptian and Arab conquest of Western territory." What they called "the battle for winning the heart of Diana" entailed not so much a love affair on his side as a political offensive against Christian Europe. One report even described the accident as Egyptian revenge for the Dinshaway Incident in 1906 (when the British responded to the death of one of their officers by executing four peasants). An Egyptian cartoon portrayed Dodi's relationship with Diana as Egypt's 72-hour reprisal operation for Britain's 72-year occupation of Egypt. Such an aggressive view of the lovers' relationship practically requires the British government to reply in kind, making the murder of Diana an almost logical step.

Westerners are hardly innocent of similar conspiracy theories. The Internet buzzed with wild speculations. One saw the long arm of munitions manufacturers, incensed at Diana's campaign for a ban on landmines, reaching into the Paris tunnel. Another had Diana not dead at all but faking her own death as a ploy to escape the media. One of Lyndon LaRouche's publications called Diana's death an event of "extraordinary strategic significance" because it "shakes the foundations of the world's most powerful institution, the British Empire." (Yes, LaRouche believes the empire still exists.) The LaRouchies are not

quite sure who arranged the murder, but they know that it has "implications for every being on this planet."

These musings in the West remained confined to the fever swamps of politics. By contrast, it was the mainstream press in the Arab world that indulged in outlandish and bizarre theories. Such conspiracy thinking bodes ill for the Arabs in their dealings with politics. It indicates passivity and defensiveness, as well as a wish to avoid participating in the modern world. In this view of things, nothing happens of its own; some culprit—almost always British, American, or Israeli—stands behind every untoward event. If the Arabs hope to move on to a more responsible and mature form of politics, they would do well to leave the conspiratorial mindset behind.

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