

The plot thickens

The invention and dissemination of conspiracy theories is prevalent throughout the world, and especially in the Middle East, says Dr. Daniel Pipes. But, he tells **Yerah Tal**, the danger is that someone might act upon them

WASHINGTON — One assertion that appeared in the Israeli press last week argued that Mossad case officer Yehuda Gil's actions were exposed intentionally, in a planned attempt to prepare public opinion for the government's resumption of talks with the Syrians. Once the preliminary shock died down, a few days after the affair came to light, some were already looking for elaborate explanations for the episode, as if the whole thing had been "pre-arranged," rather than a simple intelligence failure extending over a 20-year period.

The invention and dissemination of conspiracy theories like this one are a popular pastime throughout the world, says Dr. Daniel Pipes, a senior researcher at the University of Pennsylvania and editor of the Middle East Quarterly. Some conspiracy theories have even altered the course of history. In the Middle East, he adds, they are especially popular: the Arab-Israeli conflict has been largely fueled by them, even though, at least until the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, conspiracy theories were less prevalent in Israeli society.

Pipes recently published two books dealing with conspiracy theories. One, called "Conspiracy," discusses the influence of conspiracy theories on world history. It is subtitled, "How the Paranoid Style Flourishes and Where It Comes From." The second book, entitled "The Hidden Hand," focuses on conspiracy theories in the Middle East. Its subtitle is "Middle East

Fears of Conspiracy." Conspiracy theories, Pipes notes, are usually promulgated by those who feel they are being blamed for something serious. "It is the last measure of defense for people faced with accusations that challenge their legitimacy. An individual who is pushed into a corner will use conspiracy theories to deflect the flames."

Israelis and Jews, he says, may have suffered from conspiracy theories more than any other nation. The Arab world has been very successful at promulgating them, and most of the wars between Israel and Arab countries have been fueled by theories presenting Israel as part of an international Jewish conspiracy. These theories have often been fed by anti-Semitism, and many have been reminiscent of "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion."

Pipes discusses a number of attempts made in Israel to explain events in conspiratorial terms. Then Chief of Staff General Mordechai Gur, he notes, characterized Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's announcement of his willingness to sign a peace treaty with Israel and come to Jerusalem as a mere trick, designed to distract attention from Egyptian plans to at-



November 1995: Rabin's funeral.



November 1963: JFK's funeral.

tack Israel. With regard to Syria, then Minister Shulamit Aloni once claimed that Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was secretly behind the Golan residents' public campaign against withdrawal from the Golan. Rabin hoped, she believed, that the campaign would help in the negotiations with Damascus and cause the Syrians to accept a

minimal withdrawal.

The most famous conspiracy theory to be promulgated in Israel was the claim that Yigal Amir was not really the one to have assassinated Rabin. That, Pipes says, is the most prominent example of how the dissemination of such theories is a desperate attempt to evade responsibility and cover for weak and

unconvincing arguments. The stories about Shabak agent Avishai Ravid's activities contributed to the spread of the theory. It was therefore very important to make public the classified section of the Shamgar commission's report on the assassination.

"Conspiracy theories are a combination of lies and half truths, in-

tegrated into one theory. In many cases, the theories are based on 'grains of truth,' but, as the old saying goes, 'half-truths are worse than lies.' The way to kill a conspiracy theory is to reveal all the information and the true facts. Truth and facts are the greatest enemies of conspiracy theories," says Pipes.

Conspiracy theories are also prevalent in the United States. Most Americans believe to this very day that President John Kennedy was not killed by a lone assassin, that it was part of some plot involving the C.I.A. Most African-Americans believe the government is responsible for drug distribution within black communities. O.J. Simpson was acquitted after he succeeded in convincing the jury that he had been plotted against because of the color of his skin. Two youths are charged with blowing up the federal building in Oklahoma City, killing 168 people, including 19 children, because they believed that the government was conspiring to steal the freedoms of the American people.

According to Pipe's research, the African-Americans and the far-right are the two groups in the U.S. most susceptible to the acceptance and dissemination of conspiracy

theories. Theories like this, he explains, thrive in conditions of economic hardship. They provide for the need people have to find someone to blame for their troubles. Extremist Black Muslim leader Louis Farrakhan, head of the Nation of Islam, is one of the major promulgators of conspiracy theories. Farrakhan, Pipes says, established himself by means of conspiracy theories he disseminated throughout the black community, accusing the white U.S. regime of acting to cause the disappearance of the American black community.

The American government itself is also guilty of promulgating conspiracy theories. Last January, for example, the government distributed a 331-page document accusing the press of "conspiring with the conservative right to overthrow President Clinton and his government." Pipes views this too as a sign of weakness. He sees it as an attempt by the government, which is having difficulty responding to press criticism, to shift attention to other topics. The press itself often helps in the dissemination of conspiracy theories. It loves everything mysterious, unexplained, suspicious, and strange. That's what sells papers.

The movie industry has also contributed significantly to the phenomenon, as movies on conspiracies have proven themselves profitable. As long as it remains in the realm of "entertainment," Pipes says, there is nothing wrong with it. Conspiracy theories become a problem, however, when they cause individuals to act.