

Conspiracy Theories in the Middle East and the United States: A Comparative Approach

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Organizers:

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Conspiracy theories flourish in highly diverse environments and answer to vastly different human needs, desires, and imaginations. Currently they are particularly prominent in the United States and in the Middle East, the two areas the conference intends to focus on. The rise of the United States to the leading imperial power has gone hand in hand with a proliferation of conspiracy theories that locate the conspiring forces within the federal government or big companies. The theories that have thrived in the Middle East, by contrast, imagine foreign conspirators, because the region has been on the receiving end of the international power system in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In both cases, these suspicions are not entirely unfounded. Anti-government conspiracy theories in the United States, scholars have argued, have since World War I often been triggered by officially formulated conspiracy theories or even real conspiratorial actions on behalf of the government. Similarly, the Middle East has seen some classical cases of political conspiracy perpetrated by exterior forces, perhaps the most notorious one being the coup against the Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh in 1953, which was orchestrated and financed by the CIA. The origins of conspiracy theories in the region, though, can be traced back much further, and the questions is yet unanswered in how far it is appropriate to link their emergence to real conspiracies.

Focusing on two regions that are, despite all their differences, inextricably connected in multifarious ways, the conference adopts a comparative approach to the study of conspiracy theories. It seeks to bring to the fore the specific characteristics of each cultural context as well as the ways in which conspiracy theories travel from one region to the other, how one region figures in the theories of the other, and how events in one region resonate with conspiracy theories circulating in the other. As a result, the conference will contribute to our understanding of Middle Eastern as well as U.S.-American variants of conspiracy theories as well to our understanding of the forms and mechanisms of such theories in general.

We are proud to announce as keynote speakers MELANI MCALISTER, The Elliott School of International Affairs, George Washington University, Washington D.C., author of *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East, 1945-2000* (University of California Press, 2001), and MARK FENSTER, Levin College of Law, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL, author of *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture* (revised 2nd ed., University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

In order to enhance the quality of discussions at the conference, those who will be invited to present a paper will be asked to submit a written version of their talks (roughly 5,000 words) by 30 September 2010. The papers will then be collected in a reader and made available to all participants prior to the conference.

The Freiburg Institute for Advanced Studies will cover travel and accommodation costs for all presenters.

While we are particularly interested in papers that explore the comparative and transregional dimension of the topic, we also invite contributions that focus on any aspect of conspiracy theories related to either the Middle East or the United States. Individual papers may focus on historical or contemporary conspiracy theories, and center on political discourse, the media, or any kind of cultural artifacts. Please submit your 300-word proposal as well as a short CV (2-3 pages) via email to conspiracy.theories@friar.uni-freiburg.de by **15 March 2010**.