This New Columnist for the New York Times Believes a 'Massive Zionist Organization Rules America'

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Articles & Testimony

The paper's new Egyptian columnist has repeatedly appeared on Arabic media outlets expressing the kind of circular, paranoid reasoning normally confined to fringe blogs in the United States.

Alaa Al-Aswany is Egypt's preeminent novelist. His 2002 best-seller *The Yacoubian Building* highlighted the political corruption, moral duplicity, and economic inequality of contemporary Egypt, and established him as one of the most influential critics of Hosni Mubarak's regime. His star grew brighter following the 2011 uprising that ousted Mubarak, when Aswany became an oft-quoted voice of the Egyptian opposition -- "The Face of Egypt's Uprising," as the *Wall Street Journal* put it -- and he is generally regarded in the Western press as an authentically "liberal" Egyptian intellectual. It is likely thanks to this reputation that the *New York Times* announced earlier this month that it was giving Aswany a monthly column as part of its newly expanded opinion section.

It is a choice that the *Times* will regret, however, because despite his brave stance against Mubarak and his broadly progressive pronouncements in English, Aswany is hardly a liberal. He is, in fact, among Egypt's most prolific conspiracy theorists, and he often uses his very public platform to reinforce some of Egypt's most popular bigotries -- and he typically does this when speaking or tweeting in Arabic, which is why the Western press often misses this aspect of his public persona. Aswany said on Egyptian television, for instance, that a "massive Zionist organization rules America," which is why "Obama is not able to go against Israel's desires."

For much of the past year, Aswany has tirelessly promoted the theory that "the United States supports the Muslim Brotherhood to reassure Israel." This is what he told an Egyptian television interviewer in June, and he has reiterated this claim repeatedly in subsequent months. Immediately following Mohamed Morsi's ouster on July 3, Aswany tweeted, "Obama is worried because Israel is worried." When Egypt's defense minister called Egyptians into the streets later that month to "authorize" the government's subsequent crackdown against the Brotherhood, Aswany tweeted, "The army requested authorization because the June 30 revolution was subjected to distortion by the

Western Zionist media, which does not forgive us for aborting the Brotherhood's plan with American and Israel." In August, when Senator John McCain visited Egypt to encourage negotiations between the military and the Brotherhood, Aswany tweeted, "The Zionist John McCain, one of the biggest defenders of Israel, threatens Egypt if it does not release [Brotherhood leader] Shater immediately. The only explanation is that Brotherhood rule is in the interest of Israel."

How, exactly, does it benefit Israel when an extremely anti-Israel organization such as the Brotherhood is governing Egypt? In the real world, of course, it doesn't. But Aswany's conspiratorial rantings argue there are two benefits. First, he argues, supporting the Brotherhood bolsters Israeli security. As Aswany tweeted in August, "Zionist support for the Brotherhood prevents Hamas from attacking Israel."

Second, writes Aswany, Israel desires a weak Egypt so that it can dominate the region. Given the Brotherhood's miserable performance in power, "Brotherhood rule guarantees to Israel that Egypt remains underdeveloped and subordinate." Indeed, the notion that Israel views Egyptian weakness as its ticket to regional hegemony is an article of faith for Aswany. When a web video attacking the Prophet Muhammad sparked mass outrage in September 2012 and was used to encourage an attack on the U.S. Embassy in Cairo, Aswany warned Egyptians that "angry and ill-conceived reactions" would play into the hands of Israel, which knows "Arab reactions well and would find a pretext for intervening in the affairs of the country."

Even by the standard of conspiracy theories, this is ludicrous. While Washington should have been more critical of the Brotherhood's dictatorial governing style, it certainly did not "support" the Brotherhood in any sense of that word. (In fact, if anyone supported the Brotherhood it was Aswany himself, since **he backed Morsi's 2012 election campaign (https://twitter.com/AlaaAswany/status/206089998259331074)** against Mubarak's former prime minister -- though he insisted that the choice between a Muslim Brother and a member of the old regime was "the result of a military conspiracy against the revolution.")

Moreover, given the Brotherhood's extreme hostility towards Israel -- it seeks to establish a "global Islamic state" that is mutually exclusive with Israel's very existence -- a strong U.S.-Brotherhood relationship would not have reassured Israel at all. Nor did rocket attacks from Hamas-controlled Gaza cease during the Brotherhood's yearlong rule of Egypt. Nor does Israel want a weak Egypt; in fact, it wants a stable one, and it views a weak Egypt as a breeding ground for terrorists.

But in Aswany's worldview, many Western governments are primarily motivated by their support for Israel, and their supposed Israel-centrism explains their every action. As Aswany noted in July, "Western governments that often collude against Egypt for the benefit of Israel are now embracing and adopting the Brotherhood. The Brotherhood for them is the greatest guarantee that Egypt remains weak and backward" -- which, again, Aswany contends is a core Israeli interest. And he believes that the Western media has also come under the Zionists' spell. "A simple experiment," he tweeted in July, "Go to the website of any global newspaper and read its coverage of Egypt, and you'll find that most of the writers that defended Israel are now mostly defending the Brotherhood." Indeed, in Aswany's twisted worldview, Washington's displeasure with the way in which Morsi was ousted and Western reporting of the rising Brotherhood death toll must have Israel in mind first and foremost. And so being pro-Brotherhood -- as Aswany defines it -- must be a Zionist position.

In the United States, this kind of circular, paranoid reasoning is standard fare on fringe blogs. It is not, alternatively, the sort of analysis that lands someone a regular column in one of the nation's leading papers.

Aswany, who presents himself as an avid reader of the "Western Zionist media," surely knows this. So it's fair to wonder: Has Aswany considered the possibility that the *Times'* decision to grant him a monthly column is, itself, a Brotherhood-Zionist plot intended to weaken him?

Eric Trager is the Wagner Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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