

DATE: 08-10-2010  
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Date: 9/28/2001  
 Edition: USA Today

in southern Gaza on Thursday. Violence threatens a cease-fire agreed to Wednesday.

# Conspiracy theories say Israel did it

## Muslims blame Sharon, Mossad

By James Cox  
 USA TODAY

ISLAMABAD, Pakistan — In their quest to solve what one Arab newspaper called "the Great Whodunnit," Muslims the world over are pointing an accusing finger at their archenemy: Israel.

From Cairo to Kuwait and Damascus to Dushanbe, Muslims have singled out the Jewish state as the unseen hand behind the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks that felled the World Trade Center towers, ripped a fiery gash in the Pentagon and shook the American psyche.

In casual conversations, newspapers and Internet chat rooms, many in the Muslim world are endlessly chewing over and recycling unsubstantiated rumors that implicate Israel. They're saying, for example, that:

► Four thousand Jews who worked at the



By Mike Segar, Reuters

**Trade Center:** Some say 4,000 Jews stayed home from work at the twin towers Sept. 11.

### The Muslim world

World Trade Center were mysteriously absent the day hijackers crashed two airliners into the towers.

► A group of five Jews was arrested shortly following the attacks after being spotted videotaping the crashes on a New York rooftop and dancing in jubilation.

Typical is an editorial in the *Syria Times*. It named Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon as the brains behind the Sept. 11 horror. "Sharon is known for his experience in masterminding and carrying out massacres and collective killings," the newspaper said. "The recent attacks are actually acts of professional criminals like Sharon and his ilk."

Conspiracy theories have been ubiquitous in the Middle East and Central Asia for centuries. Wherever there are conflicts, enemies conjure up complicated scenarios blaming each other for evil deeds. Israel is a frequent villain.

This month's attacks spurred conspiracy talk outside the Muslim world as well. Immediately after the attacks on New York and Washington, there were rumors in the USA that hundreds of Arab-Americans in New York had been warned and didn't go to work in Manhattan that day.

Some of the fuel for the current conspiracy talk among Muslims comes from their religious beliefs. On the streets of Islamabad, many peo-

ple point out that the killing of innocents violates the teachings of the holy Koran. That prescription is so central to Islam that many Muslims simply refuse to believe the perpetrators of the attacks could share their faith. They are ready to exonerate even professed enemies of the West, such as Osama bin Laden.

"I believe Osama would not do such a thing because it is against Islam," says Zafar Mahmood Sheikh, a consultant to one of Pakistan's main Muslim political parties.

For others, the simultaneous hijacking of four American airliners was something even the cleverest of Middle East terror groups couldn't pull off.

"I can smell Israeli fingers behind this," Salim Abu Sultan, a Palestinian diplomat, told the *Gulf News*, a daily in the United Arab Emirates. "The scope of the attack was beyond the capability of Arabs . . . Only the Israelis have the ability to do such things."

In the shadows, many Muslims say they see Israel's vaunted Mossad spy agency pulling the strings as puppetmaster.

"The most popularly accepted theory," *Gulf News* reported, is that Sharon's government engineered the event "to fuel American anger against Arabs and obtain a 'green light' for Isra-

el's ongoing persecution of the Palestinians."

Within days of the attacks, rumors of Jewish involvement had sped from the Arab countries of North Africa and the Middle East to Muslim nations of Central and South Asia, even reaching the world's most populous Muslim country, Indonesia in the South Pacific.

But Muslims in the USA clearly are generating much of the anti-Israeli vitriol on the Internet, says Rasul Bakhsh Rais, an economist at Quaid-e-Azam University in Islamabad.

"I'm getting these e-mails every day. Who are these people? I never gave them my e-mail address," he says, scrolling through the electronic bile.

The accusations directed at Israel have taken on a crude flavor.

An editorial cartoon in Wednesday editions of the Pakistani daily *The Nation* depicted Israel as a pig, the USA as a salivating wolf and the Muslim world as a lamb. As the pig defecated upstream, the angry wolf blamed the downstream lamb for "making the water muddy."

An op-ed piece in the same edition repeated the rumor that 4,000 Jews escaped harm on Sept. 11. It quoted a Canadian "intelligence expert" as saying that U.S. intelligence agencies have found "links" between the attacks and the Mossad.

The "reported absence" of Jewish fatalities suggests "word had come down to them through some mysterious grapevine simply telling them not to go to work that day," wrote Kaleem Omar, a commentator for Pakistan's *The News*, a daily.

The grieving father of suspected hijacker Mohamed Atta, interviewed by Egyptian news agency MENA, wondered why U.S. media outlets had chosen to ignore reports that U.S. authorities "seized a number of Jews while they were dancing in celebration over the incidents."

The answer to that question was obvious to Ismail Abu-Shanab, a member of the militant Palestinian group Hamas.

U.S. news organizations "are largely controlled by the Zionist lobby," he told reporters from a pro-Hamas Web site.

Not all the accusations are reserved for Israel. The willingness of moderate Arab nations to aid a U.S.-led coalition against terrorism only proves "Arab rulers are stooges of Americans, who are always being used by the Jews, our real enemies," says Sheikh, the Pakistani political consultant.

The Jewish conspiracy notion enjoys wide credibility in Pakistan, which risks a popular backlash if U.S. forces assault Afghanistan in an effort to capture or kill bin Laden.

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