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CONSPIRACY THEORIES IN TURKEY\(^1\)

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Introduction

The Turkish national metanarrative, already in place by the late nineteenth century, stemmed from the fear of imperial dismemberment provoked by threats from abroad and within. This apprehension and perceived vulnerability and exposure brought about not only a nationalist furor, but also a conspiratorial mindset that spotted enemies everywhere against whom one should be ever watchful. Although the metanarrative was first propounded by the state discourse of the declining late Ottoman Empire (especially the Hamidian state) and inherited by Young Turks and Kemalists, the Islamist metanarrative arose from the same context. The birth of conspiracy theories relating to Jews and Freemasons can be dated to the early twentieth century, exacerbated by Zionist demands to settle in the then Ottoman territory of Palestine, and by the existence of the community of Dönme (Jewish converts, also known as ‘conversos’). The association – at times, even the identification – of Young Turks, and then Kemalists, with Freemasonry and Zionists, was at the root of Islamist conspiracy theories (Nefes 2012). Contemporary Turkish conspiracy theories are deeply rooted within a specific historical and discursive space. Their emergence, dissemination and proliferation are possible only if they comply with pre-existing ideas and sentiments. Examining the traumas revolving around the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, this chapter will explain the origins and fantasies of Turkish nationalism undergoing an imperial collapse (for studies of Turkish conspiracy theories, see Gürpınar 2011, 2013a, 2014; Özman, Dede 2012; Yeğen 2014; Nefes 2017, 2018a, 2018b).

The demise of an empire: The Ottoman legacy

The late Ottoman/early Turkish nationalist metanarrative presumed that the Ottoman Empire had been partitioned as a result of the plots of international and domestic foes. The former were the great European powers, first and foremost arch-imperialist Britain. Domestically, the enemies of the nation were imagined to be non-Muslims, who were supposedly being steered and manipulated by their political and religious leaders, encouraged by ethnically Turkish rootless, liberal, cosmopolitan intellectuals who had fallen under the spell of Western propaganda, along with other subversives. All enemies were thus amalgamated, tightly associated, and rendered as extensions and accomplices of the overarching global plot. Denying them any political and
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ideological agency, domestic enemies were perceived as not only willing fifth columns, but also on the payroll of a mastermind.

The non-Muslims, as the usual suspects, were affirmed as the main enemies within the nation’s borders, harbouring agendas, predispositions and interests that not only complied with, but also collectively contradicted, the interests of the Ottoman state. The non-Muslims grew rich throughout the nineteenth century, acting as middlemen between the incoming European merchants and the local peasantry (Kasaba 1988). Their complicity with encroaching European capitalism ensured their self-interests diverged from those of the Ottoman state. Their enrichment was evidence of their treachery in the eyes of those who considered the economy to be a zero-sum game, presuming that non-Muslims would have grabbed the wealth of the Muslims in the first instance (Kaiser 1997; Ihrig 2016: 74–9). The elusive ‘cosmopolitans’ (kozmopolitler) also had a share in the Ottoman retreat. By being ideologically depraved and unreliable, they were influential in the dissemination of perilous ideas with the potential to weaken and corrupt national awareness and vigilance.

Whereas nineteenth-century Ottoman reformism marked the liberal phase of Turkish modernisation, failures and disillusionment led the empire toward alternative policies in an effort to avoid the otherwise inevitable imperial fate. Sultan Abdülhamid II (who reigned 1876–1909) not only ruled the empire with an iron fist, but also introduced a pervasive culture of conspiracy. Suspecting subversion at every instance, he designed a surveillance state obsessed with collecting information from spies within the empire and by embassies abroad, further feeding his paranoia (Riedler 2011; Gürpınar 2013b). The Hamidian culture of conspiracy was inherited and appropriated by the Young Turks who had dethroned the sultan. The Young Turks in power drifted towards radical Turkist and authoritarian policies, despite their hitherto rhetoric of rights, liberties and freedom (Hanioğlu 2008: 62–111). For the Young Turks, non-Muslims were only exploiting the rhetoric of rights and liberties while deviously pursuing agendas that were in diametric opposition to the interests of the imperial centre and the gullible Turks (Kayalı 1997; Zürcher 2010).

In the age of high imperialism, Western powers aspired to grab territories for themselves, from Africa to Asia. For the Young Turks, the picture was crystal clear: European capital had always been fully integrated and freely exchanged across the Ottoman territories, running banks, railways and facilities, and buying cheap raw materials and selling industrial goods, killing local proto-industry and artisanship. According to this scenario, the Ottoman lands would eventually surrender to the clutches of imperialism unless countered by an effective military resolve. The ‘cosmopolitan’ intellectuals were also seen to be complicit, inadvertently serving the grand plot, and were caricatured as naïve ignoramuses with no grasp of actual politics, incapable of gauging the real intentions of the ominous European powers who had easily duped them.

Amidst such a geopolitical quagmire and legitimisation crisis in the Ottoman Empire, it did not take long for the Young Turks to come up with a scheme that amalgamated all of the ‘enemies’ that they should overwhelm. Their evolving ideology presumed a far-reaching showdown between ‘us’ and ‘them’, the two categories being inherent, impermeable and prevailing, fixed through the centuries. For them, war was not merely a military involvement pursued at the fronts, but a lifetime encounter that was fought in times of both war and peace on different fronts, and beginning with the rearing and training of pre-school children (Beşikçi 2012: 203–45; Ateş 2012; Grüßhaber 2018: 114–29). Conspiracy was ever-present, omnipresent and omnipotent, meaning that a patriot had to be constantly vigilant. The rise of nationalism, demanding rights and liberties as well as outright independence, appalled the empire, which failed to respond and accommodate. This brought the dissolution of the multi-ethnic and multi-confessional Ottoman Empire. Whereas a Turkish nation-state that Turkified the remaining territory offered
the only viable political exit from this predicament, conspiracies were sought for the separation-
ist movements refusing to accommodate the age of nationalism. The Sharif Hussein rebellion helped and partially organised by T.E. Lawrence during the First World War further boosted this scare and fostered a stab-in-the-back account of events, accusing Arabs of treason against the caliph. This narrative was also instrumental in the Kemalist rhetoric depicting Arabs as willing accomplices of imperialism who were zealously favoured and praised by Turkish conservatives for being Muslim brethren. This also demonstrated ‘Turkish Islamists’ ideological fixation and foolhardiness (Çiçek 2012). Armenian genocide was also justified on the grounds of Armenians being fifth columns stemming from the same ontological insecurity and fear of national annihila-
tion (Ekmeçioğlu 2016: 7–8).

The Sèvres Treaty vs. the Lausanne Treaty

The post-First World War invasion of Turkey and Istanbul following the Ottoman defeat was perceived as the darkest hour of Turkish history. This fright, however, resulted in the eternalisation, naturalisation and normalisation of the existential fear of national annihilation as the order of the day. The sentiment would later be dubbed ‘Sèvres Syndrome’ after the Treaty of Sèvres that was signed in 1920 between the victorious Allies and the defeated Ottoman Empire, requiring the Turks to dissolve most of its military and relinquish significant territory, including Turkish-majority areas.

Sèvres was overturned by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who reorganised and assumed the command of the rump Ottoman army and defeated the invading Greek army. Following his military victory, the treaty was rescinded and renegotiated, introducing favourable clauses to the Turks in the Treaty of Lausanne signed in 1923, which annulled the former Treaty of Sèvres. In Turkish political discourse since then, however, Sèvres and Lausanne imply so much more than two treaties. The term ‘Sèvresphobia’ was coined in the 1990s to describe the unyielding belief that Turkey was under imminent attack from the West, in a bid to overturn the Treaty of Lausanne (Kirişçi, Winrow 1997: 184, 193; Piccoli et al. 2001: 115–18; Yılmaz 2006: 29–40; Guida 2008: 37–52; Göçek 2011; Nefes 2013, 2018a).

This ontological insecurity established a mutually exclusive dichotomy between the two treaties. While the Lausanne treaty epitomised the deliverance from the throes of imperialism that had been imposed upon the Ottoman Empire for at least a century, Sèvres, in contrast, was seen as the very quintessence of the mischievous ends sought and attained by the West, as a metaphysical entity. Sèvres implied subjugation to Western imperialist enemies not only in political, but also ideological, terms, smacking of empty imperial pageantry, sycophancy, a servile culture, the self-serving Ottoman ancien régime and cosmopolitan liberals. Lausanne, in contrast, denoted selfless zeal, commitment, masculinity, audacity and resolve, along with ideological self-righteousness. The Treaty of Lausanne was regarded as sacrosanct by secular nationalists, in that it resulted in the establishment of the secular republic and the liberation of Anatolia from European and Greek occupation (and imperialism); the two were inseparable, for them there could be no secular republic without Lausanne.

This dichotomy also offered ‘history in a nutshell’, making a definite and compact interpretation of the course of modern Turkish history. In brief, this narrative posited the Sèvres and Lausanne treaties as two antagonistic, decisive moments in modern Turkish history, and suggested that the Western powers had never renounced their claims or longing for the Sèvres treaty. According to this position, Westerners never forget, but only change the means by which they conspire, switching to subtler schemes that were more difficult to fathom unless the beholder was adequately equipped to spot such conspiracies. To these ends, they have, since
then, supported and sponsored the subversive forces within Turkey, especially the Kurdish separatist and Islamic movements that aimed to weaken the Kemalist-republican ethos (Cevizoğlu 2007; Baytok 2007; Çekiç 2014).

The Manichean and conspiratorial iconography also served well in the dissemination and perpetuation of this fear. The Sèvres map became a household image that every Turkish student encountered in textbooks and in the media. This imagery clearly depicted the innate incompatibility of the two discursive universes: One being republican, idealist, patriotic and selfless, and the other selfish, unpatriotic and impervious to social woes. As we will see, this perceived dichotomy became all the more apparent in the post-1980 neoliberal and post-national order.

Kemalism and Neo-Kemalism from the 1930s to 2000s

For the Turkish secular-nationalist conspiratorial universe, as proven impeccably by the Treaty of Lausanne, the national idea is robustly and inextricably ingrained within the very self of Atatürk. Any diversion from his principles is tantamount to national treason. Furthermore, it is unimaginable that anyone would ever willingly renounce and dismiss national belonging. Anyone who deviates from this ideal could only be construed as accomplices to the global master conspiracy, or commanded and readily manipulated by a puppet master, namely the U.S.A.

Kemalism conceived two irreconcilable camps: The camp of reaction versus the camp of progressivism. Kemalist progressivism was resolutely nationalist, firmly upholding national vigour and ethos and the project of national enlightenment. As an ideology, it blended nationalism and faith in modernity, perceiving modernisation as a transformative agent of the nation. This conviction was almost unequivocally endorsed by intellectuals, although the Kemalist-nationalist consensus gradually eroded as the new generation of intellectuals came to move towards the left. This necessitated adjustments and mutations to the Kemalist premise, although a more drastic appropriation came in the 1960s with the adaption of Third World left-nationalism. This new permutation was dubbed ‘neo-Kemalism’. It challenged and repudiated the status-quo Kemalism that was strictly pro-U.S. and was called ‘wardrobe Kemalism’ (Selçuk 1966), to indicate it as nationalist only in appearance. The 1960s Cold War conjuncture was to be historicised and posited within a historical scheme nationalising the Marxist rendering of history and global order.

It is not difficult, however, to detect the Kemalist coating that survived intact under alternative disguises within this leftist/Marxist scheme, in which no difference between the West, Christendom and global capitalism is discernible. The elusive designation ‘West’ serves as an amorphous term that enables the ontologisation, essentialisation and eternalisation of the hostility. This narrative supplies the necessary flexibility to allow the nature and underlying motives behind this elusive West to be spotted. The ambiguity of the term renders its articulation interchangeable, whether referring to Christians, imperialists, capitalists or nation-states (British, French, etc.) against the Turks. In this respect, the conspiracy narrative can easily adapt to Islamist, nationalist (Kemalist) or socialist scripts. The pivot of this meta-account envisaged a sharp and irreconcilable dichotomy that exists between the ‘West’ and ‘us’. This essentialised and eternalised antagonism is shared in leftist, rightist, Islamist or Kemalist conspiratorial minds.

The rising Third-Worldist and Maoist currents and Marxist imperialism scheme were built on and well suited to this inherited national framing. Whereas the 1970s witnessed a rise of socialism, especially among students and intellectuals, and, to a lesser degree, workers, the military coup of 1980 came down hard on the Turkish left, leading to the arrest of tens of thousands of leftist sympathisers and activists and the banning of leftist organisations (Zürcher 1998:
The 1980s heavily tarnished the public prominence and power of the left as a towering social force, leading, by the end of the decade, to the demise of global socialism as a feasible project with mass appeal. Many disillusioned Turkish socialists abandoned or moderated their leftist commitments and faith in the global revolution for the promise of a better, more progressive and peaceful world guided by Marxist theory; others sought refuge in reformist and democratic socialism. The new leftist focus gravitated toward anti-militarist, environmentalist, feminist and L.G.B.T agendas, yet many other disillusioned leftists shunned and even disdained these refuges, claiming they were tantamount to the wrecking and undoing of socialism. For them, gay rights, the environment and identity politics were mere shallow fads, distracting from the socialist pledge to transform the world (Perinçek 2000).

Harbouring deep hostility to the new left agendas, these disillusioned socialists drifted overwhelmingly toward anti-imperialist Kemalism, keeping their anti-imperialism intact but abandoning their hitherto egalitarian agendas and utopias. In many ways, this was a homecoming and brought about a new ideological amalgamation known in Turkish as *ulusalçılık*. Although the phrase’s direct translation into English would be nationalism per se, partially because it is a Turkish (Mongolian) word as opposed to the Arabic loanword *milliyetçilik* (the standard word standing for nationalism), it was tinged exclusively with left-leaning, hard-line and radically secularist connotations. From their Marxist anti-imperialism, they arrived at a republican nationalism (resembling French *souverainisme*) that represented the main dichotomy between the enlightened and national republic and its enemies in the age of globalisation and the demise of nation-states (Gürpınar 2011: 265–71). This new ideological amalgamation coalesced leftist, rightist and centrist features claiming to assemble ‘patriots’ against those traitors in thrall to the nation-statist ethos, including Islamists, Kurdish nationalists, liberals and socialists in the service of imperialism.

This xenophobic nationalism claimed to be the only true form of Kemalism, alleging a direct genealogy from Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and his political discourse right up to the 2000s. However, this appropriated form of Kemalism differed greatly from the mainstream Atatürkism that had prevailed from the 1950s onwards in its sharp intolerance of ethnic and cultural diversity, its xenophobic nationalism and its blatant authoritarianism, which was in stark contrast to the conditional and pragmatic peace of Kemalism with democracy. It was, nonetheless, staunchly built on Kemalist vocabulary and cultural affinities, and this predisposition was made possible thanks to the perpetuation of a mindset that had been produced under the distinctive circumstances of a given historical juncture, at a time of imperial retreat and the partitioning of the Ottoman Empire. Benefiting from a historical reservoir of more than a century, the neo-nationalist ideologues twisted the national narrative to suit their political agenda and rendered it the only legitimate and national programme. Arguably, this shift was a symptom of the crisis of nation-statist ideologies in the age of globalisation, as well as the rise of identity politics and pluralism. The hitherto consensual national narrative became conspiratorial in an effort to respond to and debunk perceived threats, as it failed to explain the new social, political and cultural realities.

A wealth of conspiracy theories allegedly exposing secret plots by the ‘global elite’ to partition Turkey came to circulate on the Internet, as well as in the popular press and on television, promoted by high-profile pundits whose books had a large readership. Many conspiratorial themes were exploited exhaustively including: Christian missionary activity in Turkey (Sabah 2005); the alleged Greek claims in the Eastern Black Sea (Pontus) (Sarmay et al. 1999; Bulut 2007; for an academic treatment of this fear, see Asan 2009); Israel’s territorial claims in southeastern Turkey; the aspirations of the ecumenical Greek patriarchy in Istanbul (Yıldırım, M. 2004; Altundal 2004); and the intrigue in the Vatican regarding Turkey (Altundal 1993, 2005,
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2006). Not surprisingly, the E.U. was accused of orchestrating these covert schemes, which were naively overlooked or consciously obscured by the liberal intelligentsia.

The themes, premises and assumptions of these conspiracy theories are concomitantly novel and age-old and are derived from the lexicon and grammar of the founding nationalist ideology of the secular Turkish republic. All of the circulating conspiracy theories were built on the pre-conceived historical setting and national episteme that perceived the course of the late Ottoman Empire and the Turkish War of Independence (1918–1922), not belonging to a distinctive historical context, but as recurring episodes in an enduring and eternal struggle between two unchanging and perpetually antagonistic parties (Özkan 2001; Yıldırım, U. 2004; Manisah 2006; Coşkun 2008).

Islamist conspiratorial universe

Although Kemalist aversion to imperialism and liberalism was fraught with conspiracy theories, Islamism was even more profoundly infatuated with a conspiratorial outlook. Islamists and conservatives had long conceived of themselves as in a perpetual war with the Zionist-Freemasonic plot aiming to subjugate Turkey and Islam. Accordingly, only the Islamic and conservative bulwark posed the weighty pillar of resistance against this threat. For them, in fact, Westernisation itself was a conspiracy imposed by the West and carried out by local accomplices, including the Freemasons, Jews and Dönmes pulling the strings of the Westernised elite duped by Western ideological propaganda. This Westernisation sought to undermine traditional morals and values, to disassociate Islamists from the national past. This would render the Turkish people defenceless, feeble and misguided against Western transgression, and was a course that was implemented by no lesser accomplices than those who ruled the country, beginning with Mahmud II (reigned 1808–1839). The Tanzimat reforms were considered tantamount to an abandonment of the Islamic mores and culture that reigned over the moral landscape that secured the grandeur and splendour of the polity and the nation. The Tanzimat Westernisation was followed by the Young Turk and Kemalist regimes in the same vein, with the only diversion being the reign of Abdülhamid II, who seemingly was deposed by the Young Turks, but was, in reality, deposed by those behind them, i.e. the Jews, Freemasons and Western imperialists. The Islamists long believed that the Turkish establishment (which they were sure existed as an intact and commanding entity since the onset of Turkish Westernisation) had been under the influence of the Freemasons, Jews and Dönmes since then. The Bilderberg narrative that had become fashionable by the 1970s was also superimposed upon this narrative, according to which the global super elite and international Jewry were puppet-mastering their lackeys (Yesevizade 1979; Çetin 1997).

Antisemitism was also rife among Islamic and conservative circles (Nefes 2015a). The Protocols of the Elders of Zion had been the quintessential ur-text of this conspiratorial mindset, which had been slightly appropriated for the Islamist agenda since its earliest translations and dissemination throughout the Islamic world (Achcar 2010). During the Cold War, this mental framework was incorporated into the anti-communist frenzy amalgamating communism, Jewry and the West. The conservative and Islamic anti-communist strand perceived communism less as an economic doctrine than as a transgression of moral and social order and an ominous threat to the family and the nation. It was, in fact, perceived as a sinister plot run by the global order, not far from the visions of The Protocols, yet built upon local cultural references. Aversion to the encroachment of modernity was universal, replicating the same pattern.

Necip Fazıl Kısakürek (1904–1983) emerged as the most vocal Islamic public intellectual, having mastered and rebranded this narrative for consumption for the next generation by the
late 1940s. Since then he became an iconic and unassailable authority among Islamic circles. His book on Abdülhamid II (1965) became essential reading, establishing a cult in which the sultan was portrayed as the saviour of Islamic lands and dignity. According to this narrative, Abdülhamid was deposed by the Young Turks in the service of the Zionists/Jews vexed with his (alleged) obstruction of their colonising Palestine and his pledge to reinvigorate the empire and keep it intact.

Realising that they would have little opportunity to colonise Palestine as long as the formidable sultan remained in power, Herzl and his cabal considered the possibility of a coup. The link was so obvious that ‘whereas hitherto the constitutionalist movement was hazy, chaotic and obscure, it was transformed into a well-organized offensive subsequent to Herzl’s dismissal by Abdülhamid’ (Müftüoğlu 1985: 246). Tainted with secularist, libertinist and positivistic ideas, the Young Turks became easy prey, operating as willing accomplices in the Jewish conspiracy. Alienated from their authentic culture, and hence losing their morals and consciousness, they would serve as docile zombies, easily manipulated by their puppet masters:

As Abdülhamid II was well-aware … the Jews were well-disciplined and commanded power in different areas. They controlled international finance, trade and the European press. They first activated the European press and then galvanized the anti-Abdülhamid forces and instigated instability.

They also, according to this theory, spurred a campaign of slander, and it was the Jews who dubbed Abdülhamid II the ‘Red Sultan’ (le sultan rogue), a term coined allegedly in reference to his Armenian ‘policies’, but in fact attributed perniciously by the Jews (Mısıroğlu 1971: 360).

For one conservative author, the mischievous intentions of the Zionists ‘had crashed the steel-clad stature of Abdülhamid II.’ For him, Abdülhamid II’s overwhelming preoccupation in his office was Zionism, in that he not only tracked the Zionist network and activities abroad closely via the Ottoman embassies, but also spied on the Zionist congresses (Çabuk 1990: 243).

The Treaty of Lausanne was a further example of servility to Westernism in the Islamic conspiratorial mind. Although the dichotomy drawn between Lausanne and Sèvres was a quintessentially Kemalist penchant, the Islamists were no less enthusiastic about interpreting the causes of the imperial demise and national decay in a Manichean framework. The Islamist version, however, blamed the Kemalists of subordination, arguing that Lausanne had been a testimony of betrayal and a succumbing to the British mandate, amounting not only to a surrender in material terms (loss of territory, economic concessions), but also, and more importantly, to an ideological capitulation and catastrophe. ‘Lausanne as treachery’ became a popular Islamist trope, first articulated by Kisakürek (1950). Rıza Nur’s erratic autobiography (1967) provided evidences to those who wanted to debunk Lausanne to overturn the Kemalist narrative. Yet, the cult book that most vocally exposed the ‘Lausanne treachery’ was Kadir Mısıroğlu’s 1971 book, aptly titled Lausanne: Victory or Defeat?

The Dönme community (or conversos) is a crypto-Jewish minority in Turkey that originated in the seventeenth century. Due to their secretive nature, there is little reliable information about this group, which is obviously a bonanza for conspiracy theorists who seek to expose what is deliberately concealed. It is estimated that there are 70,000-80,000 people of Dönme origin in Turkey, of which around 3000-4000 still follow the Dönme belief system (Sisman 2010: 16). The Dönme theme has been a salient one in the Islamist conspiratorial mindset. Since the early twentieth century, there have been accusations by Islamists of secret Dönme power in Turkish politics (Nefes 2012), with Sèvres syndrome seeming to play an important role in the prevalence
of such conspiracy rhetoric in Turkey. In-depth interviews with the conspiracy theorists on this topic (Nefes 2015a) and their readers (Nefes 2015b) demonstrate that the conspiracy theories about the community are related to and triggered by the ontological insecurities deriving from imperial dismemberment and mistrust of non-Muslims.

Deep state: Reality, discourse and conspiracy theory

The ‘deep state’, both as a reality and as a discourse, was an original contribution by Turkey to the global conspiracy theory community. The term, in fact, metamorphosed from the term ‘Counter-Guerilla’ (Kontrgerilla) that disseminated among leftist activists arrested during the period of martial law (1971–1973) to refer to the nefarious authority that ran the brutal crackdown and conducted interrogations. The C.I.A. was also accused of being behind the Counter-Guerilla, using torture as an effective counter-insurgency method (Kılıç 2009).

Bülent Ecevit, the incoming leftist prime minister following the period of martial law, first articulated the term. He had become aware of a private branch within the government, unaccountable to political authority, after being asked to approve of the channelling of discretionary funds but advised by the military generals not to inquire into their purpose. Ecevit fulminated against the state-within-state order, identifying it as Counter-Guerilla, and positing himself and his leftist stand in direct conflict with this security establishment. Since then, leftists in Turkey have used the term often to refer to structures outside the reach of political accountability and visibility, whose main role is to counter and repress leftist subversion through extra-legal and unaccountable means.

This was in fact the Turkish branch of a N.A.T.O.-wide stay-behind organisation, the clandestine connections of which were first revealed in Italy (Ganser 2004), although the Turkish case seems to have differed slightly (Söyler 2015). The body was well incorporated into the inherited authoritarian bureaucratic system, and became, inevitably, its constitutive part, persisting after the Cold War but with the new mission of ‘defending’ the state, not from the communist menace, but from other perceived subversive threats. Whereas the stay-behind schemes were silently eliminated in other NATO countries, the Turkish wing survived, but was directed towards other perceived threats.

The term ‘Counter-Guerilla’ gave way abruptly to the phrase ‘deep state’ in late 1996, after a mysterious car accident in the countryside exposed a matrix of power at the intersection of the state security establishment, the mafia and other shady connections. The phrase was first used in 1995 by Ertuğrul Özkök, the flamboyant editor-in-chief of mainstream Turkish newspaper Hürriyet, who later attributed the term to Mehmet Ağar – a police chief and éminence grise of the deep state who had murmured about the ‘reflexes of deep state’ to Özkök at a dinner.

Uğur Mumcu (1942–1993), a leftist journalist who was killed in 1993 in a mysterious car bombing, whose perpetrators and motivations still remain unknown, wrote consistently and succinctly about and sought after Çatlı and his connections back in the 1980s (Mumcu 1981; 1984). Mumcu’s books and researches were impressive and daring, making him an icon and paragon of investigative journalism. He also introduced the Italian anti-communist establishment to a Turkish readership, exemplified in the notorious revelation of the P2 Masonic lodge, establishing the imagery in Turkey of deep state bureaucrats, politicians and mobsters colluding. Inspired by Mumcu’s mastery of the art, in the 1990s, ‘deep state revelations’ became fashionable among mostly leftist journalists – some mediocre, others seasoned and breath-taking. The ‘deep state’ also became an attractive theme for professional conspiracy buffs who spotted unlikely liaisons, named names and connected ostensibly unrelated events based on simple reasoning, assumptions and guesswork. These revelations were in fact partially reverberations from
the ongoing battles between factions in the ‘deep state’ (mainly left-wing and right-wing factions, but also organised thought networks and personalised connections and allegiances). The ‘deep state’ served also as a discourse, functioning as a ploy amid the power struggles in which many ‘deep state exposers’ were inadvertently manipulated.

Whereas the ‘deep state revelation’ genre was predominantly a leftist pursuit, by the 2000s Islamists had also taken up the endeavour. In the leftist deep state narrative, the nemesis of the deep state was inherently the left (and, by the 1990s, increasingly the Kurds, in parallel to the rise of the P.K.K.). The Islamist account twisted the narrative, depicting the archenemy of the deep state as Islam and its political outlets. Neither account was wrong, given the shift of the perceived threats after the end of the Cold War and the global rise of Islamism. In particular, the Gülen religious order became highly effective in disseminating the Islamist account, making it the most hegemonic.

It became crystal clear that the Gülenists themselves had infiltrated the state’s security bodies as part of a deliberate strategy that had been launched already by the 1980s, backed by centre-right politicians seeking to engender a support base. By the 2000s, Gülenists had become preeminent not only within the police and judiciary, but also, and more troublingly, in the military, which had long been viewed as a secular bastion closed to any infiltration, as the self-assured Turkish military was known for obsessively monitoring the military schools and cadets (Şık 2014). The extent of the infiltration was such that the Gülenists dared to attempt a coup in 2016, that failed spectacularly. In short, by the 2010s, the Gülenists had themselves become ‘the deep state’ while feigning to oppose it, manipulating the leftist and liberal intellectuals who had heartily supported them against Kemalist authoritarianism. This was a ‘conspiracy within a conspiracy’. What was branded as an elimination of the deep state turned out to be an incursion, and an attempt to take over the state, corroborating the claims of those who had argued that Islamists were creating their own deep state, and thus embarrassing liberal optimists.

Once the Gülenists clashed with the A.K.P. in a bid to retain their bureaucratic power and further increase their clout, they were eradicated by the A.K.P. after an atrocious showdown between the two. In the period that followed, Gülenism-bashing became a new source of conspiracy theories, and the Gülenist bureaucratic network came to be known as ‘the parallel state’ that operated independently of the ‘official state’. The deep state was, and is, a fact, without question. Yet it has prompted a conspiratorial craze/industry in the hands of intellectual entrepreneurs. The ‘deep state’ concept was exported from Turkey to the international arena, both as a serious analytic concept and as a conspiratorial buzzword (Blanuša 2018).

Conspiracy theories during A.K.P. rule

The conspiratorial rhetoric became more explicit with the consolidation of power of the ruling A.K.P. Although it came to power in 2002 as a reformist party, its enthusiasm for progress waned, and the party would become increasingly authoritarian, shifting to populist discourses melding populism with Islamism. The triumphalism subsequent to the elimination of military defiance rendered it more authoritarian than ever. Imposing its grip on power by 2010, it was able to forsake its erstwhile semi-liberal attitudes and, distancing itself from its liberal allies, the party fostered a home-grown Islamist intelligentsia as its need to employ liberal rhetoric diminished. This intelligentsia promoted a conspiratorial culture that blended inherited Islamist discourses with conspiracy theories imported from the West in the age of populism. Different from conventional Islamic conspiratorialism, the cult of Erdoğan lay at the centre of this metanarrative, in which Erdoğan is depicted as the target of a global conspiracy. In fact, Erdoğan himself deliberately voiced an array of conspiracy theories fulminating against enemies that allegedly
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Co-conspire in secret. This discourse was obviously a reflection both of his Islamist background and a political strategy. Although the similarities with the Islamist mindset are obvious, several twists and diversions are also apparent. First, although political Islamism had existed as an ideology with inflexible preconceptions and dictums, the new conspiratorial universe of the A.K.P. is designed, somewhat haphazardly, around a single man: Erdoğan. A major motivation behind the boosting of these conspiracy theories by the pro-government media was, in fact, the establishment of the cult of Erdoğan.

Not just another political party competing for votes and seeking temporary political office via the ballot box, A.K.P projected itself as representing a timeless and metaphysical ideal. With no difference observed between the ideal, the party and the state, this presumption brought in a trivialisation of politics. The Islamist intelligentsia invented a new political lexicon to espouse the sacralisation of politics (Gentile 1996), ushering in a political vocabulary that sharply distinguished between what was referred to as ‘old Turkey’ vs. ‘new Turkey’ (Çağlar 2014). ‘Old Turkey’ (imagined as a power bloc consisting of businessmen, military and bureaucracy, but also intellectuals, N.G.O.s and ‘White Turks’, see below) was demonised as the nemesis conspiring with the global order and its proponents. Especially in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, domestic politics and foreign policy became inextricably intertwined in Turkey, and this shift birthed a new conspiratorial universe in which the domestic and the international could not be dissociated. Accordingly, all domestic opposition, including the leftists, Kemalists, P.K.K. and the Kurdish movement, was to be framed as in an alliance with Zionists, neocons, Baathists and other dark forces.

Enemies were legion, being both domestic and international, and apparent rival states were enemies, as in any other nationalist imagination. Although Turkey was not lacking in solid state-level enmities in the previous decades, globalisation and the erosion of state power brought more treacherous and elusive enemies into view, some of which were super-state, and some sub-state. In this conspiratorial universe, the ‘enemy’ was not an agent one could easily identify, but rather a diffuse, amorphous, obscure and omnipresent one. Furthermore, these singular enemies were depicted as derivations, puppets or agents of a mastermind. Although they may enjoy their own autonomy and own reasons and motivations, there prevails over all one omnipotent enemy, an imagery that is best captured in the visions of The Protocols of the Elders of Zion. The ‘West’, as discussed above, is an abstraction that cannot be said to refer to an identifiable material reality. The ‘West’ has been construed as the ultimate and irreconcilable enemy of ‘us’, whether this ‘us’ referred to ‘Turks’, ‘Muslims’ or any amalgamation of these two partially overlapping, partially contesting identities. Yet, the demonisation of this elusive ‘West’ was carried to new heights by the A.K.P. According to A.K.P. intellectuals, the enemies within are not only legion, but also constantly changing appearance, while remaining the same behind their façades. Another accompanying demonised categorisation were the ‘White Turks’ who were allegedly dominant in ‘Old Turkey’. This was a label employed to stigmatisate the secular and well-off upper-middle class, who were implicated as not rooted within society – not sufficiently Turkish – hence ‘white’, meaning more European looking than the average Turk, and living in their urban secluded habitats, separated from the cultural and moral norms of society (Bali 2002: 324–77; Gürpınar 2011: 170–9). This discourse was further exacerbated with the Gezi protests that broke out in 2013 (Albayrak 2008; Kutlu 2014a, 2014b).

The Gezi protests became the bête noir of the Islamist intelligentsia and their conspiratorial universe. Demonstrators had gathered initially to protest the planned building of a shopping mall on the site of Gezi Park at the very centre of the city’s bohemian quarter, yet what started out as a small-scale protest turned into a massive anti-governmental demonstration after the brutal police crackdown (Özkırımlı 2014; Öğütle, Göker 2014; Gürpınar 2016: 199–326; Nefes
2017). Failing to attain the moral upper hand against the popular sympathy shown to the protestors, it was the task of the A.K.P. intelligentsia to frame the course of events in such a way that they would secure moral superiority and claims of legitimacy, against all odds. The most direct approach was to shift the debate from the Gezi protests and police brutality to the ‘big picture’ that lay behind, implicating the Gezi protestors as unknowing or deliberate pawns in the service of global powers aiming to topple Erdoğan and to destabilise Turkey (Ertem, Esayan 2013; Güngör 2013a, 2013b; Aktay 2013). Denying the protestors agency, the pro-government media lost no time in depicting them as on the payroll of foreign intelligence services. George Soros was one of several household names who was blamed. Previously a favourite in Kemalist conspiracy theories, being seen as working on behalf of neoliberalism and imperialism, he became a hate figure. ‘Civil society’ (and the ‘open society’ of Soros) was thus seen in some circles as a smokescreen concealing subversive activities in the name of rights, liberties and democracy. Any opposition to the Islamist government could, and was, inevitably conceived as being in the service of this overarching global plot.

The historicisation of conspiracy theories further trivialised ‘today’, deeming it a nuisance in the eternal grand theatre of history and struggles, and this historicisation also trivialised transient moral transgressions. As war renders morality a secondary concern that needs to be reassessed within the reality of war, while also justifying misdemeanours, the introduction of history as a theatre depicting a perpetual state of war also deems moral claims inconsequential and petty in the larger theatre of history. Conspiracy theories remain an effective means of depoliticising public debate and imposing the politics of eternity, having served these ends succinctly in Turkey. Several television series produced by the state boosted such historical conspiratorialism and depicted late Ottoman history accordingly.

The A.K.P. also used the Internet and social media to disseminate conspiracy theories to discredit its foes and sharpen the rift between the two seemingly irreconcilable camps in order to consolidate its base. This strategy had become much more brazen by the mid-2010s, epitomised most blatantly by a network known somewhat ominously as the ‘Pelicans’. The curious name came from an anonymous manifesto posted on Wordpress on May 2016 entitled the ‘Pelican files’ (for no sensible reason), which accused the then-prime minister Ahmet Davutoğlu of conspiring against Erdoğan behind the scenes, prompting his resignation in just three days (on the ‘Pelican files’, see Öğur 2016; Sözeri 2016). The unit that came to be known as ‘Pelicans’ since then operated as intellectual thugs, with the main mission being to discredit and defame A.K.P. and Islamist heavyweights with the potential to threaten Erdoğan’s grip on power. Funded generously by shady money channelled from state funds, the unit ran a sizeable social media operation for the effective dissemination of conspiracy theories. These social media accounts, as well as journalists, academics and public figures affiliated with the network, promoted conspiracy theories to defame opposition of all kinds, while also making pre-emptive strikes against potential threats. A constellation of journalists, academics, twitter opinion leaders and trolls made up this notorious network, contributing by acting, tweeting and retweeting, and the Pelicans remain notorious for their shameless defaming and disseminating of conspiracy theories to this end. State-funded or state-sponsored trolls devised conspiracy theories effectively to slander alternative views and groups through invention, promotion and dissemination through Internet memes and infographics. Pro-government media also served the same purpose. The independent media has been gradually destroyed, its owners forced to sell their newspapers and television channels to businessmen allied with the government by means of credit supplied by state banks and public tenders. The government-designed media served as propaganda, revealing new alleged conspiracies spearheaded by an array of enemies masterminded by the New International Order (de Medeiros 2018).

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Authoritarian regimes need enemies to legitimise their existence. Furthermore, as ideologies wane, they seek unidentified, elusive and metaphysical enemies, such as demonised alternate ideologies and political movements. To secure subservience, the ruling A.K.P. also needs enemies whose hostilities are not mundane, nor grounded on a conjectural realpolitik or national interests, but rather on an ontological grounding as a political strategy (Snyder 2018: 33–40).

Conclusion

Although the preeminent ideologies reigning in Turkey, such as Kemalism, Islamism and nationalism displayed different and even antithetical ideological tendencies, they shared similarities, although couched in different terms. This is because they inculcated in the same historical milieu. They rose on deep mistrust against not only imperialist foreign powers but also unreliabless within. Conspiracy is omnipresent and omnipotent. Such an intellectual climate fostered an environment in which conspiracy theories flourish. This clearly shows that Turkey is not an outlier, but another geography in which national euphoria and populist urges search for conspiracy theories to render their narratives impeccable and moral.

Note

1 Parts of this chapter have previously been published in Doğan Gürpınar’s book Conspiracy Theories in Turkey (Routledge, 2019). We thank Routledge for the permission for reuse. We also express our gratitude to Alp Yenen for his comments and suggestions.

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