

Conspiracy theories and Occidentalism as an essential part of Turkish political culture

Mehmet Ümit Necef

News

In recent years President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has resorted more and more often to conspiracy theories and Occidentalism in his analysis of the relations between Turkey and western countries. For example, he has claimed that the PKK (Kurdish Worker's Party), Islamic State and the Fetullah Gülen movement, which is accused of being behind the aborted coup attempt in 2016, are supported by western countries to harm Turkey.

Summary

In my last article entitled "Xenophobia, Islamophobia, Western Conspiracies and Manipulations. Turkish Official Explanations of Islamic State" I argued that the three official documents published by the Turkish government, which analyze the cultural, political and theological roots of Islamic State (IS), claim that conspiracies and manipulations by Western powers are at play in intentionally creating and directing IS. In this article, I will maintain that the present AKP government is influenced by conspiracy theories and Occidentalism not only with regard to IS, but also to an array of other issues.

Key Words

Conspiracy theories, Occidentalism, Erdogan, Reza Zarrab

About the Author

M. Ümit Necef is an associate professor. He works on a 4-year project financed by the Swedish Research Council for Health, Working Life and Welfare (FORTE) on the motivations of young Swedish and Danish Muslims to join Islamic State (IS) and other jihadist groups.

Analysis:

A number of Turkish scholars and pundits point out that conspiracy theories and Occidentalism have in recent years become a major feature in the AKP government's political discourse and style of politics. For example, Cennet Uslu, a political scientist from Kirikkale University, observes in her article with the expressive title "From real Politics to Conspiracy Politics" that "(c)onspiracy theories seems to have encircled the political sphere in our country. We can easily see how this penchant for conspiracies encloses every explanation, and has placed itself in the center of our political life. Conspiracy theories are being used by people from all walks of life as an 'opportune explanation' and as opinions which 'suit the heart, but not the mind'. She claims that Turkish politics has been under the spell of conspiracy theories since the end of the Ottoman times, but they have run wild in the last couple of years and have become mainstream politics.

Conspiracy theories about Western states' covert and nefarious interventions in political life are not unique to Turkey and other countries in the Middle East. They can exist and flourish both in consolidated democratic as well as in unconsolidated democracies and non-democratic countries. However, the political elites use conspiracy theories pragmatically in the Middle East, and they are a "salient feature of the political discourses of the region"(288).¹ When contemporary societies are faced with political or economic crisis such as terrorism and war, which threaten the social and political order, some citizens may develop conspiracy theories. These theories are "explanatory beliefs that involve a number of actors who join in secret agreement, and try to achieve a hidden goal that is perceived as unlawful or malevolent".² Reflecting and impacting on state-society relations and local impressions of the world beyond the region, "they affect how political behavior within and among the states of the region is situated, structured, and controlled".³

Conspiratorial explanation of the Gezi Demonstrations

In his study of how the Turkish government framed the Gezi Park demonstrations in May and June 2013 as a conspiracy of the "international interest lobby", Nefes

¹ Gray, Matthew 2010: *Conspiracy Theories in the Arab World Sources and politics*. London: Routledge. P. 288.

² Prooijen, Jan-Willem & Jostmann, Nils B., 2013: Belief in Conspiracy Theories: The Influence of Uncertainty and Perceived Morality. February 2013 *European Journal of Social Psychology* 43(1).

³ Gray 2010: 12.

highlights the conspiratorial political style in Turkey.⁴ The prime minister of the period, R. T. Erdogan used “accusations of conspiracy” when explaining the reasons behind the so-called Gezi Park protests. He framed them as a conspiracy of the “interest rate lobby” against his government and Turkish independence, although he has not pointed out precisely who constitutes this lobby. According to Nefes, Erdogan broadly referred to “a secret international group profiting from high interest rates”.⁵

Nefes underlines that the government’s use of conspiracy frames is “emblematic of how this style could easily prevail in mainstream Turkish politics”.⁶ He claims that some conspiratorial theories are historically persistent frames in certain contexts, and these theories often involve some foreign power aiding minorities or some terrorist group in Turkey.⁷ The breakdown of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the First World War and the following Sèvres Treaty which partitioned the rest of the empire “led to widespread conspiratorial views about plotting foreign agents and the internal groups they use as pawns”.⁸ The conspiracy frame has been often employed by the Turkish state and Turkish intellectuals to explain the reasons for the Kurdish insurrections since the founding of the republic in 1923, especially against the contemporary one which began in 1984 and still continues.

Following the argumentation of Nefes the idea of the western powers establishing and aiding Islamic State proposed in the Turkish official documents is a recent version of the conspiratorial frame of the “Sèvres syndrome”, as it warns about alleged plots of Western powers and their local collaborators in Turkey.

The power behind PKK, Islamic State and the Gülen Movement: The US

In a nation-wide televised speech President Recep Tayyip Erdogan claimed that the trial against the Iranian-Turkish businessman Reza Zarrab, accused of violating sanctions against Iran, was in reality a conspiracy against himself and Turkey. Erdogan was (once again) accusing the USA of trying to discredit Turkey because it did not submit to “scenarios” concocted by the American authorities. Broadening his scope of accusations, he said: “They (the U. S.) aggravated the PKK (Kurdistan Workers’ Party) for that. They put FETÖ (Fethullahist Terrorist Organization) to the front and sicked

⁴ Nefes, Türkiye Salim 2017: The impacts of the Turkish government’s conspiratorial framing of the Gezi Park protests, *Social Movement Studies*, 16:5, 610-622.

⁵ Ibid.: 612.

⁶ Ibid.: 619.

⁷ Ibid.: 612.

⁸ Ibid.: 612.

DEASH (Islamic State) on our country.”⁹ Then he directed his diatribe against the Republican People’s Party (CHP) leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, who has recently alleged that the president and his relatives had off-shore accounts and added: “And even now they are using the person who is the head of the main opposition, also known as the main ‘treason party,’ for the same purpose”.

In a later speech, he repeated his claims: “The indictment presented in the court case (against Reza Zarrab) in US is a conspiracy against Turkey. ... It is a coup d’état on international level”.¹⁰ Erdogan’s message was made explicit by the prominent pro-AKP commentator Abdülkadir Selvi, who contributes to the country’s biggest daily, *Hürriyet*: “Erdogan is aware of the fact that the real target of the arrow is himself. For the first time, he made it very clear yesterday. He said it (the court case) is an American conspiracy against Turkey”.¹¹

In speeches in which the intention evidently is to counter accusations that he and his government have helped Reza Zarrab and profited from his business deals,¹² Erdogan’s own “scenario” was that the whole Western world, especially the USA, was against Him and stood behind the diverse organizations who were fighting against Turkey - the PKK, the IS as well as the so-called Fetullah Gülen Movement all at the same time and in coordination. The opposition in Turkey was treacherous and collaborated with the imperialist Westerners.

This implausible thesis of the three organizations in question being orchestrated by the U.S. “to punish, judge and discredit us” as Erdogan put it in the speech, and eventually destroy Turkey, was first put forward a year earlier by the daily *Sabah*, the flagship of Turkey’s pro-government media. On December 5, 2016, it carried a postulational headline: “It is very clear that Daesh (Islamic State), the PKK and FETÖ are acting together”.¹³ Thus, these quite different organizations were attacking Turkey in a coordinated campaign. Importantly, the coordinator behind them was the rather

⁹ *Daily News* 2017: “US trying to discredit Turkey for not submitting to ‘scenarios’: Erdoğan”. 3 December.

¹⁰ Anadolu Ajansı 2017: “Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan: Amerika’daki dava bir cambaza bak cambaza oyunudur” (Erdogan: The trial in the US is all humbug). 5 December. <https://www.ntv.com.tr/turkiye/cumhurbaskani-erdoganamerikadaki-dava-bir-cambaza-bak-cambaza-oyunudur,tiwFLQKwv0CBHYCOo9sNug>

¹¹ Selvi, Abdülkadir 2017: “Erdoganin yeni savasi” (Erdogan’s new war). *Hürriyet*, 6 December.

¹² von Hein, Shabnam 2017: Erdogan's 'Goldfinger' on trial in US. DW, 30.9. Erdogan's family is said to have profited from Zarrab's business deals. <http://www.dw.com/en/erdogans-goldfinger-on-trial-in-us/a-35932473>; Tremblay, Pinar 2017: Turkey's creative schemes aim to discredit Zarrab case in US. *Al-monitor*. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/11/turkey-united-states-akp-tries-discredit-zarrab.html#ixzz50fZ2RJvI>

¹³ Initially *Sabah* put forward a softer version of the claim: ““PKK, FETÖ and Islamic state overlap”. *Sabah* 2016: “PKK, FETÖ, PYD, DAİŞ ve YPG birbiriyle örtüşüyor”. *Sabah*, 4.8.2016.

ubiquitous and all-powerful “mastermind” (üst akıl), a conspirational power that President Erdogan, according to commentator Mustafa Akyol, invented in 2015. At the time, the term “mastermind” was a euphemism the AKP-supporters used for the U.S. However, especially after the failed coup in July 2015, the pro-government media and more recently president Erdogan himself began to attack the U. S. openly.

Akyol asserts that Sabah’s claim that these groups are coordinated by a single major manipulator is not unique, but rather a political narrative that one can read in Turkey’s pro-government media literally every single day.¹⁴ Besides being advanced by the pro-government media, anti-Western conspiracy theories, which Akyol puts forward, make up “today’s official ideology”.¹⁵

Oriental Fundamentalism and Occidentalism

Besides “conspiracy theories” another concept has become popular among pundits critical of President Erdogan and the government: Oriental Fundamentalism and Occidentalism, which are used synonymously. Etyen Mahcupyan, a prominent Turkish-Armenian intellectual, put forward that the fashionable thesis among the ruling elite in 2015 is “Oriental Fundamentalism”, which with an essentialist approach constructs the West as “the eternal ‘other’”.¹⁶ This fundamentalism tries to reimagine a golden past going as far back as pre-Ottoman times casting “Turkish Muslims” as at constant war with “Christians”. Another public intellectual is the above-mentioned Mustafa Akyol, who defines it as an ideological tendency, which “begins by depicting the West as inherently immoral and treacherous, and it goes on with an authoritarian ambition to de-Westernize society”.¹⁷

Both authors underline emphatically that one must differentiate between raising reasonable criticism and objections against concrete western policies and claiming that the West is essentially and ontologically evil and corrupt.

One of the earliest observers of this ideological tendency in various nationalist, nativist and revolutionary movements was the Syrian philosopher Sadik Jalal al-Azm. He did not use the term Occidentalism, but described the phenomenon as “ontological Orientalism in reverse” and illustrated that this tendency is popular among nationalist

¹⁴ Akyol, Mustafa 2017: Why Turkish government pushes ‘global conspiracy’ narrative. *Al-monitor*, January 9.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Mahcupyan, Etyen 2015: Doğu fundamentalizmi (Oriental fundamentalism). *Aksam*, 21.07.

¹⁷ Akyol, Mustafa 2017: “‘Earth is flat,’ pro-Erdogan youth leader argues”. *Al-Monitor*, 11 September.

and nativist Arab intellectuals.¹⁸ His critique against this tendency was not less harsh than his critique of Orientalism. Summing up his criticisms, he wrote: (It) is, in the end, no less reactionary, mystifying, ahistorical and anti-human than Ontological Orientalism proper”.¹⁹

Al-Azm’s article is first published in 1981. Many years later in 2004 Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit published Occidentalism and defined it as “(t)he dehumanizing picture of the West painted by its enemies”.²⁰ They trace the roots of this idea in European romanticism and put forward that it was subsequently transferred to other parts of the world. They stress that Occidentalism is as reductive as Orientalism: “To diminish an entire society or a civilization to a mass of soulless, decadent, money-grubbing, rootless, faithless, unfeeling parasites is a form of intellectual destruction.”²¹

Conclusion

Commenting on the Reza Zarrab case, Mahcupyan writes that this case seems to aim to put political pressure on Turkey rather than to keep up judicial principles. However, those who gave the prosecutors this opportunity, according to him, are no one other than the government and Erdogan himself.²²

Mahcupyan thinks the government should stop curtailing democratic rights and expand freedoms and liberties. All sections of society, the pious and the secular, the Turks and the Kurds, the Sunnis and the Alevis should be included in political life. He comes with a warning: “If the government cannot get over the political diseases of cementing its own electoral base, disguised irredentism and latent Occidentalism, Turkey will in the near future face troubled times. Populism and loudmouthed jingoism will not lead us anywhere”.²³

¹⁸ Al-Azm, Sadik Jalal 2000: “Orientalism and Orientalism in Reverse” in Macfie (ed.), A. L. 2000: *Orientalism. A Reader*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. P. 230-237.

¹⁹ Ibid.: 237.

²⁰ Buruma, Ian & Margalit, Avishai 2004: *Occidentalism. The West in the Eyes of its Enemies*. London: Penguin Books. P. 5.

²¹ Ibid.: 10.

²² Mahcupyan, Etyen 2017: ”Türkiye bağımlılıktan nasıl kurtulur?” (How can Turkey free itself from dependency?). *Karar*, 08.12.

²³ Mahcupyan, Etyen 2017: Başarı hikayesi nerede? (Where is the success story?) *Karar*, 21.03.