

How a Defunct U.S. Initiative from 2004 Continues to Fuel Anti-Americanism in Turkey

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Brief Analysis

In Turkey, Washington's perceived unilateral interventionist policies and its support for authoritarian regimes has created the conditions for conspiracy theories such as BOP.

When U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken visited Turkey in November 2023, the license plate of his vehicle [created \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g2OK3OHLduM\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g2OK3OHLduM) a wave of [excitement \(https://www.yenicaggazetesi.com.tr/abd-disisleri-bakaninin-konvoyunda-bop-plakali-arac-ankarada-bu-plaka-dolasti-730520h.htm\)](https://www.yenicaggazetesi.com.tr/abd-disisleri-bakaninin-konvoyunda-bop-plakali-arac-ankarada-bu-plaka-dolasti-730520h.htm) among Turkish [nationalists \(https://www.veryansintv.com/blinkenin-ziyaretinde-bop-plakali-arac/\)](https://www.veryansintv.com/blinkenin-ziyaretinde-bop-plakali-arac/). Blinken came to meet with Turkish foreign minister Hakan Fidan to discuss Hamas's October 7 attack on Israel, Israel's military operation in Gaza, Turkey's veto of Swedish membership in NATO, and Turkey's expected F-16 purchase from the United States. Yet despite the many issues on the agenda, Turkish media focused on the license plate of Blinken's Land Cruiser, which had the letters "BOP," which for Turks called to mind a U.S. project launched in 2004. Originally called the Greater Middle East Initiative and later known as the Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative, the project is known in Turkish as BOP, and Turkish media quickly deciphered the [message \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C6aVDAToG-U\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C6aVDAToG-U) from Washington: "No matter what you do, we will implement the BOP."

The initiative, one of many ambitious U.S. projects to transform the Middle East, which the George W. Bush administration planned to present at the G8 Summit in June 2004, [relied \(https://www.jstor.org/stable/4330417\)](https://www.jstor.org/stable/4330417) mainly on Arab Human Development Reports identifying "freedom, gender, and knowledge deficits" as three critical and common problems for Arab states. Accordingly, it [included \(https://www.jstor.org/stable/4330417\)](https://www.jstor.org/stable/4330417) three major reform areas intended to make the region modern and prosperous: "'promoting democracy and good governance;' 'building a knowledge society;' and closing the 'prosperity gap' between the Middle East and the more developed parts of the world." One could argue that the BOP was in fact a response to the rise of Islamism, a project

to support "good Muslims" against "bad Muslims." Nevertheless, this ambitious project was stillborn in the face of hostile reactions by Arab states like Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Al-Hayat, an Arabic-language newspaper based in London, reported on the project in February 2004, and for the next few months, Arab intellectuals and journalists **criticized** (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/4330417>) the BOP, with the support of their regimes, as a sinister American plan to secure U.S. interests and maintain global hegemony. After an intensive diplomatic and public opinion campaign in the Arab world, the Bush administration decided to wind down the project, emphasizing the importance of stability and give the leading role to Middle Eastern countries as the only actors that could carry out such a reform. By June 2004, the initiative was dead.

The question is, why did it have such a long afterlife in Turkey, which was not among the countries that the BOP aimed to transform, and in fact, was a kind of model that Washington policymakers suggested other countries copy or use as inspiration. This is why Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, then serving as Turkish prime minister, exaggerated his role and claimed to be co-president of the BOP. In fact, Turkey, together with Italy and Yemen, was **chairing** (https://www.ab.gov.tr/siteimages/birimler/kpb/tr_rep_20061998/2004_tr_rap.pdf) the Democracy Assistance Dialogue established under the BOP. Erdoğan explained Turkey's role as leading the region in terms of women rights and democratic governance. Nevertheless, Turkish public opinion, including ultranationalists, Kemalists, leftists, and Islamists, perceived the initiative as a U.S. conspiracy, and it has become the Turkish opposition's primary instrument for criticizing Erdoğan and his foreign policy. Nearly nineteen years after the Bush administration shelved the BOP, an Islamist party produced a propaganda video for the 2023 elections targeting President Erdoğan by reminding voters of his self-proclaimed lead role in the project.

The BOP became a symbolic target for anti-American and anti-Semitic feelings in Turkey. During the Cold War, various bilateral crises caused the rise of anti-Americanism among leftists and Islamists. In the 1990s, the terrorism of the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party) and Operation Provide Comfort, the American operation to protect the Kurds from the Saddam regime, led to anti-Americanism among nationalists, who saw the operation as a step toward carving out a Kurdish state from Turkey. In the 2000s, the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the humiliating arrest of Turkish soldiers by U.S. Special Forces in northern Iraq in 2003 turned public opinion against the United States. Against this background, the BOP was viewed as the expression of an American conspiracy to divide Turkey's territory as part of a larger redrawing of Middle East borders. Turkish foreign policy pundits attempt to prove this by citing to a Washington Post **article** (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/2003/08/07/transforming-the-middle-east/2a267aac-4136-45ad-972f-106ac91e5acd/>), penned in 2003 by Condoleezza Rice, then serving as U.S. national security advisor ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Security_Advisor_\(United_States\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Security_Advisor_(United_States))), which called on the administration to repeat the economic and democratic restructuring of post-World War II Europe in the Middle East by supporting local democratic actors. These pundits saw the article as a **promise** (<https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/yazarlar/2017/09/25/buyuk-ortadogu-projesi-uygulamaya-mi-konuldu>) to change the borders of twenty-two Middle Eastern countries, including Turkey.

Rice's article is not the only evidence the pundits adduce. An imaginary Middle East map, published in the Armed Forces Journal in 2006, usually goes hand in hand with the BOP in public **discussions** (<https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/yazarlar/2017/10/09/bopun-haritasi-var-mi>) in Turkey. The **article** (<http://armedforcesjournal.com/blood-borders/>) with the map was written by Ralph Peters, a retired U.S. Army lieutenant colonel and political analyst. Brainstorming on Middle East peace, Peters suggested alternative Middle Eastern borders that he felt would be fairer to "cheated" population groups like the Kurds. Probably few people took the map seriously then and far fewer still remember it in Washington today, but Peters and his map are still quite popular in Turkey.

Another goal of the BOP, an average Turkish analyst would **argue** (<https://www.tevhidhaber.com/banu-avar-asil->

[amac-buyuk-israilden-de-ote-131424h.htm](#)), is securing and expanding Israel by making the surrounding Muslim countries unstable, smaller, and weaker, thereby making them easy prey for the Zionists to establish Greater Israel. The instruments that Turkish analysts believe are being used to implement the BOP also explain why this conspiracy theory is still handy. The first instrument is certainly the Kurds. Establishing a Kurdish state was a task that the European powers failed to complete at the division of the Ottoman Empire after World War I, and Turkish nationalists see the Kurdish nationalist movement not as a genuine quest for political, social, and cultural rights, but as a foreign conspiracy against Turkey's territorial integrity. They view the BOP as a useful way of explaining Kurdish terrorism and U.S.-Kurdish relations, particularly in Iraq and northern Syria, and of mobilizing Turkish public opinion and legitimizing repressive measures against the Kurds.

The second imaginary instrument is the Islamists, an idea that Turkish nationalists have used to delegitimize the Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) government and Erdoğan, who, as noted, publicly acknowledged his role in the project. In their view, the United States promoted and assisted Islamists all around the region, just like [Israel \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZtGiV85TwY\)](#), which supported Islamist fanatics to weaken more reasonable Palestinian nationalists. Thus, Washington allegedly aimed to bring down secular Middle Eastern regimes. From this perspective, Erdoğan and his party are American projects working against the Turkish state. Erdoğan's support for allowing U.S. troops to open a northern front against the Saddam regime in 2003 was part of this project, [argued \(https://twitter.com/eczozgurozel/status/1763663105278537921\)](#) Republican People's Party (CHP) leader Ozgur Ozel in a social media post in April 2024.

Turkish nationalists and Kemalists are not the only groups that talk about the BOP. It appeals to Islamists, too, who see it as an American project to divide Muslim countries. Even pro-Erdoğan [journalists \(https://m.haber7.com/yazarlar/ibrahim-karagul/404434-bop-suikastlerinin-sifreleri-cozuluyor\)](#) and AKP [parliamentarians \(https://www.facebook.com/kemalizmm007/videos/akpli-vekil-bop-yahudi-men%25C5%259Feli-israil-men%25C5%259Feli-bir-projedir/142824599186232/\)](#) frequently refer to the BOP to explain U.S. policies in the region.

This is not a simple misunderstanding or misreading of U.S. intentions, but is based on a view of the United States as an omnipotent and omnipresent force that can foresee and plan years ahead— even a hundred years. It is a common misperception in Turkey that great powers like the United States (and Great Britain) make century-long plans, like the BOP. For this reason, everything that happens in the region, particularly groundbreaking events and political shocks, is seen as an intentional act by the United States. Indeed, events like the Arab Spring, the 2017 Kurdish referendum, and Hamas's October 7 attack on Israel lead to new waves of discussions about the BOP in Turkey.

In a nutshell, the BOP symbolizes and explains the existential insecurities of the Turkish state. Ultimately, however, it is just a symbol. Regional backlash against Washington's unilateral interventionist policies, viewing the region only through security lenses, lack of social, economic, and cultural policies, and U.S. support for authoritarian regimes has created the conditions for such conspiracy theories. Moreover, if Erdoğan had not publicly embraced the BOP, the project most likely would not have had such a long afterlife in Turkey. In a post-Erdoğan Turkey, the concept might lose its appeal, but anti-Americanism is a larger [phenomenon \(https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/mepo.12674\)](#) than the BOP. Post-Erdoğan Turkey will probably find new symbols better suited to the new political environment. But until then, the BOP will remain the main American plan to divide Turkey. ❖



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