

How Conspiracy Theories Spread

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Articles & Testimony

How and why do conspiracy theories spread in Turkey? Recent developments are a case in point, demonstrating the role of government rhetoric in spreading such theories, as well as anti-Western sentiments.

Lately, Turkey has experienced a spike in Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, terror attacks, resulting in more than 50 deaths in less than two months. This violence has been chipping away at the standing of the ruling Justice and Development Party, or AKP, pushing the party to shift focus on the issue and blame not the PKK, but Israel and clandestine actors for the attacks.

The party, for instance, now refers to the PKK as a "subcontractor" (taseron), suggesting that Israel and invisible actors, not the PKK itself, are responsible for the terror attacks. At the same time, the AKP has also begun labeling domestic and international media that have been critical of its foreign policy as other "subcontractors" puppeteered by the same forces that are "behind the PKK." These two new conspiracies are laying roots in Turkey. Here is how.

As soon as the May 31 Gaza flotilla incident took place, AKP officials started to imply that Israel was behind the PKK terror attacks that had, hours earlier, killed seven Turkish soldiers in a rocket attack on a naval base in the Mediterranean port city of Iskenderun. Speaking on the day's events, AKP Deputy Chairman Huseyin Celik condemned Israel, but also made a connection between Israel and the PKK attack: "On the same day [as the flotilla incident], there was an attack on a military unit in Iskenderun. We also condemn this act of terror. We do not think that it is a coincidence that these two attacks took place at the same time."

On June 9, the AKP government voted "no" to U.S.-led sanctions against Iran's nuclear project. This development prompted a barrage of criticism of the AKP's foreign policy, at home and internationally. The AKP leader, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, strategically shifted the blame, tying such criticism to "subcontractors."

Erdogan said at the Turkish-Arab Forum held in Istanbul on June 10 that "the word 'media' is associated with Israel and Israeli administration around the world... they have the capability to manipulate as they please as far as this matter is concerned." The next day, in Trabzon, he rebuked the media again for its role as a conspirator: "International media, as supported by Israel, make the very same claims [of Turkey breaking away from the West]. They receive their instructions from the same place."

On June 11, Erdogan spoke on Turkish foreign policy: "And yet as we make an effort to increase the level of cooperation, an insidious hand gets involved in the matter right away. So far, they have managed to design world politics, foreign policy, with this black propaganda, with these aggressive headlines.... Get a hold of those papers published in Israel and put them on the table, and then put those certain well-known papers in Turkey next to those, and believe me, you will see no difference between the two, with the exception of language. This is because these are subcontractors [sic]."

On June 15, speaking, at an AKP parliamentary meeting, Erdogan again addressed Turkey's "subcontractors," saying "we shall not submit to that black propaganda. Neither that of the international nor the local media.... We shall never

flinch in speaking the truth in the face of the stale campaigns of the subcontractors within Turkey.... They have of course mobilized those press organizations they provide support for, or the ones that support Israel, as they always do. There are those who support this in Turkey as well... I am very sorry to report that the black propaganda against Turkey, initiated and currently maintained by Israeli supported international media, is openly supported by certain known press organizations within Turkey.... We know the real meaning between the lines in those headlines, and the motive behind them all too well."

As PKK attacks persisted, Erdogan continued to shift the blame. On June 20, one Turkish soldier was killed and one was wounded during a PKK ambush in the southeastern province of Elazig. In a speech in Van the same day, Erdogan commented on the increase in PKK violence: "We know whose subcontractor the PKK is."

Other AKP leaders have joined Erdogan in promoting the "subcontractor" conspiracy. On June 19, during a press conference concluding an AKP delegation's visit to the United States, Vice Chairman Omer Celik was asked whether current criticisms were being leveled at Turkey or the AKP. He responded: "Israel is attempting to portray current events as stemming from Prime Minister Erdogan. We know what these efforts mean. Those who know Turkish history will recognize that this propaganda is simply an attempt to provoke a coup, or other undemocratic ends."

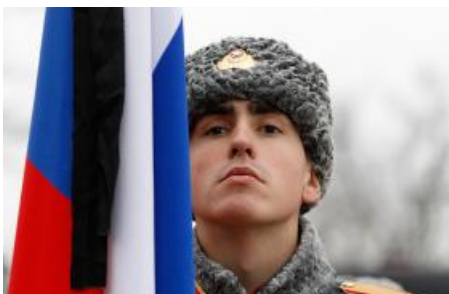
Similarly, speaking at an AKP town hall meeting in Diyarbakir on June 20, deputy chairman Abdulkadir Aksu reacted to the PKK's attack the previous day in Semdinli, saying, "The PKK subcontracts here and there, for numerous entities."

These recent events in Turkey demonstrate how government rhetoric spreads conspiracy theories that ferment anti-Western sentiments. Once the authorities spread such theories, they become part of mainstream thinking, making it difficult to tackle them. The lesson is simple: spreading conspiracy theories is similar to letting the genie out of the bottle; once the authorities promote such theories, it is already too late.

Soner Cagaptay is a senior fellow and director of the [Turkish Research Program \(template102.php?SID=12\)](#) at The Washington Institute. Jaclyn Blumenfeld and Burc Ozcelik are research interns at the Institute. ❖

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