

Blaming 'Subcontractors': Turkish Rhetoric, the PKK, and Israel

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Articles & Testimony

Over the past two months, Turkey has experienced a spike in terrorist attacks by the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), resulting in more than fifty deaths. The increased violence -- coming after a relative lull in such attacks -- has touched raw nerves among the population. As a result, the issue is fast becoming a key driver of domestic politics, eroding the grip of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP).

In response, the AKP has shifted focus on the issue, blaming other actors for the attacks instead of the PKK. Specifically, Ankara now refers to the PKK as "the subcontractor" (taseron), suggesting that Israel and/or clandestine forces are directing the group's activities. The AKP has hurled similar accusations at domestic and international media deemed to be critical of its foreign policy, including its support for the Gaza flotilla and its June 9 "no" vote on Iran sanctions at the UN Security Council.

Blaming Israel for PKK Attacks

Following the May 31 Gaza flotilla incident, AKP officials began to publicly imply that Israel was behind PKK violence in Turkey. Only hours before Israel's raid on the flotilla, a PKK rocket attack had killed seven Turkish soldiers and wounded another six at a naval base in the Mediterranean port of Iskenderun. Speaking on the day's events, AKP deputy chairman Huseyin Celik condemned Israel and linked the incidents: "On the same day [of the flotilla raid], 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."

Speaker of the parliament and AKP deputy Mehmet Ali Sahin made similar insinuations regarding the PKK attack: "Who ordered them to pull the trigger? Who was behind them? What do they want, what are their objectives?...I do not consider this to be a simple, straightforward terrorist attack."

Erdogan's Conspiracy Theories

Following on the heels of the flotilla controversy, the AKP's June 9 decision to oppose U.S.-led sanctions against Iran's nuclear program spurred further criticism of the party's foreign policy, both at home and internationally. In response, Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan shifted the blame, tying such criticism to "subcontractors."

At the June 10 Turkish-Arab Forum in Istanbul, for example, he claimed that "the word 'media' is associated with Israel and Israeli administration around the world.... [T]hey have the capability to manipulate as they please as far as this matter is concerned." The next day in Trabzon, he again rebuked the media as a conspirator: "International media, as supported by Israel, has 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, claiming that the international community is "disturbed by the fact that we are getting closer to our Arab brothers to whom we had turned our back...for centuries at end." He continued: "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."

His accusations resumed on June 13: "They are trying to justify the barbaric assaults they have launched. They may fool everyone, but Turkey does not and shall not be fooled by these tricks. Their lies, their allegations, their black propaganda, these won't stick on us. We shall neither submit to their black propaganda, nor compromise our stance as far as their subcontractors within Turkey are concerned."

Erdogan's polemics against the media culminated in a June 15 speech at an AKP parliamentary meeting: "We shall not submit to that black propaganda...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 continued, Erdogan applied his subcontractor rhetoric to that issue as well. On June 20, one Turkish soldier was killed and another wounded during a PKK ambush in the southeastern province of Elazig. In a speech in Van on the same day, Erdogan declared, "We know whose subcontractor the PKK

is."

On June 22, four Turkish soldiers and one civilian were killed by a roadside bomb in Istanbul. The Kurdish Freedom Hawks (TAK), a terrorist organization with ties to the PKK, claimed responsibility for the attack. Erdogan again shifted the blame, telling AKP deputies, "Some have been discomforted by our designation of the PKK as a subcontracting entity. For an organization entirely cut off from external financing to stay on its feet and buy weapons is impossible."

Others Follow Erdogan's Example

Other AKP leaders have since joined Erdogan in blaming sinister subcontractors (whether from Israel, Turkey, or elsewhere) for criticizing the party's foreign policy. On June 19, during a press conference concluding a visit to the United States, AKP vice chairman Omer Celik was asked whether recent criticisms had been aimed at Turkey or his ruling party. 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."

Elsewhere, at a June 20 AKP meeting in Osmaniye, deputy chairman Ekrem Erdem maintained that "whenever good things start to happen in Turkey, we see an increase in terrorism. The PKK is an extension of the Ergenekon structure [referring to the alleged 2009 coup plot]. The number of terrorist acts increases when there are positive developments in the country."

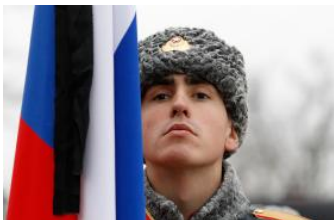
Similarly, speaking the same day at an AKP town hall meeting in Diyarbakir, deputy chairman Abdulkadir Aksu reacted to the previous day's attack in Semdinli, saying "the PKK subcontracts here and there, for numerous entities." More recently, Huseyin Celik commented on the PKK during a July 18 speech in Van: "The powers that sold the PKK mines and those who sold Turkey mine detectors are the same."

Conclusion

Ongoing events in Turkey demonstrate how government rhetoric can create and spread conspiracy theories. Once the authorities disseminate such ideas, they become part of mainstream thinking, making them difficult to reverse. The United States and European Union need to be on guard in case anti-American and anti-Western sentiments become part of the narrative as well. The key to countering conspiracy theories in Turkey is to ensure that the AKP government does not spread them to begin with -- tackling such theories after they emerge may be too late.

Soner Cagaptay is a senior fellow and director of the [Turkish Research Program \(/template102.php?SID=12&newActiveSubNav=Turkish%20Research%20Program&activeSubNavLink=template102.php%3FSID%3D12&newActiveNav=researchPrograms\)](#) at The Washington Institute. He would like to thank Institute interns Jaclyn Blumenfeld and Burc Ozcelik for their research contributions to this report. ❖

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