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Trick, trap, treason: conspiracy theories on Turkey's internal and external enemies (2002-2022)

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Glossary and abbreviations

AKP (a.k.a. AK [White] Party):	The Justice and Development Party (<i>Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi</i>), founded by Erdoğan in 2001. Has been in power since 2002.
Bahçeli, Devlet:	Leader of the conservative-nationalist and far-right MHP since 1997.
BDP:	Pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi) that was founded in 2008. Joined the HDP in 2014.
Baykal, Deniz:	CHP leader from 1992 to 2010 with short intervals.
CHP:	The Republican People's Party (<i>Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi</i>), founded by Mustafa Kemal [Atatürk] as People's Party in 1923.
Erdoğan, Recep Tayyip.	Prime Minister of Turkey between 2002 and 2014. President of Turkey since 2014.
HDP:	Pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (Halkların Demokratik Partisi) that became influential after 2015.
İP:	Workers' Party (<i>İşçi Partisi</i>). Their ideology is left-wing nationalist and <i>ulusalçı</i> . The party was founded by Doğu Perinçek in 1992. Not to be confused with the Turkish Workers' Party.
Kılıçdaroğlu, Kemal.	The leader of the CHP between 2010 and 2024.
MHP:	The Nationalist Movement Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi), founded in 1969. In an alliance with Erdoğan's AKP since 2016.
Millî Görüş:	"National/Islamist Vision". A Muslim conservative social and political movement affiliated with the Islamist ideology of Erbakan and his Welfare Party.
MİT (Milli İstihbarat Teşkilatı)	The National Intelligence Organisation of Turkey founded in 1965.
Öcalan, Abdullah:	Founder and leader of the PKK, imprisoned in İmralı since 1999.
PKK:	Workers Party of Kurdistan founded in 1978. Illegal armed-guerrilla branch of the Kurdish political movement. Considered as a terrorist organisation by Turkey, the EU, and the US.
PYD:	Democratic Union Party in Syria. Accepted as the Syrian wing of the PKK.

- RP: The Welfare Party (*Refah Partisi*). An Islamist political party, affiliated with the Millî Görüş movement, founded by Erbakan in 1983 and banned by the Constitutional Court in 1998.
- Ulusalcı(lık): A strand of nationalism specific to Turkey. Emerged in the 1990s and inspired by Kemalism. Belongs to the left side of the spectrum of Turkish nationalism.
- YPG: People's Defence Units. Armed wing of the PYD.

INTRODUCTION

CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND TURKEY: THE BASICS

Chapter outline

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My nation [...] You saw the trick played [on us]. You felt the trap that was set up. You understood the target of the assaults [...] this scheme [which is targeting us] inside and outside [...] We have all its documents. We are going to reveal this network of treason.

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, by-then Prime Minister of Turkey, uttered these words at a rally titled “Respect to National Will” (*Milli İradeye Saygı*) at the height of the Gezi Protests in June 2013. The demonstrations had begun as an environmentalist protest but then turned into massive widespread protests throughout Turkey. Rather than addressing the perceived social and political problems of his administration that caused hundreds of thousands of people to join demonstrations in all but one city of Turkey, Erdoğan opted for a traditional strategy in Turkish politics, resorting to conspiracy theories, blaming external powers and internal elements jointly.

During the first two decades of the Erdoğan administration (2002-2022), conspiracy theories were used first against Erdoğan and his party, the AKP, by their political opponents, and then by Erdoğan and the AKP themselves to exclude his political opponents. In both cases, the actors that resorted to conspiracy theories portrayed their opponents as the internal enemy and linked them to external enemies. Turkey’s historical legacy was also brought into the picture to portray the current alleged conspiracies as linked to past real or imagined ones.

Conspiracy theories that emerged during the Erdoğan administration did not originate spontaneously. On the contrary, Turkey has a long history of blaming political, economic, and social problems on internal and external enemies. In an article published in 1991, historian and sociologist Şerif Mardin defined conspiracy theories as “Turkey’s philosophy of history.”² Although conspiracy theories could be observed all around the world, I argue in this thesis that the more-than-two-decade Erdoğan administration confirms Mardin’s view. I hope to show that the Erdoğan period in Turkey demonstrated how conspiracy theories and blaming internal and external powers have become integral components of contemporary Turkish political discourse.

This thesis is about the defining characteristics of political conspiracy theories in Turkey. How is the discourse on internal and external enemies constructed in Turkey, and how are historical references employed in daily politics to exclude political actors by linking internal threats to external ones? Before moving onto the subject matter, it is useful to first provide an overview to the topic and describe its characteristics using definitions.

¹ Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, 15 June 2013, quoted in Muhammer Ferik, *Recep Tayyip Erdoğanlı Yıllar* (İstanbul: E-kitap Projesi, 2015), 1314. Unless stated otherwise, all the emphasis throughout this chapter and the thesis (highlights in *italics*) is mine.

² Şerif Mardin, “The Nakshibendi Order in Turkish History,” in *Islam in Modern Turkey. Religion, Politics and Literature in a Secular State*, ed. Richard Tapper (London: I.B. Tauris, 1991), 122, quoted in Hamit Bozarslan, “Komplo teorileri Üzerine Tartışmalara Bir Katkı,” in *Birikim* 183 (July 2004): 19.

A. Characteristics of conspiracy theories

1. What is in a name: Definitions and terminology

Conspiracy comes from the Latin word *conspirare*, which means “breathing together.” More broadly, a conspiracy could be defined as “a secret plan on the part of a group to influence events partly by covert action.”³ As far as research and academia are concerned, while *conspiracy* is a very old concept dating back to Ancient Greece, *conspiracy theory* is a product of modernism, and the oldest use of the phrase recorded so far is from 1863.⁴ Although the term *conspiracy theory* is frequently used both in academic literature and everyday discourse, it defies a simple definition. I define *conspiracy theories* (hereafter CTs) as assertive statements intended to explain events or circumstances by suggesting that things are not what they seem and that there are hidden forces aiming to put their malicious intentions into practice.

A remarkable relationship exists between conspiracy and CTs. On the surface, the case could be made that the line between conspiracy and CT is a blurry one. Daniel Pipes –who had controversial publications about the history of the Middle East and CTs (of whom more anon)– defines a CT simply as “the non-existent version of a conspiracy.”⁵ This approach is problematic for two reasons. The first is that it is a reductionist definition that omits essential parts of CTs. The second is that, as some academics, including Pipes himself point out, some CTs can turn out to be true, or they might have an element of truth, meaning the conspiracy (even if partially) did exist in the first place.⁶ As Jeffrey Bale states, the difference between genuine conspiracies and conspiratorial politics has mostly been ignored.⁷ Bale argues that while the sinister activities of secret groups are real and occur regularly, CTs are “essentially elaborate fables.”⁸ To give an example from Turkish history, one can compare the conspiratorial politics of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) and CTs that surrounded them. The CUP ruled the Ottoman Empire during its last decade and was responsible for the Armenian Genocide. Historian Alp Yenen argues that while the policies of the CUP involved genuine conspiracies, some of the CTs about them were products of fantasies.⁹ It could also be argued that conspiracies are very different from

³ Charles Pigden, “Popper revisited, or what is wrong with conspiracy theories?” *Philosophy of the social sciences* 25-1 (March 1995): 5.

⁴ Joseph Roisman, *The Rhetoric of Conspiracy in Ancient Athens* (UCLA Press, 2006); Victoria Emma Pagan ed., *Conspiracy Narratives in Roman History* (NY: University of Texas Press, 2005). The earliest usage of the term “conspiracy theory” seems to be from 1863, in a letter to the editor, printed in the *New York Times*, in which the author Charles Astor Bristed is referring to the claim that during the American Civil War, British nobles deliberately harmed the US for their own interests, as a “conspiracy theory.” Charles Astor Bristed, “English Insincerity on the Slavery Question,” *The New York Times*, 11 January 1863, 3.

⁵ Daniel Pipes, *The Hidden Hand: Middle East Fears of Conspiracy* (NY: Saint Martin’s Press, 1996), 10.

⁶ Pipes, *Ibid*, 325-352; Cass R. Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule, “Symposium on Conspiracy Theories: Conspiracy Theories: Causes and Cures,” *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 17- 2 (2009): 206.

⁷ Jeffrey M. Bale, “Political paranoia v. political realism: on distinguishing between bogus conspiracy theories and genuine conspiratorial politics,” *Patterns of Prejudice* 41-1 (2007): 45 and 47-50.

⁸ *Ibid*, 48.

⁹ Alp Yenen, “The Young Turk Aftermath: Making Sense of Transnational Contentious Politics at the End of the Ottoman Empire, 1918–1922,” (PhD Diss., University of Basel, 2019), 9-10; Yenen “Elusive Forces in Illusive

CTs in the sense that, while the “author” of a conspiracy is a conspiracist who plans and executes a secret action, the author of a CT is someone who tries to explain reality in an alternative way, often through some speculation and imagination.

Conspiracies almost always attract CTs; where there is a conspiracy, there is often a CT.¹⁰ However, the two do not point in the same direction; their conclusions are often completely different. As an example, there is no doubt that the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in November 1963 in Dallas, Texas was a conspiracy. However, the results of the Warren Commission that was tasked to investigate the assassination and the “results” of the CTs are diametrically opposed. While the Warren Commission concluded that the murderer Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone (having found no evidence to the contrary), numerous CTs about the assassination of Kennedy point to the CIA and Vice President Lyndon Johnson as internal; and Cuba, Russian secret service KGB, and the mafia as possible external connections.¹¹ The relationship between CTs and conspiracy does not necessarily work the other way around; the presence of a CT does not always necessitate the existence of a genuine conspiracy.

A word that is used frequently within the studies of CTs is *paranoia*. The main reason for this could be attributed to the seminal work “The Paranoid Style in American Politics” in 1964 by the American historian Richard Hofstadter.¹² In discussing CTs, Hofstadter famously argued that what characterises “the paranoid style” is “the curious leap in imagination that is always made at some critical point.”¹³ Hofstadter himself, who used the phrase “political paranoid,” stated that he was “not speaking in a clinical sense, but borrowing a clinical term for other purposes.”¹⁴ Following the study of Hofstadter, the word *paranoia*, along with *delusion* or similar pathological terms, was used in studies about CTs.¹⁵ Various scholars, including Hofstadter himself, admitted its pejorative nature.¹⁶ However, scholars also noted the “similarity between delusional systems of paranoids and plots imagined by conspiracy theorists.”¹⁷ The

Eyes: British Officialdom’s Perception of the Anatolian Resistance Movement,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 54-5 (2018): 788–810, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00263206.2018.1462161>.

¹⁰ Christoph Herzog, “Small and Large Scale Conspiracy Theories and Their Problems: An Example from Turkey,” in *Conspiracy Theories in the United States and the Middle East: A Comparative Approach*, ed. Michael Butter and Maurus Reinkowski (De Gruyter, 2014), 209.

¹¹ For a summary of CTs and their criticism about the assassination of Kennedy, see Peter Knight, *Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to X-Files* (Oxford: Routledge, 2000), 76-117. Knight rightly argued that, while there might be certain unidentified/unrevealed points about the assassination of Kennedy, CTs about this incident advocate that “the whole of American history is somehow linked to those seven seconds in Dealey Plaza.” Knight, *Ibid*, 77.

¹² Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964).

¹³ *Ibid*, 37.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 3.

¹⁵ Robert Robins and Jerold Post, *Political Paranoia: The Psychopolitics of Hatred* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997). For a relatively early discussion of the “paranoid mind” and seeing CTs as delusions, see Erich Wulff, “Paranoid Conspiratory Delusion” in *Changing Conceptions of Conspiracy*, ed. Carl F. Graumann and Serge Moscovici (Springer, 1987), 171-90. Wulff, who incorporates Freudian approach in his analysis as well, does not necessarily see conspiracism as paranoia, but merely discusses it.

¹⁶ Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style*, 5; Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy*, 9.

¹⁷ Barkun, *Ibid*, 8.

word *paranoia* also went hand-in-hand with describing CTs as a social malaise or a mental illness.

In discussing the terminology about CTs, the difference between those who conspire and those who resort to CTs matter. For those who conspire, the term typically used is *conspirator*. For those who resort to –or have a tendency to resort to– CTs, there is a rich vocabulary, most of them being variations of *conspiracism*, including *conspiracy thinking*, *conspiracist mindset*, *conspiracist mentality*, among more.¹⁸ I will be using the word *conspirator* to describe someone who (or is claimed to) conspire, and *conspiracist* to refer to someone who resorts to CTs. This usage of the word *conspiracist* does not bear an essentialist content. In this thesis, a conspiracist does not imply a pathological mindset/mentality but merely a person or group who is resorting to CTs to explain political complexity. To give an example, regarding the attacks on the World Trade Centre on September 11, 2001 (from now on, 9/11), the Al-Qaeda members who hijacked the planes and deliberately flew them into the Twin Towers are *conspirators*, and those who blame the US government for knowing the attack in advance or taking part in it are entertaining conspiracist thoughts or engaging in *conspiracism*.

2. The nature of conspiracy theories

a) Size matters: Characteristics and magnitude of conspiracy theories

Although CTs are diverse, certain common characteristics exist that can help one analyse them. Michael Barkun –whom will be frequently cited throughout this thesis– made a key observation and offered three principles that could be found in almost every CT and explained them as follows:

“Nothing is as it seems”: Appearances are deceptive.

“Nothing happens by accident”: Conspiracy implies a world based on intentionality.

“Everything is connected”: Pattern is believed to be everywhere, albeit hidden from plain view.¹⁹

While these three elements serve as key characteristics for CTs used frequently in this thesis, the nature of the *conspirator* and the *conspiracist* could be elaborated more. “A conspiracist worldview” argued Barkun, “implies a universe governed by design rather than by randomness.”²⁰ From the viewpoint of the conspiracist, the conspirator is evil and perfect in many aspects: It is all-powerful, it deftly uses secret methods, it successfully manipulates the masses, and it has an “unusually strong sense of solidarity” in that it works well together with other conspirators.²¹ The conspiracist adopts a Manichean worldview characterised by binary

¹⁸ Karen M. Douglas, Joseph E. Uscinski et al. “Understanding conspiracy theories,” *Political psychology* 40 (2019): 5.

¹⁹ Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy*, 3-4.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 3.

²¹ Dieter Groh, “The Temptation of Conspiracy Theory, or: Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?”

oppositions, such as “pure vs impure,” “national vs non-national,” or –as illustrated in CTs concerning the alleged enemies of the Soviet Union– “social vs unsocial.”²² Accordingly, evil actors are trying to trick innocent people or weaken countries.²³ The conspiracists are also “the lord of the circumstances,” in that they see everything being about them.²⁴

While the terms *conspiracy* and *conspiracy theory* have both been commonly used in a broader sense, various scholars working in the field offered to make distinctions based on the magnitude of the perceived conspiracy. For instance, Barkun offered a tri-tiered distinction, and identified three types of perceived conspiracies: “Event conspiracies,” “systemic conspiracies,” and “super conspiracy,” which is the categorization utilised throughout this thesis.²⁵

Accordingly, event conspiracies refer to isolated events, with a relatively little scope, such as the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing.²⁶ Systemic conspiracies, on the other hand, refer to conspiracies with a greater scope, aiming to have influence or “take control of a nation, a country, or, the entire world.”²⁷ A super conspiracy refers to a conspiracy within a conspiracy, involving “a distant but all-powerful evil force manipulating lesser conspiratorial actors.”²⁸ To give an example for each one from Turkey: The 2013 Gezi Protests, according to the conspiracist mind, would qualify as an event conspiracy; the alleged schemes of external powers against Turkey would constitute a systemic conspiracy (which the Gezi Protests then have to be a part of); and the allegations made by Erdoğan and his opinion leaders after 2016 that Turkey was under attack by forces taking orders from the *üst akıl* (the mastermind) would be an example of super conspiracy.

b) Content matters: Types of conspiracy theories

In addition to the magnitude of CTs, distinctions could also be made in terms of the types of CTs. Consider the following four allegations: a) The Giza Pyramid complex (the three great Pyramids) were built by aliens; b) the anti-Erdoğan 2013 Gezi Protests were part of an external conspiracy to weaken Turkey; c) 9/11 was a hoax as the US officials allegedly had advanced knowledge or they themselves instigated the destruction of the World Trade Centre; and d) Saddam Hussein had links to Al-Qaeda and that he took part in 9/11. All four qualify as CTs, but in terms of their content and authors, I propose to make a distinction between i) *esoteric* vs

Part I: Preliminary Draft of a Theory of Conspiracy Theories,” in *Changing Conceptions of Conspiracy*, ed. Carl F. Graumann and Serge Moscovici (Springer, 1987), 3.

²² Serge Moscovici, “The Conspiracy Mentality,” in *Changing Conceptions of Conspiracy*, ed. Carl F. Graumann and Serge Moscovici (Springer, 1987), 154.

²³ Groh, “The Temptation of Conspiracy Theory,” 5.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 5.

²⁵ Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy*, 6.

²⁶ The perpetrator of the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing which killed 168 people was Timothy McVeigh, who was executed in 2001. Though certainly not on the same scale as that of the Kennedy assassination, the Oklahoma bombing, too, attracted CTs.

²⁷ Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy*, 6.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 6.

political CTs, and ii) *state-sponsored* vs *popular* CTs. There are significant differences among them that will also be relevant for the discussion of CTs in Turkey.

In terms of content, the first statement that the Giza Pyramids were built by aliens could be referred to as an esoteric (or mystical) CT in that it involves more supernatural elements and is not directly related to daily politics. On the surface, it involves no direct accusation to any political groups. It can also be entertaining in that –as Jan-Willem van Prooijen suggests– people who believe in such CTs will find themselves “uncovering a mystery in an exciting tale.”²⁹ The fact that bestselling works of science fiction and fantasy literature had advocated similar ideas serves as evidence of this phenomenon.³⁰ With regards to content, the other three statements are *political* CTs. As the subject of this thesis, political CTs are directly related to power structures, state administrations, and usually address day-to-day politics. The main difference between esoteric and political CTs is that esoteric CTs address more mystical or supernatural themes.³¹ Esoteric CTs could still involve elements of politics in the sense that the assertion that the Giza Pyramids were built by the aliens implies the authorities and established sources are hiding the truth (similar with the denial of the moon landing or the Flat Earth theory). Therefore, it could be argued that power and secrecy are present in both esoteric and political CTs.

In terms of their authors, there were a couple of *popular* CTs surrounding 9/11 that were advocated by certain people or groups who were not satisfied with the explanations offered by the Bush administration. The first was the “advanced knowledge” CT (which alleged that the Bush administration knew about the attacks) and the second was the “inside job” CT (which alleged that the Bush administration itself instigated the attacks).³² On the other hand, the Erdoğan administration’s allegation that the Gezi Protests were part of an external conspiracy to overthrow the government³³ and US President Bush’s claim that Saddam took part in 9/11, were state-sponsored CTs. While CTs by the Erdoğan administration regarding the Gezi Protests served as justification for the crackdown and evading responsibility, the Bush administration’s CTs about the link between Saddam Hussein and Al-Qaeda served as the justification for the US invasion of Iraq.³⁴ Therefore, for the purposes of this thesis, state-sponsored CTs are categorised as conspiracy narratives promoted by governments and supported by their allies, such as pro-government media or institutions, to justify controversial actions such as suppressing internal dissent or violating international law.

²⁹ Jan-Willem van Prooijen, “Psychological benefits of believing Conspiracy Theories,” *Current Opinion in Psychology* 47:101352 (2022): 1

³⁰ The most (in)famous of those was Erich von Daniken’s *Chariots of the Gods? Unsolved Mysteries of the Past* (Putnam: 1971). Nowadays, these types of pseudoscientific CTs are referred to as “ancient astronauts.”

³¹ Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy*, 15-19 and 161.

³² For 9/11 CTs, see Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy*, 159-170 and 171-82.

³³ Which I will be exploring in great detail in *Chapter IV: The hunted becomes the hunter*.

³⁴ Liesbeth van der Heide, “Cherry-picked intelligence: the weapons of mass destruction dispositive as a legitimation for national security in the post 9/11 age,” *Historical Social Research* 38-1 (2013): 286-307.

Modern state-sponsored CTs had their origins in fascist and totalitarian regimes. Karl Popper argued in 1945 that conspiracism was an essential component of Marxism.³⁵ Similar to their use in Stalinist Russia or Maoist China, CTs are used today as tools of government propaganda. Ren et al. argue that authoritarian leaders typically use CTs to discredit political opponents, consolidate their constituent base, evade responsibility by shifting blame, and erode democratic institutions and rule of law.³⁶ Similarly, Julien Giry and Doğan Gürpınar enumerate the functions of CTs in authoritarian states as follows: to help mobilise the masses; to portray the country as threatened both from outside and inside; to help create a Manichean dualism; and, referred to by Léon Poliakov as “diabolic causality,”³⁷ to portray the alleged enemies or scapegoats as the sole cause of the perceived threat.³⁸

State-sponsored CTs are attempts, as Matthew Gray argues, to shape –and in fact manipulate– the language used in relation to daily politics and to control the flow of information.³⁹ State conspiracism could also be thought of from the perspective of power, especially when the state uses CTs to suppress dissent. Regarding political CTs, while popular CTs often accuse the state of conspiring against the public, state-sponsored CTs often accuse its citizens of conspiring against the sovereign state.

Within political CTs, in addition to popular and state-sponsored conspiracism, there is a third type that emerged during the last decade. In their 2019 book, *A Lot of People are Saying*, Nancy L. Rosenblum and Russell Muirhead defined a new category, which they referred to as “the new conspiracism” and used it to define particularly the CTs during the Trump administration’s first term.⁴⁰ The characteristics of the new conspiracism include repetition, asking questions rather than positing a narrative, lack of an elaborate theory (also referred to as “conspiracy without theory”), and lack of evidence.⁴¹ While the aforementioned book is specifically written to show how CTs have become an important part of Trump’s policy making, it also involves brief references to Erdoğan. While it is accurate to suggest that, particularly in their embrace of post-truth narratives, both Erdoğan’s and Trump’s discourses could be

³⁵ Karl Popper, *Open Society and Its Enemies*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 1945), cited in Julien Giry and Doğan Gürpınar, “Functions and Uses of Conspiracy Theories in Authoritarian Regimes,” in *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*, eds. Michael Butter and Peter Knight (London and New York: Routledge, 2020), 317.

³⁶ Zhiying Bella Ren, Andrew M. Carton, et al., “Authoritarian leaders share conspiracy theories to attack opponents, galvanize followers, shift blame, and undermine democratic institutions,” *Current Opinions in Psychology* 46:101388 (2022): 1-6.

³⁷ Léon Poliakov, *La causalité diabolique, t. 1: essai sur l’origine des persécutions* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1980), cited in Giry and Gürpınar, 318.

³⁸ Giry and Gürpınar, *Ibid*, 318.

³⁹ Matthew Gray, *Conspiracy Theories in the Arab World: Sources and Politics* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), 118-19.

⁴⁰ Nancy L. Rosenblum and Russell Muirhead, *A lot of people are saying: The New Conspiracism and the Assault on Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 19-27.

classified as state-sponsored conspiracism, I make a distinction between them on the grounds that their differences substantially outweigh their similarities.

What qualifies as state-sponsored CTs should be clearly defined. Following his 2020 election defeat against Biden, Trump and some of his circles fabricated a number of narratives claiming that their victory had been hijacked. However, the majority of the Republicans, including members of Congress, did not endorse these CTs and proceeded to certify Biden's election victory. Therefore, this does not fully qualify as a state-sponsored CT. According to my definition, state-sponsored CTs are supported by the majority, if not all, of the state elements; they become the dominant narrative in the country; they are used to eliminate dissenting voices; and they are picked up and spread by pro-government media components which work as the mouthpiece of the government.

It is worth pointing out that the categories of state conspiracism and popular conspiracism found in this thesis should not be taken strictly. The primary reason is that certain cases exist which contradict the characteristics previously outlined. For instance, as previously argued, state conspiracism often blames external powers and links internal elements to them, as seen in countries like Turkey and Russia, and widely in the Middle East and the Arab World. The Trump administration, on the other hand, hardly ever blamed the external powers of conspiring against the US. Thus, to repeat, the distinction between state-sponsored and popular CTs does not always have clear-cut lines. Popular CTs might get state sponsorship, and state-sponsored CTs can become popular, developing a bottom-up dynamic that is not fully sponsored or controlled by the state.

The literature about CTs mostly addresses popular CTs. In that regard, CTs are characterised as tools of the weak (or “losers”) against the powerful.⁴² They function as a means to unmask the deception of authority. Popular CTs claim to go after the truth, therefore, studies about popular CTs often address whether CTs are warranted or not.⁴³ There is “an official truth,” which, according to the conspiracist mind, includes deception, therefore, by showing us reality, the CT is revealing “the awful truth.” Accordingly, those who subscribed to CTs about 9/11 referred to their group as “the 9/11 truth movement.” While popular CTs often put alternative explanations to the official accounts, in state conspiracism, the conspiracy narrative itself is often the official account. Unlike popular CTs, state-sponsored CTs can disseminate quickly, and become much more influential, especially in countries where the government has a considerable monopoly on media. The discussion about state conspiracism vs popular conspiracism concerns, to a certain extent, political culture and debates about geography as well, which will be referred to later.

⁴² Joseph E. Uscinski and Joseph M. Parent, “Conspiracy Theories Are for Losers,” in *American Conspiracy Theories* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 132.

⁴³ Uscinski, “The Study of Conspiracy Theories,” *Argumenta* 3-2 (2018): 236.

State-sponsored CTs and the issue of power could be approached from a Gramscian perspective, and state-sponsored CTs could be thought of as part of cultural hegemony.⁴⁴ A Marxist political theorist who wrote extensively about the relationship between the ruler and the ruled, Gramsci argued that the ruling classes maintained control over the people not just through coercion (force granted by the police or the military), but by consent as well, which is provided through an ideology. The ruling class –or to use the Marxist terms– the bourgeoisie portrayed their ideology as the natural way of looking at the world, therefore that ideology would help shape the views of the people, becoming common sense. Through institutions such as the church, school, or the military, the ruling classes perpetuated this cultural hegemony.⁴⁵ State-sponsored CTs could be thought of as part of cultural hegemony in the sense that the state tries to shape the ideology of their citizens by spreading the conspiracy narrative. The Erdoğan administration's portrayal of the Gezi Protests as part of an external conspiracy was an example of state-sponsored conspiracism.

	Popular CTs	State-sponsored CTs
Content	Rather internal enemies, often the state itself	Almost always a foreign element
Uttered by	The weak, usually ordinary people, or “the losers”	The sovereign, usually by the government
Purpose	Reveal “the awful truth”	Hide the truth or conceal real problems
Adversary	The sovereign, mostly the state	Both the weak (e.g. dissenting groups or individuals) and the powerful (e.g. external powers or international organisations)
Function	Bringing alternative explanations to mainstream accounts	Exclude political opponents, justify controversial political actions, and create diversion from real problems

Table 1: Popular vs. State-sponsored CTs

c) Whose power is it anyway: The element of secrecy

An indispensable element of both conspiracies and CTs is the assumption of secrecy. Hidden or secret elements or aims appear in various definitions of CTs.⁴⁶ In fact, closed or secret groups and their members are frequently the subject of CTs, as in the case of the Illuminati or the Freemasons. An interesting example from Turkey are the *dönme*, who are Jewish families who, since their conversion to Islam in the 17th century, live outwardly as Sunni Muslims while also

⁴⁴ Lynne Lawner, ed. *Letters from Prison: Antonio Gramsci* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1975), 235.

⁴⁵ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2005), 259.

⁴⁶ Butter and Reinkowski, “Introduction: Mapping conspiracy theories,” in *Conspiracy Theories in the United States and the Middle East*, 1; Sunstein and Vermeule, “Conspiracy Theories,” 205.

adhering to mystical Judaism in private life. There are various CTs about the *dönme*, and often, their secret identity is accepted as proof for the existence of the said conspiracy.⁴⁷ CTs also abound regarding secret political organizations. For instance, the British came up with various CTs portraying the actions of the Ottoman CUP as part of a Jewish-Freemason conspiracy against the British, including portraying them as *dönme*.⁴⁸

3. Conspiracy theories, what are they good for?

a) The cultural turn in the US: From “enemies of the state” to “the state as the enemy”

Studies about CTs come from a wide variety of disciplines ranging from psychology and sociology to history and political science. As Uscinski states, while earlier works came from the field of history, the 1990s saw the shift first towards the cultural critiques and then to philosophy.⁴⁹ Uscinski also argued that with research about CTs coming from various fields, disciplines have been oblivious to each other, and that a gap has opened up between qualitative research about CTs such as in the field of history and cultural studies, and quantitative research such as in the fields of psychology and political science.⁵⁰

To date, the majority of influential studies on CTs have been conducted by American scholars, primarily focused on American contexts and intended predominantly for an American audience. The fear of conspiracy first began with the Puritans who were convinced that they were “God’s chosen people,”⁵¹ and then later took a secular and national character. The foundation of the United States of America –unlike most of the European nation states– rests on an anti-imperialist movement, which helped portray the birth of the US as a movement against the imperialist conspiracies of the Great Britain.⁵² Throughout American history, various CTs (both popular and state-sponsored) emerged based on fears of foreign subversion and internal threat, with the Freemasons, Catholics, Jews, and Blacks being scapegoated.⁵³ Threat of foreign subversion also reinforced fears about national security.⁵⁴ The most infamous episode of state-sponsored CTs in the US was the period of McCarthyism in the 1950s, in which Wisconsin

⁴⁷ Salim Türkay Nefes, “The function of secrecy in anti-Semitic conspiracy theories: the case of Dönmes in Turkey,” in Butter and Reinkowski, *Conspiracy Theories in the United States and the Middle East*, 154.

⁴⁸ Elie Kedourie, “Young Turks, Freemasons and Jews,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 7-1 (1971): 89–104, cited in Yenen, “The Young Turk Aftermath,” 291.

⁴⁹ Uscinski, “The Study of Conspiracy Theories,” 233.

⁵⁰ Butter and Knight, “Bridging the great divide: Conspiracy theory research for the 21st century,” *Diogenes* 62-3/4 (2015): 17–29.

⁵¹ Knight, *Conspiracy Culture*, 2; Butter and Reinkowski, “Mapping conspiracy theories,” 5-9.

⁵² Rosenblum and Muirhead, *A Lot of People Are Saying*, 21-24.

⁵³ Butter and Reinkowski, “Introduction: Mapping conspiracy theories,” 8-10.

⁵⁴ Knight, *Ibid*, 3; Zeynep Şarlak “A History of the National Security State in Turkey,” (PhD Diss., Leiden University, 2020), 9-39. It might be a coincidence, but in 1972, two books with almost identical titles came out in the US, both of them addressing fears of subversion by external powers. David Brion Davis, *The Fear of Conspiracy: Images of Un-American Subversion from the Revolution to the Present* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972); Richard O. Curry and Thomas M. Brown (eds.), *Conspiracy: The Fear of Subversion in American History* (NY: Holt, Reinhart and Winston, 1972).

senator Joseph McCarthy –who started out in 1949 by claiming there were communists in the state department that caused “loss of China”– eliminated his opponents by making unfounded accusations that often involved defamation, thereby strengthening his position.⁵⁵

While fear of foreign subversion played a role in CTs from the birth of the US until the end of the Cold War, the accused party showed a significant shift in time. CTs that had been promulgated earlier in the US were mostly about plots targeting the state whereas after the 1960s, the state itself was targeted with CTs. As Kathryn Olmstead argued, a partial explanation for this striking shift is that, while earlier, Americans were afraid of plots against the state, by the 1960s, some had been convinced that the state had been taken over by the conspirators.⁵⁶ CTs surrounding the moon landing, the assassination of Kennedy or the New World Order emerged after the 1960s and are therefore products of people who think that the American state has fallen into the hands of the conspirators. Therefore, by the 1960s, CTs about foreign subversion had been largely replaced with CTs about domestic subversion. This was also seen in movies during the 1960s and 1970s such as *Three Days of the Condor*, *All the President's Men*, or *The Manchurian Candidate*, in which the state was always manipulated by conspirators from within.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the disappearance of the “Russian spectre,” during the early 1990s, the number of state-sponsored CTs in the US (especially about foreign subversion) decreased even further, but CTs in general did not. The sudden surge in popular CTs after the 1990s was seen as part of American culture, and it led to the emergence of various studies about CTs that had the word “culture” in the title: *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture* (Mark Fenster), *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* (Michael Barkun), *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America* (Timothy Melley) and *Conspiracy Culture* (Peter Knight).⁵⁷

The phenomenon identified by Barkun and Knight as “the conspiracist subculture” in the US could be attributed to several factors.⁵⁸ Decreasing trust in established institutions, including the US government,⁵⁹ coupled with the approaching millennium, triggered apocalyptic CTs, which witnessed a dramatic increase after 9/11.⁶⁰ The sudden aspect of acts of terrorism, and the fact that it was the public that was targeted by these acts created a deep sense of insecurity. This

⁵⁵ Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style,” 25-29.

⁵⁶ Kathryn Olmsted, *Real Enemies: Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I to 9/11* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 4, cited in Butter and Reinkowski, “Mapping Conspiracy Theories,” 11.

⁵⁷ Mark Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy*; Timothy Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America* (Cornell University Press, 2016); Peter Knight, *Conspiracy Culture*.

⁵⁸ Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy*, 1; Knight, *Conspiracy Culture*, 74.

⁵⁹ According to the annual survey of the National Election Study, the percentage of Americans who trusted the government was 21 per cent in 1994, and 34 per cent in 1998 (down from 73 per cent in 1958). Knight, *Conspiracy Culture*, 245.

⁶⁰ It is striking that, in the days immediately after 9/11, “Nostradamus” was one of the words searched for most in Google after Osama bin Laden. Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy*, 161.

was coupled with mistrust in the establishment and institutions, and in general, the search for truth. As the number of CTs increased in the US after the 1990s, so did studies about CTs. As CTs in the US shifted from state-sponsored to popular ones, studies about CTs, too, mostly addressed popular CTs.

b) Condemning vs understanding approaches

There are mainly two schools of thought in approaching CTs. As various figures such as Butter and Reinkowski indicate, between the 1960s and 1990s, pathological explanations viewing CTs linked to paranoia were prevalent. After the 1990s, these classical approaches were replaced by revisionist evaluations which took socio-cultural and socio-political elements into consideration.⁶¹ Although various studies about CTs maintained this distinction, there are no established titles to refer to the different approaches. I will be using *condemning approaches* and *understanding approaches* to explain scholarly work in this area.

CTs often start out as endeavours (or failures) to understand the world or make sense of the circumstances.⁶² The appeal of CTs in Germany after World War I might constitute a striking example. Following the end of World War I, the “stabbing in the back” (Dolchstoss) myth was consciously launched by German military officer Erich Ludendorff to divert the blame for the defeat he had himself overseen. The narrative of this myth posited that Germany was not defeated at the front, but by the ones who signed the armistice, also known as “November traitors.” The Jewish population were also accused of contributing to this defeat. The failure to satisfactorily explain why Germany was defeated on the front lines led many people to embrace the CTs.⁶³ Still, it should be stated that, while understanding something might be the initial step of conspiracism, as Moscovici pointed out, the aim of CTs is mostly “to eliminate rather than understand.”⁶⁴

The term *conspiracy theory* undoubtedly has a negative and derogatory connotation, with people who subscribe to beliefs of conspiracy often being deemed irrational, or the term *conspiracy theory* itself taken as an insult.⁶⁵ As Knight puts it, regarding daily discussions, referring to an idea as a conspiracy theory often ends the discussion.⁶⁶ A study published in *Cognitive Applied Psychology* in 2021 with more than 300 participants demonstrated that people who resort to CTs lack critical thinking.⁶⁷ Studies that use the word *paranoia* or pathological explanations implying that people who believe in CTs should be treated like a patient are part of

⁶¹ Butter and Reinkowski, “Mapping Conspiracy Theories,” 1.

⁶² Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy*, 2.

⁶³ Groh, “The Temptation of Conspiracy Theory,” 32-34.

⁶⁴ Moscovici, “The Conspiracy Mentality,” 157.

⁶⁵ Herzog, “Small and Large Scale Conspiracy Theories and Their Problems,” 194.

⁶⁶ Knight, *Conspiracy Culture*, 11.

⁶⁷ Eric. W. Dolan, “New study indicates conspiracy theory believers have less developed critical thinking abilities,” *PsyPost*, 3 July 2021; accessed 14 January 2025 at <https://www.psypost.org/new-study-indicates-conspiracy-theory-believers-have-less-developed-critical-thinking-ability/>.

what is referred to in this section as the *condemning approach* to CTs. As Knight and Gray suggest, the condemning approach has three major flaws: Treating conspiracism or the prevalence of CTs as a mental disorder, looking for a CT under every stone (referred to by Gray as being “conspiracist about conspiracism”)⁶⁸ and overstressing the negative sides of CTs.⁶⁹

The *understanding approach* still problematises CTs, but rather than unequivocally condemning them, it seeks to grasp the underlying reasons. As van Prooijen argues, from a psychological point of view, CTs could provide the subject with an “alternative reality,” in which the person thinks of themselves as important.⁷⁰ CTs could also help “imbue the perceiver's worldview with meaning and purpose in a rewarding manner”⁷¹ bringing them “instant gratification.”⁷² As various figures such as Butter and Reinkowski argue, CTs need to be taken seriously and should not be dismissed. The understanding approach admits that sometimes CTs might be helpful, or that their proponents might “be onto something,”⁷³ For instance, Uscinski who came up with four categories about CTs based on their veracity argues that a CT could be right or wrong, for the right or wrong reasons.

As Uscinski argues, CTs are mostly wrong for the wrong reasons, which he himself describes as “surely a loss.”⁷⁴ When CTs are right for the right reasons, they help unmask the truth, as the case was in the Watergate scandal.⁷⁵ When they are wrong for the right reasons, the result might be producing information that otherwise would not be available, as the case was with the abundance of information gathered thanks to the CTs about the assassination of President Kennedy.⁷⁶ Astrophysicist Carl Sagan’s discussion of the “UFO craze” of the 1960s could be thought of as a striking example of CTs being right for the wrong reasons. Sagan stated that during the Cold War, the US and the Soviet Union tested each other’s air defence systems by sending drones or unmanned air vehicles to the other side, and that the logical explanation for the UFO sightings in the US during the Cold War were Soviet air vehicles. In an effort to prevent public panic concerning potential Soviet incursion into American airspace, the US government denied the existence of these vehicles and, in some instances, deliberately destroyed related

⁶⁸ Gray, *Conspiracy Theories in the Arab World*, 168.

⁶⁹ Knight, *Conspiracy Culture*, 5-7; Gray, *Ibid*, 168.

⁷⁰ Prooijen, “Psychological benefits of believing Conspiracy Theories,” 1. The phrase “alternative” was used frequently in relation to CTs promoting alternative but false narratives, especially after Trump’s counsellor Kellyanne Conway used the phrase “alternative facts” in January 2017. State-sponsored CTs are often identified as Orwellian. Shortly after Conway’s use of “alternative facts,” the novel 1984 became the sixth best-selling book on Amazon. “Sales of George Orwell's 1984 surge after Kellyanne Conway's ‘alternative facts,’” *The Guardian*, 24 January 2025; accessed 24 February 2025 at <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/jan/24/george-orwell-1984-sales-surge-kellyanne-conway-alternative-facts>.

⁷¹ Prooijen, “Psychological benefits of believing Conspiracy Theories,” 1.

⁷² *Ibid*, 1.

⁷³ Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories*, 4.

⁷⁴ Uscinski, “The Study of Conspiracy Theories,” 238.

⁷⁵ Uscinski, “The Study of Conspiracy Theories,” 238.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 238.

evidence. As Sagan argued, those accusing the US government of concealing information were right but linking it to alien visits were wrong.⁷⁷

Regarding CTs in Turkey, the narratives of the Kemalist but especially the *ulusalçı* during the 2000s about the Erdoğan administration could be thought of as CTs being right for the wrong reasons. As I will be demonstrating in great detail in this thesis, the CT narratives about the AKP and Erdoğan depicted them as having a secret agenda, and that this agenda was about turning Turkey into a state ruled by the Sharia and/or working for external powers to harm Turkey. It could be argued in hindsight that Erdoğan did in fact have a secret agenda, and that he used the EU-accession process to dismantle checks and balances in Turkey. Therefore, it could be argued that CTs about Erdoğan were right for the wrong reasons.

Within this thesis, the approach taken is understanding rather than condemning. As such, CTs will be problematised and the argument will set forth that CTs –in their most basic sense– make it difficult for Turkey to come to terms with its past and help sustain an authoritarian political culture. Although I certainly do not attribute the prevalence of CTs in Turkey to pathological reasoning or paranoia, I will frequently be referring to the so-called “Sèvres Syndrome.”

B. Political conspiracy theories in Turkey

1. Politics and conspiracy theories

Politics, conspiracies, and CTs go hand-in-hand in the sense that not only real and imagined conspiracies are mostly about politics, but also that studies about CTs predominantly address political ones. CTs could also be more influential in some parts of the world compared to others precisely due to their influence in politics. Political structures have been identified as a significant factor contributing to the prevalence of CTs in the Middle East.⁷⁸ As scholars point out, just like politics, CTs could be thought of as a worldview or even a belief.⁷⁹ In that regard, CTs spread in the same way as beliefs do.⁸⁰ Barkun argues that “belief in CTs becomes a matter of faith rather than proof.”⁸¹

People resort to CTs based on their political proclivities. For instance, people who state that they do not believe in CTs will often end up rejecting a CT that goes against their political belief but will endorse one that will denigrate their opponent.⁸² CTs could particularly be used by

⁷⁷ Carl Sagan, *The Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark* (Surrey: Headline Book Publishing, 1996), 78-85.

⁷⁸ Pipes, *The Hidden Hand*, 353-366; Gray, *Conspiracy Theories in the Arab World*, 102-140.

⁷⁹ Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy*, 2; Uscinski, “The Study of Conspiracy Theories,” 236.

⁸⁰ Sunstein and Vermeule, “Conspiracy Theories,” 215.

⁸¹ Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy*, 6-7.

⁸² Uscinski, “The Study of Conspiracy Theories,” 240.

political leaders who might use them to “enlighten” their followers or constituents, in line with the discussion about Gramscian cultural hegemony. Those who believe in CTs often claim that they “detect a truth that is not visible to others.”⁸³ Since politics is often about the struggle between two or more groups, CTs help divide the world into two polarizing ends, creating a “sense of an us threatened by a sinister them.”⁸⁴ Partisan belief in CTs will be particularly significant in discussing CTs in Turkey.

2. Geography matters? Conspiracy theories and political culture

Although CTs are universal, they occur more frequently and attract wider audiences in certain regions of the world than in others. Without succumbing to regional exceptionalism, the case could be made that CTs are more prevalent in countries that could be identified as “illiberal democracies.”⁸⁵ Using the examples of Russia, Turkey and Afghanistan, Scott Radnitz argues that CTs are seen more in developing countries or non-established democracies.⁸⁶ In such places, CTs become the new normal, with politicians publicly resorting to CTs, and journalists and intellectuals advocating these narratives.⁸⁷ State-sponsored CTs could also be observed in advanced democracies, but differently compared to less democratic countries. In advanced democracies –and in particular in the Western world– the public endorsement of CTs by politicians is generally viewed negatively and is often subject to ridicule.⁸⁸ In such countries, the function of CTs is not to eliminate the opposition or evade responsibility, but to justify controversial international actions. The conclusion should be that while state-sponsored CTs could occur everywhere, their function can and does show differences with respect to political culture.

The region referred to as “the Middle East,” where Turkey is also located, is one of those parts of the world where CTs –and especially state-sponsored CTs– have found particular appeal.⁸⁹ Although the literature concerning CTs is in agreement that state-sponsored CTs are much more prevalent in the Middle East compared to the US (or the West in general), Alexander Dunst contends that, one reason for this is that often, state-sponsored CTs in the US are not

⁸³ Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy*, 7.

⁸⁴ Knight, *Conspiracy Culture*, 3.

⁸⁵ The term “illiberal democracy” emerged in the 1990s and became popular after Fareed Zakaria used it in an article in 1997. Zakaria, “The Rise of Illiberal Democracy” *Foreign Affairs* 76-6 (November/December 1997), 22-43.

⁸⁶ Scott Radnitz, “Why the Powerful (in Weak States) Prefer Conspiracy Theories,” in *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe in Them*, ed. Uscinski (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 347-350.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 347-350.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 347-48.

⁸⁹ Gray, “Western Theories about Conspiracy Theories and the Middle Eastern Context: The Scope and Limits of Explanatory Transpositions,” in *Conspiracy Theories in the United States and the Middle East*, 287; Butter and Reinkowski, “Mapping Conspiracy Theories,” 30. Daniel Pipes claims that in “the West [...] conspiracy theories are today the preserve of the alienated and the fringe...” Pipes, *The Hidden Hand*, 2. This optimistic observation of Pipes dating back from the 1990s proved to be wrong. Especially the Bush administration after 2001, and the Trump administrations since 2016 showed that CTs could become mainstream in the US as well, though not powerful weapons of the state to be used repeatedly for manipulation and suppression.

treated as such.⁹⁰ The example Dunst gives are CTs linking Saddam Hussein and Al-Qaeda to each other after 9/11, which was used as a justification for the “War on Terror,” which included the invasion of Iraq, but which were not referred to as CTs. Scholars who studied CTs in the Middle East all acknowledge that CTs are prevalent in the region, though they offer different reasoning.

The earliest comprehensive academic study about CTs in the Middle East is *The Hidden Hand: Middle East Fears of Conspiracy* by Daniel Pipes. A controversial historian and Middle East analyst, Pipes is heavily criticised not only for his reductionist and antagonistic views about Islam and the Middle Easterners⁹¹ but also for his extreme pro-Israel bias,⁹² and friendly relations with figures like Geert Wilders.⁹³ Belonging to the classical condemning approach, Pipes posits pathological reasons for the prevalence of CTs in the Middle East, citing the advice of *The Encyclopaedia of Human Behaviour* on “treating clinically paranoid patients.”⁹⁴ Pipes also has a condescending attitude towards Middle Easterners in that he refers to them as “laggard people,”⁹⁵ and –having been greatly influenced by Bernard Lewis⁹⁶ and in general the modernisation theory,⁹⁷ Pipes argues that “Westerners can help Middle Easterners learn some critical points about modern life.”⁹⁸

Contrary to the oversimplified and biased reasoning of Pipes, other scholars suggest more plausible causes for the prevalence of CTs in the Middle East and the Arab World. In that respect, Butter and Reinkowski argue that CTs dramatically increased in the Middle East only after the Zionist-Palestine conflict. They further draw attention to the plethora of real conspiracies by the US, which they argue made politicians in the Middle East suitable to conspiracist thinking.⁹⁹ Schirn Fathi takes a similar approach and argues that the widespread CTs

⁹⁰ Alexander Dunst, “The Politics of Conspiracy Theories: American Histories and Global Narratives,” in *Conspiracy Theories in the United States and the Middle East*, eds. Butter and Reinkowski, 293-95. Dunst does not demonstrate how the said CTs could be debunked, but brings a cultural and philosophical criticism to the fact that while some CTs are named as such, some CTs escape this title.

⁹¹ A particular point of criticism against Pipes is his Campuswatch Project, which was established in 2002 and which aimed to go after academic studies in the US critical of Israel. Butter and Reinkowski defined the Campuswatch project as “Inquisition-minded.” See Butter and Reinkowski, “Mapping Conspiracy Theories,” 23.

⁹² *Ibid*, 23.

⁹³ Pipes’s antagonism against Islam and the Middle Easterners have considerable appeal in the Western World, especially in the far-right and Eurosceptic circles. Geert Wilders, whose elections campaign Pipes supported and fundraised for, is an example in case. Tom-Jan Meeus and Guus Valk, “De buitenlandse vrienden van Geert Wilders,” *NRC*, 15 May 2010; accessed 25 January 2025 at <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2010/05/15/de-buitenlandse-vrienden-van-geert-wilders-11889662-a1305174>.

⁹⁴ Pipes, *The Hidden Hand*, 376.

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, 367.

⁹⁶ Pipes, “Bernard Lewis and Me,” *Middle East Forum*, 31 May 2016; accessed 21 February 2025 at <https://www.danielpipes.org/16683/bernard-lewis-100th-birthday-appreciation>.

⁹⁷ See for instance Pipes’s statement “Modernisation requires a thoroughgoing commitment from a population to learn from the outside world.” Pipes, *The Hidden Hand*, 375.

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 376.

⁹⁹ Butter and Reinkowski, “Mapping Conspiracy Theories,” 24-26.

in Iran should be traced back to the CIA's 1953 Operation Ajax which overthrew democratically elected Mossadegh. According to Fathi, this event left such deep scars in the Iranian public, fostering a widespread perception of "US omnipresence."¹⁰⁰ Finally, Matthew Gray summed up the reasons for the prevalence of CTs in the Arab World as a combination of "political structures which in turn are the result of historical impacts, effects of external dynamics, state-society relations and political culture."¹⁰¹ Butter and Reinkowski also argue that CTs in the Middle East have been mostly neglected in CT studies, and therefore, there is a limit to transferring studies for CTs in the West or the US to the Middle East without taking into account local characteristics.¹⁰²

To understand the prevalence of CTs in Turkey, it may be necessary but not sufficient to know that CTs are prevalent in the Middle East. From some aspects, CTs in Turkey indeed have similarities with CTs in the Middle East and the Arab World. The first is the appearance of the US or the West in general as the imperialist power desiring to divide and destroy. Consider the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres and the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement. The Treaty of Sèvres, which was signed between the defeated Ottoman Empire and the victorious Allied powers at the end of World War I, evokes in the minds of the Turks a partitioned Anatolia, which I will discuss in more detail later. The Sykes-Picot Agreement, on the other hand, was a secret deal signed in 1916 during World War I between the Entente Powers (England, France, and Russia), to partition the Arab and Middle Eastern lands of the Ottoman Empire for a postwar settlement. While references to the Treaty of Sèvres accompany CTs in Turkey, references to the Sykes-Picot accompany CTs in the Arab World.¹⁰³ Sykes-Picot was denounced multiple times during the 1970s and 1980s by Arab politicians.¹⁰⁴ In November 2011, Muhammad Hassanein Heikal, who was a prominent journalist of the Nasser period in Egypt, asserted regarding the "Arab Spring" rhetoric that, "What's happening now is not a 'spring,' but a new 'Sykes-Picot' to divide the Arabs."¹⁰⁵ Even ISIS made frequent references to Sykes-Picot.¹⁰⁶ The assertion that external powers use the internal political actors as the puppets is another similarity between CTs in Turkey and CTs in the Middle East. Historian Ervand Abrahamian's argument that in Iran,

¹⁰⁰ Schirm Fathi, "From Mosaddeq to HAARP: Some Aspects of the Conspiratorial Component of US-Iranian Relations," in *Conspiracy Theories in the United States and the Middle East*, 65-72.

¹⁰¹ Gray, *Conspiracy Theories in the Arab World*, 8.

¹⁰² Butter and Reinkowski, "Mapping Conspiracy Theories," 27-28.

¹⁰³ Şükrü Hanioglu, "Sykes Picot ve Sevres sendromları ve kapalı toplum," *Sabah*, 11 December 2011; accessed 25 February 2025 at <https://www.sabah.com.tr/yazarlar/hanioglu/2011/12/11/sykespicot-ve-svres-sendromlari-ve-kapali-toplum>.

¹⁰⁴ Pipes, *The Hidden Hand*, 328.

¹⁰⁵ "In Translation: Muhammad Hassanein Heikal on the 'new Sykes-Picot'" *The Arabist*, 13 November 2011; accessed 25 February 2025 at <https://www.arabist.net/blog/2011/11/13/in-translation-muhammad-hassanein-heikal-on-the-new-sykes-pi.html>.

¹⁰⁶ "Whose colonialism? The contested memory of the Sykes-Picot Agreement," *Project on Middle East Political Science*, 6 February 2015; accessed 27 May 2025 at <https://pomeps.org/whose-colonialism-the-contested-memory-of-the-sykes-picot-agreement>.

people who resort to CTs see “politics as a puppet show in which foreign powers control the marionettes –the local politicians– by invisible strings” very much fits the Turkish case.¹⁰⁷

Still, the differences outweigh the similarities. Both Pipes and Gray cite the political structures as reinforcing CTs in the Middle East, where, unlike Turkey, dictators have clung onto power for decades.¹⁰⁸ Without falling into Turkish exceptionalism, it could be argued that its free and relatively fair elections since 1950 render Turkey a different example than the Arab World and the Middle Eastern countries. It should also be added that unlike various Middle Eastern countries, Turkey was not directly affected by the Israel-Palestinian Conflict, nor was it faced with overt Western conspiracies.¹⁰⁹

3. Conspiracy theories in Turkey: The literature

The academic literature about CTs in any given country could be divided into micro and macro studies. While micro studies address a limited timeframe or concept (e.g. CTs in the US about 9/11), macro studies are attempts to make an overarching analysis, seeing CTs as part of that given culture (e.g. the book *Conspiracy Theories in American History: An Encyclopedia*).¹¹⁰

Regarding CTs in Turkey, the majority of the studies –in fact all but one– so far have been micro studies, focusing on a limited topic or timeframe. Within the studies focusing on CTs about a timeframe, the article “Republic of Conspiracies: Cross-Border Plots and the Making of Modern Turkey” by Ramazan Hakkı Öztan focuses on the early Republic.¹¹¹ In it, Öztan shows how the Turkish government deftly used British intelligence about an assassination attempt on Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of modern Turkey, in 1935, which “helped consolidate Ankara’s ideological positions at home and pursue its long sought-after policies abroad.”¹¹²

The thematic micro studies pertaining to CTs in Turkey published so far have overwhelmingly addressed the themes of antisemitism and the *dönme*. The figure who published most in this field is Türkay Salim Nefes, whose PhD thesis in 2010 was based on interviews with high-profile intellectuals and surveyed antisemitic CTs about the *dönmes*.¹¹³ Though Nefes states that he finds pathological approaches problematic, the word “paranoid” appears throughout his

¹⁰⁷ Ervand Abrahamian, “The Paranoid Style in Iranian Politics,” *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic* (Berkeley, CA: 1993), 111, quoted in Butter and Reinkowski, “Mapping Conspiracy Theories,” 28.

¹⁰⁸ Pipes, *The Hidden Hand*, 353-66; Gray, *Ibid*, 102-40.

¹⁰⁹ The assertions that the US was behind various, in fact all the coup d'etat that took place in Turkey are yet to be proven.

¹¹⁰ Peter Knight, ed., *Conspiracy Theories in American History: An Encyclopedia* (ABC-CLIO, 2003).

¹¹¹ Ramazan Hakkı Öztan, “Republic of Conspiracies: Cross-Border Plots and the Making of Modern Turkey,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 56-1 (2021): 55-76.

¹¹² Öztan, *Ibid*.

¹¹³ Türkay S. Nefes, “Towards a Sociology of Conspiracy Theories: An Investigation into Conspiratorial Thinking on Dönmes,” (PhD Diss., University of Kent, 2010).

thesis, mostly to define CTs in Turkey.¹¹⁴ Nefes continued the same theme in various articles and book chapters.¹¹⁵ The theme of antisemitism and *dönmes* in CTs have been visited by other figures as well. In his 2008 book, *A Scapegoat for All Seasons: The Dönmes or Crypto-Jews of Turkey*, Rıfat Bali –who published extensively about the history of the Turkish Jews– focused on how antisemitic CTs about the *dönmes* featured throughout the Turkish Republic.¹¹⁶ Bali continued using the same theme in his 2013 book *Antisemitism and Conspiracy Theories in Turkey*.¹¹⁷ Ottoman historian Marc David Bear, too, published a study about CTs targeting the *dönmes*, demonstrating how they were seen as internal enemies and scapegoated both during the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic.¹¹⁸ Although all these are meticulous studies about CTs, they all focus on one single topic, antisemitism in CTs, and therefore, are not directly related to what is being discussed in this thesis.

Other thematic micro studies about CTs in Turkey involve the topic of the deep state (*derin devlet*), and CTs attributed to the Turkish political right, such as CTs targeting communism and the left. Regarding the deep state, Başak Ertür published a book chapter in 2016 about CTs surrounding the Ergenekon trials in the late 2000s and early 2010s, which were highly politicised trials that allegedly uncovered secret plans for coups against the Erdoğan administration and the Gülen community but were also used to cleanse secularist dissidents.¹¹⁹ Ertür concluded that considering that a lot of the evidence was fabricated or forced, the Ergenekon trials could best be understood by “conspiratorial imagination,”¹²⁰ which is similar to the “the curious leap in imagination that is always made at some critical point,” as described by Hofstadter.¹²¹ This argument is in general valid for CT discussion in Turkey. The book *Türk Sağı: Mitler, Fetişler, Düşman İmgeleri* (The Turkish Right: Myths, Sacred, Enemy Images) published in 2012 compiles various CTs within the discourse of the political right in Turkey (who have a conservative nationalist agenda) and demonstrates the antagonistic discourse against communists and Freemasons, including CTs targeting them.¹²² In one article from the book, Tebessüm Öztan shows how the Turkish political right sees all the following as enemies:

¹¹⁴ Ibid. See for instance “the deep state [...] is an important part of [the] paranoid style in Turkish politics” (23), “paranoid beliefs about dönmes” (110), “paranoid aspects of Turkish nationalism” (111).

¹¹⁵ Nefes, “The function of secrecy in anti-Semitic conspiracy theories: the case of Dönmes in Turkey,” in Butter and Reinkowski, *Conspiracy Theories in the United States and the Middle East*, 139-56; “The impacts of the Turkish government’s conspiratorial framing of the Gezi Park protests,” *Social Movement Studies*, 16-5 (2017): 610-622, doi: 10.1080/14742837.2017.1319269.

¹¹⁶ Rıfat Bali, *A Scapegoat for All Seasons: The Dönmes or Crypto-Jews of Turkey* (Istanbul: The Isis Press, 2008).

¹¹⁷ Rıfat Bali, *Antisemitism and Conspiracy Theories in Turkey* (İstanbul: Libra, 2013).

¹¹⁸ Marc David Bear, “An Enemy Old and New: The Dönme, Anti-Semitism, and Conspiracy Theories in the Ottoman Empire and Turkish Republic,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 103-04 (Fall 2013): 523-555.

¹¹⁹ Başak Ertür, “The Conspiracy Archive: Turkey’s ‘Deep State’ on Trial” in *Law, Memory, Violence: Uncovering the Counter-Archive*, eds. Stewart Motha and Honni van Rijswijk (Routledge, 2016).

¹²⁰ Ertür, Ibid, 177-78.

¹²¹ Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style,” 37.

¹²² İnci Özkan Kerestecioğlu and Güven Gürkan Öztan, *Türk Sağı: Mitler, Fetişler, Düşman İmgeleri*, 2nd ed. (İstanbul: İletişim, 2014).

Socialism, communism, the left in general, the Jews, and Freemasons.¹²³ Similarly, Aylin Özman and Kadir Dede demonstrate how the Freemasons and their secret identity have appeared in CTs throughout the Turkish Republic.¹²⁴

Most of the small-scale studies about CTs in Turkey address a certain theme or time period. One exception in that regard is the book chapter entitled “Small and Large Scale Conspiracy Theories and Their Problems: An Example from Turkey.”¹²⁵ In it, Christoph Herzog makes a valuable observation and states that small-scale CTs –some of which are or could be based on real conspiracies– are often linked to imaginary large-scale conspiracies (in the sense that small-scale conspiracies constitute elements of alleged large scale conspiracies), whose target is to weaken Turkey, and who are linked to an overarching colonial fight of the West against Turkey.¹²⁶

As the Erdoğan administration shifted from liberalism to authoritarianism, frequently attributing blame to both internal and external adversaries, scholarly attention increasingly turned toward analysing CTs disseminated by Erdoğan and his circles. In his 2017 PhD thesis from Kent University, *Conspiracy Theory in Turkey: Politics and Protest in the Age of ‘Post-Truth,’* Julian de Medeiros focused on CTs in Turkey related to two major incidents from recent history: the 2016 abortive coup and the 2013 Gezi Protests (in that order).¹²⁷ Medeiros’ study, later published as a book, offers a predominately philosophical analysis of CTs from a postmodernist perspective. However, its relative detachment from historical context presents a significant limitation, given that CTs in Turkey consistently draw upon the historical legacy of the Ottoman Empire.¹²⁸ Political scientists also showed an interest in CTs. In that regard, İhsan Yılmaz and Erdoan A. Shipoli published an article in 2022 that analyses CTs as part of Erdoğan’s authoritarian political discourse. In it, they show how “securitizing narratives based on fear, trauma, nostalgia, ontological insecurity, grievances, and conspiracy theories have been used by President Erdoğan” to suppress the opposition, especially after the 2016 coup attempt.¹²⁹

A theme that Erdoğan has used multiple times in various cases is the *üst akıl* (the mastermind). As also addressed in *Chapter IV: The hunted becomes the hunter*, the mastermind

¹²³ Tebessüm Özman, “Öfkeyi Çizmek: Milliyetçi Tahayyülde Düşman Portreleri,” in *Türk Sağı*, 137-167.

¹²⁴ Aylin Özman and Kadir Dede, “Türk Sağı ve Masonluğun Söylemsel İnşası: İktidar, Bilinmezlik, Komplo,” in *Türk Sağı*, 169-201.

¹²⁵ Herzog, “Small and Large Scale Conspiracy Theories,” 194-211.

¹²⁶ Herzog, *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ Julian de Medeiros, *Conspiracy Theory in Turkey: Politics and Protest in the Age of ‘Post-Truth’* (London and New York: IB Tauris, 2018).

¹²⁸ Uğur Derin, review of Julian de Medeiros, *Conspiracy Theory in Turkey: Politics and Protest in the Age of ‘Post-Truth’* and Doğan Gürpınar, *Conspiracy Theories in Turkey: Conspiracy Nation* (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2019), *Middle Eastern Studies* 56-4 (2020): 687-690.

¹²⁹ İhsan Yılmaz and Erdoan A. Shipoli, “Use of Past Collective Traumas, Fear and Conspiracy Theories for Securitization of the Opposition and Authoritarianisation: The Turkish case,” *Democratization* 29-2 (2022): 320-336.

delineates an all-powerful and evil force allegedly controlling multiple forces to conspire against Turkey. The frequent employment of this rhetoric, not only by Erdoğan himself but even more extensively by his circle, render it particularly suitable for analysis within the context of CTs. A study about the usage of the phrase *the mastermind* came out in 2021 by Kerem Karaosmanoğlu.¹³⁰ In his article “The discourse of *üst akıl*: A search for hegemony in the Turkish media,” Karaosmanoğlu analyses the pro-Erdoğan media and opinion leaders to demonstrate how Erdoğan’s discourse of the mastermind “is used instrumentally almost like a coded language as part of a political effort to invent enemies in an increasingly authoritarian context.”¹³¹

Although not directly related to CTs in Turkey, studies about the Sèvres Syndrome should also be cited. The Sèvres Syndrome is named after the Treaty of Sèvres signed in 1920 and refers to the widespread belief in Turkey that external powers, just as in 1920, want to dismember Turkey. The most comprehensive study about the Sèvres Syndrome (also known as the “Sèvres paranoia” or “complex,”) ¹³² is a lengthy article published in 2011 by historical sociologist Fatma Müge Göçek titled “Why is There Still a Sèvres Syndrome? An Analysis of Turkey’s Uneasy Association with the West.”¹³³ Göçek’s study is particularly useful to see that it was not the Treaty of Sèvres itself, but its use in education and constant emphasis by the military that created the Sèvres Syndrome.¹³⁴ Göçek argued in her article that the AKP challenged the Sèvres Syndrome and the discourse of the Turkish state and the military.¹³⁵ Considering that it was written in 2011, this argument could be valid, though after 2013, the AKP adopted a similar discourse. The discourse on Turkey’s internal and external enemies has also been problematised as part of the ideology of the government. In a book chapter published in 2020, Kerem Öktem argued that in Turkey, rulers have always prioritised the state at the expense of individual rights, and that everyone who was not a Sunni-Muslim was seen as a potential danger. Accordingly, identifying an element as an internal danger helps link it to external enemies and eventually to exclude it. It also helps rulers mobilise the masses.¹³⁶

¹³⁰ Kerem Karaosmanoğlu, “The discourse of *üst akıl*: a search for hegemony in the Turkish media,” *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 21-1 (2021): 77-99, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2021.1872233>

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹³² Although the common phrase is “the Sèvres Syndrome,” *paranoia* and *complex* are also used. Feroz Ahmad was one of the earliest figures to point out “the Sèvres Complex.” Feroz Ahmad, *Turkey: The Quest for Identity* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2003), 163.

¹³³ Fatma Müge Göçek, “Why Is There Still a Sèvres Syndrome? An Analysis of Turkey’s Uneasy Association with the West.” *The Transformation of Turkey: Redefining State and Society from the Ottoman Empire to the Modern Era* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2011), 98-184.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 118-127.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 169. An MA thesis written in 2021, which examined the Sèvres Syndrome from the view of cultural trauma, incorporated Erdoğan and the AKP into the Sèvres Syndrome as well. Sena Şahin, “‘The Turks Have No Friends But the Turks’: The Sèvres Trauma and the Construction of An Exclusionary National Identity,” (MA Thesis, 2021, Sabancı University).

¹³⁶ Kerem Öktem, “Ruling Ideologies in Modern Turkey” in *The Oxford Handbook of Turkish Politics*, ed. Güneş Murat Tezcür (NY: Oxford University Press, 2022), 53-74.

To date, only one academic study can be characterised as a macro-level analysis of CTs in Turkey. Published by historian Doğan Gürpınar, who had also published a similar work in Turkish earlier,¹³⁷ *Conspiracy Theories in Turkey: Conspiracy Nation* is the first systematic and well-researched study about the topic.¹³⁸ Establishing “the Turkish conspiratorial setting” in the first chapter, Gürpınar deals with a separate topic in every chapter (e.g. “the deep state,” “neo-Kemalist CTs” etc.) presenting both a chronological and a thematic narrative. What is missing from the book is a larger and more satisfactory theoretical framework, and some indispensable elements such as communism and the Cyprus Dispute.¹³⁹

A notable observation emerging from the literature on CTs in Turkey is that studies published prior to the mid-2010s did not involve CTs propagated by the Erdoğan administration. The main reason for this –as also argued in this thesis– could be that until 2013, CTs played a relatively little role in Erdoğan’s discourse, with the exception of some CTs about the Turkish deep state, and blaming external powers was almost non-existent. This could be seen in Göçek’s “Why is There Still a Sèvres Syndrome?” (2011) and Nefes’s “The Function of Secrecy in Anti-Semitic Conspiracy Theories” (2010) articles, in which they both argued that the AKP rejected CTs. Nefes also identified the AKP as a “liberal-conservative” party, which, during the 2000s, was in line with the prevailing political trend.¹⁴⁰ However, studies published after 2018 have incorporated Erdoğan into their analyses. Medeiros in his *Conspiracy Theory in Turkey* (2018) and Gürpınar in his *Conspiracy Theories in Turkey*, (2019) books, both addressed state-sponsored CTs of the Erdoğan administration.

There are also figures that could be referred to as self-confessed conspiracy theorists. Erol Mütercimler who wrote the Turkish book series *Kompla Teorileri: Aynanın Ardında Kalan Gerçekler* (Conspiracy Theories: Truth Behind the Mirror) cites dozens of CTs.¹⁴¹ Rather than something to be problematised, Mütercimler sees CTs as brain exercises. “Conspiracy theorising,” according to Mütercimler, “is merely writing scripts.”¹⁴² Mütercimler rejects the concept of the Sèvres syndrome and argues that it is not those expressing concern about the potential partition of Turkey who are engaging in conspiracism but rather those who invoke the notion of the syndrome itself. He views Turkish history as “extraordinarily rich in terms of conspiracy theories,” a perspective that means that he sees Turkish history rich in terms of *conspiracies*, mostly foreign ones.¹⁴³ In addition to the scripts he himself imagines, his books involve scripts written by his readers as well. Although these are all popular CTs, some of them are CTs that have been typically promoted by the Turkish state and military for decades, such as

¹³⁷ Gürpınar, *Komplolar kitabı: belki de her şey görüldüğü gibidir* (Doğan Kitap, 2014).

¹³⁸ Gürpınar, *Conspiracy Theories in Turkey: Conspiracy Nation* (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2019).

¹³⁹ Derin, review of Medeiros, *Conspiracy Theory in Turkey* and Gürpınar, *Conspiracy Theories in Turkey*, 687-690.

¹⁴⁰ Nefes, “The function of secrecy,” 149.

¹⁴¹ Erol Mütercimler, *Kompla Teorileri: Aynanın Ardında Kalan Gerçekler*, 7th ed. (Alfa Yayınları: 2006).

¹⁴² *Ibid*, 5.

¹⁴³ *Ibid*, 7.

portraying the Armenian militant organization ASALA as controlled by “the West.”¹⁴⁴ In his above-mentioned article, “Small and large scale CTs in Turkey,” Herzog addresses the aforementioned series of Mütercimler, in that throughout his book, Mütercimler picks separate and small cases from Turkey and asserts that they might be linked to the West’s overarching colonial fight against Turkey. Mütercimler’s CTs are mostly about Turkey, though he clearly supports the “controlled demolition” CTs about 9/11.¹⁴⁵ The attitude of Mütercimler is anti-Western, anti-American, anti-Kurdish, antisemitic,¹⁴⁶ and nationalist, though only in the sense of Kemalist/*ulusalci* fraction of Turkish nationalism.

This thesis falls between the micro and macro studies in the sense that I focus on a limited timeframe (the first two decades of the Erdoğan administration), but with a broader historical lens to illustrate how CTs are rooted in Turkish history. One argument of this thesis is that the period of the Erdoğan administration offers a suitable ground for studying CTs. It is well suited to illustrate Turkey’s discourse on internal and external enemies, as it demonstrates how political actors from diametrically opposed camps can use the same narrative to marginalise their opponents. Furthermore, I argue that the Erdoğan administration was first the object of CTs (meaning its target), and later on, the subject of CTs (meaning the author who used them to target others). In both cases, the conspiracist view identified a group of internal enemies and portrayed them as linked to external enemies. Unlike Mütercimler, and like all the other scholars discussed in this chapter, I maintain that CTs are something that needs to be problematised. In terms of approach, the analysis presented in this thesis most closely aligns with the work of Gürpınar and Göçek, particularly in its examination of how political actors across the political spectrum have employed CTs that attribute blame to external powers. This analysis spans a historical time frame extending from the late Ottoman Empire to the contemporary period.

In addition to my focus on narratives involving internal and external enemies, I also incorporate an analysis of the terminology employed. Terms such as *kumpas* (scheme/plot/conspiracy), *oyun* (trick/game), *tuzak* (trap) are commonly used in Turkey in CTs. In fact, they are used more than *komplo*, the Turkish word for conspiracy.

4. This study

a) My approach and methodology

This is a thesis about political CTs during the Erdoğan administration, focusing on the defining characteristics of CTs in Turkey such as collaboration of internal and external enemies, the importance of historical references in conspiracy narratives, and the role of vocabulary. I will be making use of a great deal of primary sources, such as speeches from politicians, as well as

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, 25.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, 456-67.

¹⁴⁶ The word “Jewish” appears throughout Mütercimler’s book, often to describe the ethnic/religious origin of the figures he claims to be at the centre of the schemes. See for instance pages 177, 279, 281, and 347.

books and newspaper articles by intellectuals. These primary sources are examined as products of specific historical developments and are analysed within their respective historical contexts. The context is both the recent past that they were produced in (mostly after 2002), and the context of the historical references used in the sources (mostly the late Ottoman Empire and early Turkish Republic).

This thesis draws on approaches and methods of (critical) discourse analysis to facilitate the integration of macro and micro-level data, and to illustrate how seemingly small units can have a larger impact. While Norman Fairclough, who wrote extensively on this topic, defined “discourse” as “use of language seen as a form of social practice,”¹⁴⁷ Stuart Hall’s definition was “a particular way of representing”¹⁴⁸ and “a group of statements which provide a language for talking about a particular kind of knowledge about a topic.”¹⁴⁹ In the context of CTs in Turkey, I will be employing the term “discourse” in this thesis to denote the specific use of language for political purposes.

In discussing discourse, it is essential to examine its functions, the outcomes it produces, and its potential connections to ideology and power structures. Hall described the function of discourse as “the production of knowledge through language,”¹⁵⁰ referring to the practice through which knowledge is produced as “a discursive practice.”¹⁵¹ Hall also argued that discourse could be thought of in a similar way as ideology.¹⁵² The components of an ideology—in this case, internal and external enemies—become essential elements of the discourse. In a manner similar to Gramsci’s hegemony, Fairclough coined the term “naturalisation,” (citing Gramsci as his inspiration as well) and argued that when a discourse is used repetitively by individuals or groups exerting power, it becomes natural; people take it for granted.¹⁵³ Teun van Dijk, too, argued that discourse establishes power structures.¹⁵⁴ In the case of CTs, the discourse concerns not just Turkey’s internal and external enemies, but the power structures those who are using the discourse are trying to establish. It is a means to exclude the suspected internal enemies by linking them to external enemies. Within the analysis of CTs, the data set found in this thesis comprises speeches, mostly made by politicians. The units of analysis are the vocabulary of CTs and the references to alleged internal and external enemies.

¹⁴⁷ Norman Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis* (London and New York: Longman, 1995), 7.

¹⁴⁸ Stuart Hall, *Modernity: an Introduction to Modern Societies* (Massachusetts, USA: Blackwell Publisher, 1997), 201.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 201.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 201.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 201.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 202.

¹⁵³ Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis*, 27-54.

¹⁵⁴ Teun van Dijk, “What is Political Discourse Analysis,” in *Political Linguistics*, eds. Jan Blommaert and Chris Bulcaen (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1998), 11.

Considering the general characteristics of CTs, the existing literature on CTs in the Middle East and Turkey, CTs examined in this study are predominantly i) political and ii) state-sponsored CTs. Esoteric CTs are rare in Turkey, and, in comparison to political CTs, tend to cause minimal harm.¹⁵⁵ The focus of this thesis is on CTs that constitute struggles between political actors, even when not directly articulated by politicians themselves.

From an analytical perspective, the approach adopted here aligns more closely with understanding than with condemning. The prevalence of CTs in Turkey could perhaps best be described as “straddling between pathology and normalcy.”¹⁵⁶ That is to say, political CTs are so widespread in Turkey that rather than assuming that there is something fundamentally wrong with the majority of the Turks, CTs in Turkey should be seen as ordinary. To reiterate, while I am problematising CTs, I do not suggest pathological reasons. Considering that a substantial amount of the Turkish population have internalised the Sèvres syndrome, referring to people who state their concerns about the revival of Treaty of Sèvres as paranoia would mean referring to the majority of Turks as mentally ill, which would not be helpful in understanding this phenomenon. However, the phrase “the Sèvres Syndrome” will emerge frequently, especially in *Chapter II: “Just Like Before.”* The belief that external powers desire to dismember Turkey is extremely prevalent in Turkey, and it even transcends political affiliations. My referral to the Sèvres Syndrome will be similar to the way Hofstadter used the word paranoia. That is to say, I will be borrowing a clinical term for lack of a better analytical term.¹⁵⁷

In terms of the type of CTs, the focus of this thesis will be on discussing (and problematising) state-sponsored CTs, rather than popular CTs. The main reason for this is that CTs advocating that Turkey is under attack are so prevalent in the country that even actors outside of the state have adopted this narrative. Another reason for problematising state-sponsored CTs instead of popular CTs is that popular CTs do relatively little harm. Consider the following two allegations: 1) The 15 July 2016 coup attempt in Turkey was planned and executed by Erdoğan himself, meaning it was a self-coup;¹⁵⁸ 2) The same coup attempt was instigated by external powers and their internal collaborators, and that after the coup attempt, there were still remnants of the putschists that could attempt another coup.¹⁵⁹ The first CT is a

¹⁵⁵ Even esoteric CTs are linked to politics, though remotely. Earthquakes in Turkey have been blamed multiple times on either political actors, or the US and Israel. See for instance “Deprem Makinesi” HAARP ve Ona Dair İddialar Nelerdir?” *Doğruluk Payı*, 23 November 2022; accessed 16 January 2025 at <https://www.dogrulukpayi.com/bulten/deprem-makinesi-haarp-ve-ona-dair-iddialar-nelerdir>.

¹⁵⁶ Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy*, 8.

¹⁵⁷ Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style*, 3.

¹⁵⁸ Mehmet Atakan Foça, “Vikipedi’de Kendi kendine darbe yapan liderler listesinde iddiası,” *Teyit*, 3 May 2017; accessed 23 January 2025 at <https://teyit.org/analiz/erdogan-vikipedide-kendi-kendine-darbe-yapan-liderler-listesinde-iddiasi>.

¹⁵⁹ Pro-AKP historian Cemil Koçak’s newspaper article after the coup attempt which emphatically asserted that “the coup had external connections” and that “the real purpose” of the much-criticised purges after the foiled coup is to “prevent the putschists from carrying out another coup” constitutes a good example of this kind of rhetoric. Cemil

popular CT, whereas the second one is a state-sponsored one. While the popular self-coup CT had no harmful impact on transparency or democracy in Turkey, the state-sponsored narrative of “external powers and their internal remnants” CT helped suppress hundreds of thousands of real and imagined enemies of the Erdoğan administration in the aftermath of the abortive coup attempt.¹⁶⁰

Discussions about state-sponsored vs popular conspiracism also concern the issue of “the truth.” Studies about CTs address this question frequently, discussing whether CTs are warranted or not.¹⁶¹ Regarding popular CTs about the moon landing, 9/11, or the assassination of Kennedy, questions revolve around what the truth is. For the purposes of this study, discussions about the truth will play only a minor role. Therefore, whether the 2016 abortive coup attempt in Turkey had in fact external connections will not be part of this study. This thesis is more about the discourse on Turkey’s internal and external enemies, and therefore, the discussion is about how, especially perceived internal enemies, are linked to the external ones as an exclusionary device, and what kind of a role history plays there.

b) The content: The structure and key characteristics of this study

Each chapter has a specific focus. Following this introduction, in *Chapter I: Understanding political Conspiracy Theories in Turkey: A toolbox*, I will be introducing the grand narratives and the vocabulary related to CTs and describe the important identities to show their link to CTs. *Chapter II: “Just like before”* is specifically about the historical elements used in CTs. I will be addressing in *Chapter II* the Ottoman background and the transition to Turkish Republic to demonstrate how politicisation of history created a political memory for Turkey, and how this memory was used during the Erdoğan administration in CTs. *Chapter III: Both “reactionary” and “separatist,”* covers the CTs during the early Erdoğan period. This chapter discusses how relations with the West, in particular the EU accession process and the Cyprus Dispute caused the Erdoğan administration to be targeted with CTs and seen as the internal enemy, linked to the external one. *Chapter IV: The hunted becomes the hunter*, could be thought of as a mirror of the previous chapter. This time, it will be Erdoğan that casts various kinds of internal opposition (the Gülenists, the main opposition party the CHP, the academics etc) and targets them with CTs, again linking them to external powers.

In analysing political CTs in Turkey, I will be specifically focusing on several elements:

Koçak, “Halk Sokağa Çıkınca, Vatandaş Darbe Yapamadı!” *Yeni Şafak*, 30 July 2016; accessed 20 January 2025 at <https://www.yenisafak.com/gundem/halk-sokaga-cikınca-vatandaş-darbe-yapamadi-2501918>.

¹⁶⁰ Peter Kenyon, “Turkey’s State Of Emergency Ends, While Erdogan's Power Grows And ‘Purge’ Continues,” *NPR*, 26 July 2018; accessed 23 January 2025 at <https://www.npr.org/2018/07/26/632307755/turkeys-state-of-emergency-ends-while-erdogans-power-grows-and-purge-continues?t=1534676536454>.

¹⁶¹ Uscinski, “The Study of Conspiracy Theories,” 236; Sunstein and Vermeule, “Conspiracy Theories,” 204.

i. Internal and external enemies

As the CT literature points out, foreigners and minorities are, by definition, perceived to be less trustworthy, more dangerous, more likely to cause anxiety, more difficult to control, and therefore, more likely to be accused of conspiracies and/or being subservient to foreign interests.¹⁶² A recent study has found that, among the more than 800 “villains” in American history identified since the Spanish-American War in the 1890s, more than 37 per cent have been outsiders, meaning the biggest perceived threat for Americans have been foreigners.¹⁶³

Regarding CTs in Turkey, a country defined by Doğan Gürpınar as the “conspiracy nation,”¹⁶⁴ external powers that are frequently cast as the causes of political, economic, or social problems, have been indispensable. It is not just the external powers that are blamed for conspiring against the nation or the state, but a collaboration of internal and external actors. Consider the following cases: During the early Erdoğan administration (roughly the mid-2000s), regarding the developments about the EU-accession process and the Cyprus Dispute, the AKP administration and Erdoğan were portrayed as the internal actors helping the external powers that are trying to weaken the country. For instance in 2010, in their opposition to the Kurdish Initiative of the AKP administration, the CHP defined the initiative as “a project that has been imposed on Turkey [...] also supported by the centres of external powers.”¹⁶⁵ Similarly in a 2022 survey, 24 per cent of the respondents and more than half of Erdoğan voters pointed to “the external powers” as the element responsible for the fall of the Turkish Lira, also referred to as “the economic crisis.”¹⁶⁶

CTs in Turkey often have both internal and external actors, in a rhetoric in which the claim is that external powers are trying to weaken Turkey or create chaos, and that to this end, they are receiving help from internal collaborators. This is in line with Dieter Groh’s description of the conspirator, as stated earlier, who must have a “great sense of solidarity.”¹⁶⁷ In the case of Turkey, the said solidarity is between the internal and external enemies, whose desire is to harm Turkey. Hofstadter’s definition of the political paranoid, to repeat, was one who believed the threat was directed “against a nation, culture, or way of life whose fate affects not himself but millions of others.”¹⁶⁸ The threat perception of external powers and foreigners is ubiquitous in Turkey. While external powers are accused of leading systemic conspiracies to Turkey

¹⁶² Uscinski and Parent, 132-33 and 152; Moscovici, “The Conspiracy Mentality,” 161.

¹⁶³ Uscinski and Parent, 137-140.

¹⁶⁴ Gürpınar, *Conspiracy Theories in Turkey*.

¹⁶⁵ “Başlangıçtan bugüne gün gün çözüm süreci,” *CNN Türk*, 1 December 2014; accessed 17 April 2024 at <https://www.cnnturk.com/turkiye/baslangictan-bugune-gun-gun-cozum-sureci?page=4>.

¹⁶⁶ “Anket: ‘Cumhur’ seçmeninin yarısı ekonomideki çöküşü ‘dış güçlere’ bağlıyor” *Diken*, 21 May 2022; accessed 25 January 2025 at <https://www.diken.com.tr/anket-cumhur-secmenin-in-yarisi-ekonomideki-cokusu-dis-guclere-bagliyor/>; Ruth Michaelson, “Turkey’s economic crisis expected to deepen after Erdoğan tops poll,” *The Guardian*, 16 May 2023; accessed 25 January 2025 at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/may/16/turkey-economic-crisis-expected-to-deepen-after-erdogan-tops-election-poll>.

¹⁶⁷ Groh, “The Temptation of Conspiracy Theory,” 3.

¹⁶⁸ Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style*, 4.

(tricks/schemes played on Turkey), foreigners, as individuals, are also suspected of taking part in the said conspiracies and are often accused accordingly. In defining the external enemies, the conspiracist has a Manichean view, in that the world is reduced into an arena with only two parties: Turkey vs internal and external enemies who are perceived to be colluding.

Within Turkey's discourse on internal and external enemies, external actors are the ones manipulating the internal ones, and the internal enemies (Turkish citizens) are the ones being tricked. However, this only applies to Muslims (liberals, Kurds or conservatives). These groups are often accused of being tricked by external powers that have evil intentions. The same thing cannot be said for the Armenians, Greeks, Jews, or in general non-Muslims, who are often depicted as not belonging to the country. Non-Muslims are often portrayed as willingly cooperating with external powers. This distinction between non-Muslims who allegedly deliberately work for external powers and Muslims/Turks who are depicted as being manipulated could be linked to the invisible hierarchies determining the parameters of civic-national belonging in Turkey. Barış Ünlü discussed the situation in Turkey based on a social contract and suggested that there is a Turkish contract and a Muslim contract.¹⁶⁹

How much "power" the external powers actually have is a compelling part of the discussion about CTs. As Groh states, according to the conspiracist, the conspirator is all powerful.¹⁷⁰ This, as stated previously, is more in line with popular CTs, in which the authority is accused of conspiring (e.g. the CTs that 9/11 was an inside job). When it comes to state-sponsored CTs, the alleged conspirator is not all-powerful. In the Turkish case, it certainly is not powerful enough to defeat Turkey. Internal and external enemies always try to dismember or weaken Turkey, but in the end they (or they will) *always* fail.

External powers and their alleged collaboration with internal actors is one of the main focus points in this thesis. I will be demonstrating how, especially during the first two-decades of the Erdoğan administration, CTs revolving around external powers and internal actors subservient to foreign interests have repeatedly been utilised by various actors.

ii. Historical legacy

If collaboration of internal and external enemies is the first key characteristic of political CTs in Turkey, the second one is the historical references in the conspiracy narratives. CTs in Turkey hardly ever limit themselves to the present; the past always emerges with the allegations that the perceived present conspiracies are linked to the real or imagined past conspiracies. This is done by linking the present to an episode from the past, often in the form of portraying the present as a

¹⁶⁹ Barış Ünlü, *Türklük Sözleşmesi: Oluşumu, İşleyişi, ve Krizi* (Ankara: Dipnot Yayınları, 2018), 13-27, 79-81, and 157-184.

¹⁷⁰ Groh, "The Temptation of Conspiracy Theory," 3.

continuation or repetition of the past, aligning with the “everything is connected” pillar of CTs.¹⁷¹

The connection to an event from a century ago is also in line with the “curious leap in imagination that is always made at some critical point” that Hofstadter referred to.¹⁷² In bringing up the past, it is not just an ordinary episode, but an episode of Turkish history when the existence of the country was at stake, such as the Gallipoli front from World War I or the National Struggle. That way, the current threat is rendered existential. While the current perceived internal and external enemies are portrayed to be targeting Turkey at the *present*, by dropping historical references, the conspiracist reminds us that in the past, too, Turkey was targeted with conspiracies, and that there is a link between the two alleged conspiracies.

The historical references also help present the alleged conspiracies as split into several smaller conspiracies. Christoph Herzog argued regarding CTs in Turkey that small-scale real or imagined conspiracies are often portrayed as linked to larger-scale conspiracies which are then linked to an overarching colonial fight of the West against Turkey.¹⁷³ Linking daily political developments to the alleged external conspiracies and then linking them to the Treaty of Sèvres could be thought of from this point of view.

The impact of historical legacy, particularly its emergence within the context of Ottoman/Turkish political memory, will be examined in greater detail in *Chapter II: “Just Like Before.”*

iii. Trick, trap, treason: The vocabulary of conspiracy theories in Turkey

This thesis is about the defining characteristics of the CTs in Turkey. One defining aspect in that regard is the special vocabulary. In portraying developments as external conspiracies, an international phenomenon is to accuse the internal actors of treason and targeting them as internal enemies subservient to foreign interest, working for the enemy. While the rhetoric of treason/betrayal is universal, and is used in Turkey frequently, the Turkish conspiracist view has its own vocabulary.

Key phrases of interest are *tuzak* (trap), *oyun* (trick/game) and *kumpas* (conspiracy/scheme/plot). The claim that internal and external developments are *in reality* parts of the tricks or traps is also in line with the “nothing is as it seems” pillar of the CTs.¹⁷⁴ The reason these phrases deserve special attention is that they are the indispensable phrases of the Turkish conspiracist vocabulary. Rather than the Turkish word for conspiracy (*komplo*), these

¹⁷¹ Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy*, 6.

¹⁷² Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style*, 37.

¹⁷³ Herzog, “Small and large scale conspiracy theories and their problems,” 194.

¹⁷⁴ Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy*, 4.

words are used more. There are also phrases such as *faiz lobisi* (interest rate lobby), which are only used in the CTs by certain strata of Turkey, but which still require analysis. The discussion of the vocabulary of CTs should not be done in isolation but within the context of the master narrative.

Following this introduction, in *Chapter I: Understanding political Conspiracy Theories in Turkey: A toolbox*, I will be introducing the master narrative, the vocabulary of CTs, and the two main identities that will be relevant in the following chapters.