

Antisemitism as a weapon: The Turkish Media on Kurdish Independence

by Paul Iddon - 09/10/2017 14:04



The right-wing press in Turkey has always been highly conspiratorial and detached from reality. In the run-up to, and aftermath of, the referendum on independence in Iraqi Kurdistan, however, it has increasingly begun to echo the extreme fringe conspiracy theories frequently parroted by the state-run Iranian press.

Even before the referendum, a story circled around the Turkish press alleging that [200,000 Jews are going to be settled in Iraqi Kurdistan](#) as part of a deal between Israel and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). There was no factual basis whatsoever for this claim, nevertheless it didn't stop right-wing news site Yeni Safak, which is government affiliated, from claiming that Kurdish President Masoud Barzani was behind this plan to garner greater support from Israel, the only country which openly endorsed the referendum.

Needless to say, an influx of Kurdish Jews back to Kurdistan should be a welcome development and would certainly bolster the KRG's credentials as a polity where

minority rights are fully preserved and respected. But what is at hand here is not the fact that if this were true, it would be admirable. It is that it is not true, but reported as such, precisely because the right-wing Turkish press seeks to use conspiracy theories to tap into popular anti-Semitism.

Since the referendum they've upped the ante of anti-KRG and anti-Barzani propaganda. In reference to the referendum, one Yeni Safak columnist wondered, on October 3, '[From where are the plans of the Crusader-Zionist alliance running?](#)'

Two days later the right-wing site claimed that [Barzani was behind the creation of Islamic State \(ISIS\)](#), in cahoots with the US and Israel, using a document prepared by Iraqi intelligence under Saddam Hussein of all people as their evidence. (Iraqi officials often reinforced Saddam's paranoia during that time, the General Security Directorate [even told him in 2001](#) that the title of the popular cartoon *Pokemon* meant "I am Jewish" in Hebrew and was therefore bad for the country's youth.)

This is quite remarkable given the fact that up until the referendum Turkey considered Barzani a reliable leader and [distinguished him and the KRG quite clearly](#) from the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). Overnight he has become branded as a central figure in some nefarious conspiracy.

Talk of "Zionist plots" and such anti-Semitic innuendo has become commonplace in the Turkish press. The Iranian media also insist that the independence referendum is an Israeli plot, echoing the conspiratorial pronouncements characteristic of Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Iranian officials and some Western sources of highly dubious credibility cited by the likes of Press TV made unsubstantiated claims that the referendum strengthened ISIS and was a joint US-Israeli "disintegration plot" which involved, among other things, "[encouraging apartheid](#)" in the region.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is using the same rhetoric and it's unclear if he is actually using it to guide Turkey's current policies or simply for domestic consumption. When he met Khamenei recently he seemed to outdo the Iranian leader when it came to spouting conspiracies about Kurdistan's independence push being an Israeli plot.

The Turkish leader even felt it necessary to point to the Jewish roots of two Frenchmen who endorsed the referendum.

"You have taken former Foreign Minister of France [on] your right-hand side and another Jew on your left-hand side, working on a table with them," [Erdogan said](#), referring to Bernard Kouchner and Bernard-Henri Levy, the French philosopher, who

met with President Barzani during the historic referendum.

The ferocious government assault on the media in Turkey accelerated since the July 15, 2016 coup attempt, which partially explains the prevalence of such outlandish conspiracies concerning various plots against Turkey, mostly from the US and Israel, since many of the country's more reasonable, responsible and honest journalists have been imprisoned by their government for not toeing the line.

Interestingly the conspiracies and smears against Barzani and the KRG follow a similar tactic to the ones used by Russia against Turkey over a year ago. After Turkey infamously shot-down a Russian bomber over its border with Syria on September 24, 2015, Russia imposed gas sanctions on Turkey and the state-run Russian press started a ferocious assault on the country and President Erdogan.

Ankara, the Russian media alleged at the time, was buying and facilitating ISIS's black market sale of oil (ironically [their map](#) showed one alleged ISIS oil smuggling route going through the KRG, whose vaunted Peshmerga were being killed almost everyday fighting those very same militants) and supporting the group. Members of Erdogan's own family were alleged to have been [closely involved in this](#). More generally Turkey was [in the view of the Russian press at this time](#) essentially “under occupation by Mr. Erdogan and his clique of theocrats and oligarchs.”

Fast-forward to the summer of 2016, Erdogan expressed his regret for the incident and a rapprochement began between them. Now Turkey is even [buying highly sophisticated S-400 air defense missile systems from Russia](#). One wonders if ardent readers and believers of Russian propaganda ever thought to themselves how Erdogan managed to transform from a tyrant who supports ISIS into a man Russia can sell hi-tech weapons to and do other business with in such a short timespan.

The present purveyors of paranoid and twisted conspiracy theories about Barzani in the Turkish press may make a similar 180 degree turn if and when Turkish-KRG relations are restored to the cordial and cooperative status enjoyed between Ankara and Erbil before September 25.