The Limits of Invoking Conspiracies: Comparing Turkey and Uzbekistan

On 16 January 1999, Uzbekistan faced the biggest blow to its government's stability since gaining independence. Six bombs exploded in Uzbekistan's capital city, Tashkent, causing sixteen deaths and more than a hundred injuries. Soon after, the government sought to locate and repress the assailants, including other potential rivals (Polat and Butkevich 2000). On top of that, it justified domestic repression by referring to the existence of a ubiquitous – albeit covert – conspiracy, a response that bears a striking resemblance to the Turkish government's aim to apprehend the organizers of the attempted coup d'état of 15-16 July 2016.

The attempted coup in Turkey has already been subject to much analysis. Many have accounted for the reasons why the coup failed (Malik 2016; Klaas 2016), the impact on Turkey's tradition of secularism, and how Ankara's response or countercoup may eventually compromise democracy (Cohen 2016; Finkel 2016; Tugal 2016; Dündar 2016). Others have considered the international ramifications of the coup, in particular the effects on NATO and Russian relations. This article discusses additional international consequences by comparing the Turkish government's response to the attempted coup with the actions carried out by Uzbekistan in the wake of its own crisis in 1999. It stresses that Ankara may suffer international repercussions similar to those experienced by Uzbekistan's government if it continues to justify the countercoup by referring to the existence of a widespread, secretive conspiracy. Indeed, the use and abuse of "danger" rhetoric has been subject to much scrutiny in International Relations (IR), a discourse which often shapes, reproduces and perpetuates divisions in and across regions, and which also allows for the suspension of "normal" politics (see Campbell 1992; Weldes et al. 1999; Megoran 2005; Heathershaw and Megoran 2011). In the following, I clarify why a comparison between Turkey and Uzbekistan's responses to their crises is warranted and then the predicaments which have challenged Tashkent's international relations since 1999.

Casting the Gülen Movement as a Ubiquitous Enemy

In the aftermath of the attempted coup, the Turkish government quickly accused Fetullah Gülen, an Islamic thinker currently residing in the United States, of being behind the attack. On top of that, Ankara expounded a wide conspiracy net, with nearly 2,745 judges and 103 generals and reporters being detained, followed by the suspension of almost 37,500 civil servants, many of whom are connected to the education sector.

All in all, the Turkish government made use of long established doubts about the Gülen movement's activities. Between 2011 and 2012, the Justice and Welfare Party – also known as the AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*) – increased its hold on power under the leadership of Turkey's current President, Recep Erdoğan. Due to growing internal differences, however, the AKP turned against its former ally, the Gülen movement. Of course, there is no doubt that Gülen was, already by the 1990s, one of the most influential Islamic thinkers in Turkey, not to mention the leader of a broad conservative movement with sundry connections to business and media. However, after Turkey's last successful military coup in 1997, the movement's ideas and influence were deemed increasingly suspicious by Turkish authorities, and Gülen was forced to emigrate to the United States in 1999 (Krespin-Sharon 2009: 52). In doing so, his movement was subject to public scrutiny: some saw it as a means by which to brainwash students, while others considered it to be a relatively harmless conservative endeavour which combined a modern, secular

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education with Islamic teaching (see Balci 2003; Bilici 2006; Krespin-Sharon 2009; Park 2009; Gözaydın 2009).

In any case, the point is not whether Gülen is in fact responsible or not for the attempted coup, but the way in which the conspiracy has been characterised thereafter. Like in Uzbekistan, Turkish authorities have implemented a massive purge, justifying their actions with references to a widespread secret network, consisting of perpetrators capable of brainwashing people. Turkish Prime-Minister Binali Yıldırım stated in an interview that, "given all that has happened it is clear that the threat was greater than we thought" (BBC Monitoring Europe 2016). The net was cast wide, but the danger posed by the potential conspirators was further elaborated. Turkey's Deputy Prime Minister, Nurettin Canikli, argued in an interview given to the BBC that – on top of being fanatics and more threatening than Kurdish separatism or even the Islamic State – members of the movement "practically had their brains removed". They were, according to Canikli, "hypnotised. They're like robots. Each one of them is a potential threat. They could commit all sorts of attacks, including suicide bombs" (BBC2016).

Justifications of this kind provide Ankara with enough leeway to consolidate authority and placate all internal rivals. That said, there is no doubt that the attempted coup requires a serious response, not least because it resulted in over 200 deaths and suspended the "normal" course of politics. And yet, despite the severity of the event, the problem lies not in there being a response, which is to be expected or even seen as necessary, but the scale of the crack-down and the way in which it has been justified. Referring to an invisible conspiracy, consisting of thousands of people, many of whom are apparently brainwashed, only helps to perpetuate the climate of danger and insecurity. Though it may well consolidate the AKP's grip on power, it has lasting international repercussions, insofar as the deployment of ubiquitous, covert conspiracies tends to turn against those who invoke them. But before elaborating on that point, it is worth looking at the government of Uzbekistan's response to its own crisis in 1999, how this affected its foreign relations, and whether the same outcomes are applicable to present-day Turkey.

Casting a Wide Conspiracy Net

Uzbekistan's President, Islam Karimov, began consolidating his domestic authority once the country achieved independence in 1991 (Bohr 1998; Melvin 2000). Deeply suspicious of individuals or parties who could challenge him, Karimov repressed internal challengers and the opposition, including foreign organisations with a nationalist or proselytizing agenda. For instance, the Gülen movement, which is now being subject to a major purge across Turkey, was targeted, as Uzbekistan became the first former Soviet state to curb the organisation's influence. Tashkent prohibited the circulation of the Gülen-affiliated newspaper *Zaman* in 1994 and also restricted the ability of the Gülen schools to proselytize within the country.

Following the February 1999 attack in Tashkent, all of the Gülen schools were shut down. Karimov justified repression by appealing to the existence of a wide net of conspirators, arguing that Tohir Yo'ldosh, one of the leaders of the so-called Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), had met in Turkey with Mohammad Solih, a former Presidential candidate and the leader of the opposition party *Erk* (Freedom), and that both had conspired to overthrow the government (Interfax 1999). Moreover, following the attacks, Tashkent quickly demanded the extradition of Solih from Turkey, as well as other individuals accused of participating in the events.[1]

Because the net of conspirators invoked by Karimov was so wide, the government had free reign to repress political rivals (Polat and Butkevich 2000). Twenty-two people were formally charged, although reports suggest that more than a hundred and twenty individuals were targeted by the regime (Ponomorev 1999). Indeed, in order to justify the policy, Karimov alluded to the pervasiveness of the threat and the extent to which radicals were capable of influencing an especially susceptible youth (BBC Summary of World Broadcasts 1999). Nearly a year later, Karimov took that claim further, arguing that Islamic organisations, such as the Gülen movement, were capable of brainwashing young people: "They have been poisoning their brains at various mosques, distorting the true essence of our sacred religion, misinterpreting it" (BBC Summary of World Broadcasts 2000). Similar to Turkey after the attempted coup, the threat was portrayed as a conspiracy led by fanatics who were very much capable of manipulating their followers at will.

International Repercussions of finding Enemies Within

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The actions of the government of Uzbekistan throughout the 1990s and particularly its response to the crisis in 1999 had three key repercussions. Although Tashkent was able to consolidate domestic control, it was increasingly considered a political liability by Western leaders due to its human rights record; it gradually lost credibility and the ability to secure international support; and it was unable to have its interests depicted beyond the logics of security and stability. In short, invoking the existence of a ubiquitous conspiracy is not without costs. I shall go over each of these points briefly and then discuss whether they may be applicable to Turkey.

Becoming a Political Liability to Western Partners

The abuse of conspiracies sheds doubts on the democratic potential and human rights situation of a state. For instance, during the McCarthy era in the United States, conspiracy theories about infiltrated communists, compounded by the witch hunt that followed, compromised the credibility of American liberal democracy (Olmsted 2009; Dudziak 2011). And yet, the damage may often extend beyond the domestic sphere, for questions about individual rights come to dominate the public sphere, brushing all other issues to the side. Of course, while references to democracy and human rights are to be expected when meeting European Union (EU) Member-States, let alone United States' representatives, these issues can very much plague a relationship, as was the case of Uzbekistan. For example, during Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's trip to Uzbekistan in 1999, the meeting consisted of tense public discussions about reform and human rights, even though the visit was supposed to reinforce a burgeoning security relationship. That trend persisted even after 2001, when Uzbekistan's government became a "partner" of the United States' War on Terror. Neither party could avoid the issue and so the political relationship deteriorated steadily (Daly et al. 2006: 23-25). Germany, with whom Uzbekistan had developed a significant economic and security relationship, was also forced to make references (though less frequently) to Uzbekistani reform, especially in order to curb media and parliamentary criticism (Teles Fazendeiro 2015). Of course, this is not to say that the issue of democratization and human rights trumps all other interests, nor that Uzbekistan was unable to pursue relations with Germany and the United States. Rather, the Uzbekistani government systematically had to show that it was not enforcing repression or otherwise justify why it was doing so. As such, invoking widespread conspiracies did little to mitigate growing Western scepticism, an effect that had other practical consequences. "Western" politicians were indeed forced to think twice before engaging with Uzbekistan, as too close a political relationship could be interpreted as an act of cynicism or a betrayal of deeply held values.

Inability to Obtain Strong International Support

By casting such a wide net of conspirators, Tashkent faced a growing problem of credibility. In this regard, it is important to bear in mind that there are indeed serious threats to Uzbekistan, not least because its government was forced to deal with the consequences of two civil wars in neighbouring states (in Tajikistan and in Afghanistan) during the 1990s. Yet the concern herein is not with highlighting such threats, rather with how they are represented to domestic and international observers alike. In fact, it was precisely the attempt to present a ubiquitous internal conspiracy that give rise to increased international scepticism. For instance, two bombs near the American and Israeli embassies in Tashkent went off in 2004, but the government of Uzbekistan obtained little if any public support regarding those attacks. Worse, the events were represented by sceptics as a ploy by the government to gather sympathy (Ilkhamov 2004). Whether or not this is true is beyond the scope of this article, but it demonstrates that conspiracy theories tend to turn against those who invoke them systematically. In short, invoking conspiracies thwarts confidence, raising doubt about the intent of all political actors, including the government who may have originally appealed to them.[2]

The Inability of the Government to be Depicted beyond Strategy

By virtue of systematic references to dangerous conspiracies, such as the existence of an internal enemy, stability is increasingly regarded as both the main and only rationale of the government. Though Karimov frequently appealed for strong economic relations with partners and also remained sceptical of multi-lateral arrangements, his decisions to leave the Eurasian Economic Community in 2008 and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation in 2012 were interpreted by way of a logic of security. Observers debated extensively the security threats of the regime and whether leaving any of those organisations was a means by which to balance against great powers or to secure

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internal stability (see Fumagalli 2007; Teles Fazendeiro 2012; Pikalov 2014). John Heathershaw and Nick Megoran (2011: 617), two preeminent scholars of Central Asia, rightly argue that the "significance of the discourse of danger is not simply that it leads to academic and journalistic misinterpretations of events in the region but that it informs and, therefore, deforms western policy and practice." By systematically invoking the need to fight against dangerous conspiracies, these conspiracies, in turn, tend to brush aside other significant issues. Economic cooperation, for example, is gradually taken to be secondary, as danger and security become the prisms though which politics is interpreted.

Prospects for Turkey?

By casting such a wide conspiracy net, the Turkish government faces the prospect of having the country cast as a place of danger, a depiction with serious international, political and economic ramifications. At any rate, what has happened to Uzbekistan is not immediately applicable to Turkey. No doubt, the latter has still a long tradition of cooperating with NATO and the EU. And yet, it is worth bearing in mind the international repercussions of invoking large and secretive conspiracies. Turkey may eventually be considered a no-go place by (Western) politicians in light of how its justifications undermine democracy and human rights, thereby contradicting NATO and EU values. But aside from its the relationship with the "West", Ankara may also gradually lose international support more generally. Referring to a large web of plotters may turn against the Turkish government, as facts become increasingly difficult to separate from conspiracy theories. This effect would be especially detrimental to the Turkish government, which requires international support to deal with the civil war in Syria and with Kurdish separatism. Finally, Turkey has little to gain from bolstering the rhetoric of present and imminent danger. As a country whose economy is partially directed toward tourism and the movement of people, perpetuating the existence of widespread, covert threats does little to enhance international confidence.

Notes and References

[1] Though Solih was not extradited, other potential participants were returned to Uzbekistan, much to dismay of Human Rights organisations in Turkey (see, for example, Mazlumder 2010; Bakirtaş 2016).

[2] On the use of conspiracy theories and other political ploys, such as compromising a political rival, and their consequences, see Heathershsaw (2012), Olmsted (2009) and Wilson (2005).

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