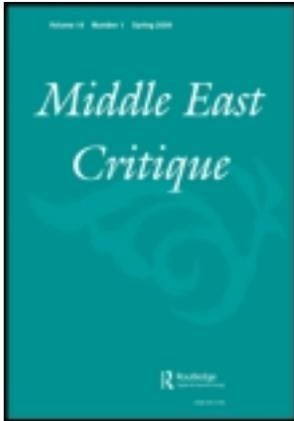


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The Social Psychology of the Ergenekon Case: The Collapse of the Official Narrative in Turkey

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It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that the Republic of Turkey was created in the image of its founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. In fact, those who subscribe to the official Turkish narrative often refer to the country as ‘Atatürk Republic’ (*Atatürk Cumhuriyeti*). That phrase emphasizes a certain political identity that was largely shaped during the Cultural Revolution Atatürk brought about under his one-party rule in the 1920s and 1930s. In very brief terms, the revolution aimed to replace, often by force, Turkish religious-cultural practices and symbols with Western ones.¹ Atatürk’s forced-Westernization policy was coupled with a strong cult of personality around his image as the nation’s leader. When Atatürk’s reign came to an end in 1938 with his death, the state sanctified his memory and ideals, and allowed his unquestioned status to persist in the years to come. His persona, ideology and Cultural Revolution since have become largely intertwined and have influenced official Turkish historiography strongly.²

Within the Turkish political system, it has been the bureaucracy, and especially the military, that have safeguarded Atatürk’s heritage for decades. But, as the restrictions on freedom of speech started to loosen after the turn of the millennium, not only the official ideology but also the whole system that maintained the *status quo* came under widespread criticism, mostly on democratic grounds. The criticisms directly targeted the official narrative and, by doing so, further stimulated public interest in history. For many, that was a recovery from ‘amnesia,’³ since the state institutions had long inculcated the idea that Turkish history started with Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. According to the counter-narrative, however, even the choice of the self-proclaimed last name

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¹ B. Lewis (1961) *The Emergence of Modern Turkey* (New York: Oxford University Press); E. J. Zürcher (1993) *Turkey: A Modern History* (London: I. B. Tauris).

² F. Ülgen (2010) Reading Mustafa Kemal Atatürk on the Armenian Genocide of 1915, *Patterns of Prejudice*, 44(4), pp. 369–391. Also see K. Bumin (1998) *Okulumuz, Resmî İdeolojimiz ve Politikaya Övgü* [Our School, Our Official Ideology, and Praise for Politics] (İstanbul: Patika).

³ E. Özyürek (ed.) (2007) *The Politics of Public Memory in Turkey* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press).

‘Atatürk,’ which means ‘Father of all Turks’ in Turkish, was an attempt to start Turkish history with the Republican era, and thus to erase society’s memory.

The challenge to the official narrative gained new momentum, first, after the military intervention of 1997 that overthrew the incumbent coalition government, then, with the rise of the conservative AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* – Justice and Development Party) to power in 2002 and, finally, in 2008, when the investigations regarding the Ergenekon case implicated a widespread state involvement in many of the infamous crimes in the country’s past. Some of the revealed evidence has challenged the positive images of certain state institutions and political actors to an unprecedented extent.⁴ This article argues that the magnitude of these challenges have constituted a ‘meaning threat’⁵ for those who subscribe to the official narrative. Meaning threats occur when people experience events that are at odds with their cognitive frameworks through which they give meaning to the outer world. Experiencing meaning threats makes people feel less certain about themselves and their capability to cope with the outer world. This is why, under such circumstances, people feel uncomfortable and take resort in conservatism, which, in the Turkish case, corresponds to paternalist authoritarianism and assertive ethnic nationalism.

Conservatism and Social Psychology

The theory of meaning within the social psychology literature deals with how the human brain perceives and makes sense of the outer world, as well as how people react when this process somehow is obstructed. In very simple terms, the outer world is too complicated for the human brain to perceive and understand fully. To cope with this complexity, the brain does two things: (1) it reduces its cognitive load—that is, it limits the amount of information it receives, and (2) it cognitively structures a simplified version of the actual world, and uses that model to construe phenomena.⁶ Although this *modus operandi* of the brain makes human life extremely practical, it also brings with it some problems, since simplification involves defining phenomena by their most salient characteristics, while filtering out almost everything else. Doing so is the primary reason behind, for example, the human inclination to characterize others by stereotypes.⁷ In other words, categorizing people on the basis of skin color, ethnic background or other conspicuous characteristics is a result of simplistic thinking that focuses for the most part on the immediately visible features of phenomena.

⁴ It was the Susurluk incident of 1996 that revealed the extralegal activities of the Turkish state for the first time. The incident involved a car crash that revealed that the former deputy head of the Istanbul Police Department, an ultranationalist hitman wanted on Interpol’s Red List, the hitman’s mistress, and a member of the Turkish Parliament were traveling in the same car. But despite the huge public reaction and wide media coverage, the investigation did not lead to any significant findings.

⁵ W. B. Mendes, J. Blascovich, S. B. Hunter, B. Lickel & J. T. Jost (2007) Threatened by the Unexpected: Physiological Responses During Social Interactions With Expectancy-Violating Partners, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 92(4), pp. 698–716; and K. van den Bos (2009), Making Sense of Life: The Existential Self Trying to Deal with Personal Uncertainty, *Psychological Inquiry*, 20(4), pp. 197–217.

⁶ S.L. Neuberg & J.T. Newsom (1993) Personal Need for Structure: Individual Differences in the Desire for Simple Structure, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 65(1), pp. 113–131. For more on prejudice and stereotypes, see W. Lippmann (1922) *Public Opinion* (New York: Free Press); and G. W. Allport (1954) *The Nature of Prejudice* (Cambridge, MA: Perseus).

⁷ For more on prejudice and stereotypes: Lippmann, *Public Opinion*; Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice*.

In addition to the working principles of the brain, psychological needs and conditions also influence human perceptions. In fact, the relationship between the *modus operandi* of the brain and certain psychological processes is key to explaining the way humans make meaning. For example, people feel at ease when their experiences confirm that the outer world is operating the way their simplified version of it predicts. Whenever something unexpected happens, however, the mental comfort comes to an end. This is called *expectancy violation*, and it can be triggered by something as simple as encountering a counter-stereotype.⁸ Upon experiencing an expectancy violation, people feel anxious and threatened because they sense that their ability to understand—and thus, cope with—the outer world has decreased.

One other psychological need that influences human meaning making is the *cognitive need for closure*, which, in essence, is also a need for mental ease. It refers to the human preference for an answer—that is, any answer—to a given topic over confusion and ambiguity.⁹ In other words, people feel uncomfortable under conditions of uncertainty, and they look for ways to attain closure as soon as possible and to maintain it for as long as possible. Importantly, the answer that will satisfy the need for closure is not necessarily the true answer but the available one, because, the goal is to eliminate—or at least, make tolerable—the uncertainty.¹⁰

Another human response to uncertainty is to take resort in cultural/religious worldviews. Worldviews are highly influential in the way people make sense of reality. Therefore, when their experiences support their worldview—that is, when everything operates as predicted—people feel more complacent. The opposite is also true. Experiences that contradict worldviews induce discomfort and negative reactions.¹¹ Under such circumstances, people tend more passionately to embrace their worldviews. For example, under conditions of anxiety, people are more likely to exhibit increased religious zeal,¹² because, even when the outer world betrays their worldviews and no longer makes sense, people still turn to these very worldviews in an effort to cling on to life, and feel more certain of themselves.

Especially salient here is the human motive to remain in control of the outer world. When people experience events that make them feel their personal control over the outer world has decreased, they attribute control to external systems—that is, they tend to think that, even though the world is not in their control, it still does not operate randomly, and that some other force maintains the order. Depending on the person and the context, that external system of control may be a *controlling* God, or an *overarching* political system.¹³ Since this cognitive process—that is, the human inclination to avoid uncertainty

⁸ Mendes, Blascovich, Hunter, Lickel & Jost, Threatened by the Unexpected.

⁹ A. W. Kruglanski (1990) Motivations for Judging and Knowing: Implications for Causal Attribution, in: E. T. Higgins & R. M. Sorrentino (eds.) *The Handbook of Motivation and Cognition: Foundation of Social Behavior*, Vol. 2, pp. 333–368 (New York: Guilford Press).

¹⁰ A. W. Kruglanski & D. M. Webster (1996) Motivated Closing of the Mind: ‘Seizing’ and ‘Freezing,’ *Psychological Review*, 103(2), pp. 263–283.

¹¹ van den Bos, Making Sense of Life.

¹² I. McGregor, K. Nash & M. Prentice (2010) Reactive Approach Motivation (RAM) for Religion, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 99(1), pp. 148–161.

¹³ A. C. Kay, D. Gaucher, M. J. Callan, J. L. Napier & K. Laurin (2008) God and the Government: Testing a Compensatory Control Mechanism for the Support of External Systems, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 95(1), pp. 18–35; and A. C. Kay, D. A. Moscovitch & K. Laurin (2010) Randomness, Attributions of Arousal, and Belief in God, *Psychological Science*, 21(2), pp. 216–218.

and threat—also gives rise to the tendency to resist change, and even to justify and rationalize existing social and political structures, the result is a tendency toward political conservatism.¹⁴

The Official Narrative in Turkey

Official narratives depict and, in fact, cognitively structure a particular version of the political world. They present past and present accounts in accordance with a national myth. The official narrative in Turkey,¹⁵ for example, has a history, continuing into the present, of presenting a black-and-white vision of the world, where shades of gray are largely non-existent.¹⁶ It is a product of the early years of the Republic of Turkey. It was a time when the memories of World War I and the ensuing war against the British plans involving the partitioning of the Ottoman Empire were very fresh. The ideological stance of the official Turkish narrative thus reflects the psychology and views of the military rulers, and especially of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who fought the Turkish War of Salvation (1919–22), and then ruled the country under a one-party regime.

The narrative depicts a Hobbesian world where Turks are at war with almost everyone else. According to that perspective, Turks need to be cautious about foreign powers that continuously conspire to weaken the Turkish state so as eventually to divide it. The narrative constantly repeats that argument and, by doing so, not only emphasizes the vulnerability of the nation against hostile external forces¹⁷ but also fuels the paranoia about a possible return of the Treaty of Sèvres.¹⁸ Within that security-oriented perspective, the narrative accentuates two ideologies inspired from the French

¹⁴ A.C. Kay, D. Gaucher, J.M. Peach, K. Laurin, J. Friesen, M. P. Zanna & S. J. Spencer (2009) Inequality, Discrimination, and the Power of the Status Quo: Direct Evidence for a Motivation to See the Way Things Are as the Way They Should Be, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 97(3), pp. 421–434; and J. T. Jost, J. L. Napier, H. Thorisdottir, S. D. Gosling, T. P. Palfai & B. Ostafin (2007), Are Needs to Manage Uncertainty and Threat Associated With Political Conservatism or Ideological Extremity?, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 33(7), pp. 989–1007. System justification theory holds that the human inclination to rationalize and justify the existing order is present even among the members of groups whom the *status quo* most harms. This motive, on the one hand, leads the advantaged group members to believe that the disadvantaged group members deserve their lower social or economic status and, on the other, makes it easier for the disadvantaged group members to internalize inferiority. For more, see: J. T. Jost, M. R. Banaji & B. A. Nosek. (2004) A Decade of System Justification Theory: Accumulated Evidence of Conscious and Unconscious Bolstering of the Status Quo, *Political Psychology*, 25(6), pp. 881–919.

¹⁵ The term ‘official narrative’ in this article refers to the way the state, or an institution in alliance with the state, does or does not present past and present accounts.

¹⁶ B. Çotuksöken, A. Erzan & O. Silier (eds.) (2003) *Ders Kitaplarında İnsan Hakları: Tarama Sonuçları*, [Human Rights in Textbooks: Scan Results] (Istanbul: Tarih Vakfı). Also see: F. Üstel (2004) ‘Makbul Vatandaş’ in *Peşinde: II. Meşrutiyet’ten Bugüne Vatandaşlık Eğitimi* [In Pursuit of the ‘Acceptable Citizen:’ Citizenship Education from the II. Constitutional Era to Today] (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları); and S. Kaplan (2006) *The Pedagogical State: Education and the Politics of National Culture in Post-1980 Turkey* (Stanford: Stanford University Press).

¹⁷ Ç. Keyder (2007) Whither the Project of Modernity?: Turkey in the 1990s, in: S. Bozdoğan & R. Kasaba (eds.) *Rethinking Modernity and National Identity in Turkey*, pp. 37–51 (Seattle: University of Washington Press).

¹⁸ The Treaty of Sèvres is the peace treaty signed on August 10, 1920, between the Ottoman Empire and the Allied Powers of World War I. For more on ‘the Sèvres syndrome,’ see K. Kirişçi & A. Çarkoğlu (2003) The View from Turkey: Perceptions of Greeks and Greek–Turkish Rapprochement by the Turkish Public, in: A. Çarkoğlu & B. Rubin (eds.) *Greek–Turkish Relations in an Era of Détente*, pp. 117–153 (London: Frank Cass).

experience: secularism and nationalism. Both of these ideologies have shaped the content of the Republican elite's forced socialization efforts. For example, the Republican cadre adopted from France the secularist policy of removing religion from not only the political but also the social sphere.¹⁹ The broader objective of the cadre in doing so was to achieve a fundamental cultural change—the idea being that the Ottoman past was archaic and backward, and the policy of *laïcité* would bring to the new Republican era progress and freedom.

The story of the application of nationalism is slightly more precarious. Initially, the ideology merely involved establishing Turkishness as the new basis of unity in the Ottoman Empire.²⁰ The nationalist leaders followed the same agenda after the proclamation of the Republic in 1923. In the early 1930s, however, the political climate in Europe introduced racist concepts, such as eugenics or craniometry, to the thinking of the Republican cadre.²¹ The result was a number of state-supported efforts scientifically to prove the superiority of the Turkish race over the others.²² The Turkish Thesis of History (*Türk Tarih Tezi*), formulated by Mustafa Kemal himself, provided the framework for these works. The thesis held that Turks had originated in Central Asia, where they had built the world's first civilization, and their migration to different continents had introduced civilization to the rest of the world.²³ Most civilizations we know today were thus Turkish in origin.²⁴

These supremacist arguments gradually fell out of fashion after the theories in question were discredited. The militarist discourse associated with them, however, persisted. For example, the Turkish educational system still inculcates students with the essentialist idea that the Turkish nation is, and needs to remain, a 'military-nation' (*asker-millet*),²⁵ since it has to protect itself from its neighbors and other enemies. More importantly, both secularist and nationalist policies have characterized an ideal

¹⁹ A. Kuru (2009) *Secularism and State Policies Toward Religion: The United States, France, and Turkey* (New York: Cambridge University Press).

²⁰ M. Ş. Hanoğlu (1995) *The Young Turks in Opposition* (New York: Oxford University Press).

²¹ Maarif Vekilliği (1939) *Lise Kitapları: Biyoloji II* [High School Textbooks: Biology II] (Istanbul: Maarif Matbaası).

²² Especially important among these works is the state-sponsored doctoral dissertation of Afet İnan, who studied the skull sizes, heights, weights and other morphological characteristics of 64,000 people in Anatolia with the objective of proving that Anatolia is the 'fatherland of the Turkish race.' See A. İnan (1947) *Türkiye Halkının Antropolojik Karakterleri ve Türkiye Tarihi: Türk Irkının Vatanı Anadolu (64.000 kişi Üzerinde Anket)* [The Anthropological Characteristics of Turkish People, and the History of Turkey: Anatolia as the Fatherland of the Turkish Race (Survey on 64,000 People)] (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu). For more on racism, eugenics or craniometry during the one-party era, see N. Maksudyan (2005) *Türklüğü Ölçmek: Bilimkurgusal Antropoloji ve Türk Milliyetçiliğinin Irkçı Çehresi (1925–1939)* [Measuring Turkishness: Science-Fictional Anthropology and the Racist Features of Turkish Nationalism] (Istanbul: Metis).

²³ B. Ersanlı (2003) *İktidar ve Tarih Türkiye'de 'Resmi Tarih' Tezinin Oluşumu (1929–1937)* [Political Power and History: The Formation of the 'Official History' Thesis in Turkey (1929–1937)] (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınevi).

²⁴ A. Yıldız (2001) 'Ne Mutlu Türküm Diyebilene:' *Türk Ulusal Kimliğinin Etno-Seküler Sınırları (1919–1938)* ['How Happy is he who can Say I am a Turk: The Ethno-Secular Boundaries of the Turkish National Identity (1919–1938)] (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları).

²⁵ A. G. Altınay (2004) *The Myth of the Military-Nation: Militarism, Gender, and Education in Turkey* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan).

Turkish citizen and, by doing so, pushed significant portions of the population into a secondary status. Kurds, conservative Muslims and non-Muslims are the most prominent examples of the identities that the Turkish state ideology has rendered as secondary.

For example, Turkish nationalism denied even the existence of a Kurdish identity.²⁶ The justification of the denial policy, which included a ban on the Kurdish language and culture, was based on the idea that a separate identity within the country's borders would divide the nation. The discrimination against Kurds, however, was not entirely on an ethnic basis. Those who agreed to assimilate into the Turkish culture were welcomed.²⁷

Unlike Kurds, conservative Muslims have faced discrimination due not to the nationalist but the secularist component of the state ideology. This is due to the dichotomous distinction between the Ottoman past and the Republic that is still highly salient in Turkish politics. From its side of the dichotomy, the Turkish state perceives conservative Muslims as the remnants of the old regime, and their identity as a threat to the Republic. This is why, in the Turkish context, the term 'backwards' (*gericiler*) still refers to the conservative Muslims who are reluctant to give up their 'outdated' cultural and religious practices. Likewise, progressives (*ilericiler*) indicate those who embrace state-imposed cultural practices. Today, this line of thinking finds expression in the state-imposed secularist practices, such as the ban on headscarves in state institutions, including many state and private universities. The state also has complete control over mosques as well as the teaching of Islam in public schools.²⁸

In the case of non-Muslims, the state sanctions exclusion—that is, it does not consider non-Muslims even a prospective part of the Turkish nation. Therefore, unlike Kurds, non-Muslims—which usually refers to Armenians, Jews or Greeks—are not encouraged to assimilate into the Turkish culture. The rationale behind this different treatment of non-Muslim minorities lies in the militarist mentality of Turkish nationalism, which still operates with the mindset of the Turkish War of Salvation, and perceives non-Muslim citizens as a fifth column.²⁹ Accordingly, it presents an unfavorable image of their identities and, in the process, ignores episodes in history that involve cruelty and injustice toward them. For example, a college student in Turkey majoring in political science may very well graduate without learning about the Armenian question, the Thrace Pogroms of 1934,³⁰ the Wealth

²⁶ M. Yeğen (2011) *The Kurdish Question in Turkey: Denial to Recognition*, in: M. Casier & J. Jongerden (eds.) *Nationalisms and Politics in Turkey: Political Islam, Kemalism and the Kurdish Issue*, pp. 67–84 (New York: Routledge).

²⁷ M. Akyol (2006) *Kürt Sorununu Yeniden Düşünmek: Yanlış Giden Neydi, Bundan Sonra Nereye?* [Rethinking the Kurdish question: What Went Wrong, Where Next?] (İstanbul: Doğan Kitap).

²⁸ It is important also to note, however, that especially in the 1980s the Turkish state toyed with the idea of reconciling Islam (or, more accurately, its own version of Islam) with nationalism by supporting a doctrine that commonly is referred to as the Turkish-Islamic Synthesis. The doctrine maintains that there is an inherent compatibility between the Turkish and Islamic identities and intertwines the two by emphasizing how Turks fought for centuries in the name of Islam. For more, see E. Copeaux (2006) *Tarih Ders Kitaplarında (1931–1993): Türk Tarih Tezinden Türk-İslam Sentezine* [In the History Textbooks (1931–1993): From the Turkish Thesis of History to the Turkish-Islamic Synthesis] (İstanbul: İletişim).

²⁹ Çotuksöken, Erzan & Silier, *Ders Kitaplarında İnsan Hakları; and Altınay, The Myth of the Military-Nation*.

³⁰ R. N. Bali (2008) *1934 Trakya Olayları* [1934 Events in Thrace] (İstanbul: Kitabevi).

Tax of 1942,³¹ the Pogrom of September 6–7, 1955,³² or any other unpleasant episode in twentieth-century Turkish history.³³

To justify this highly discriminative state of affairs, the Turkish state ascribes to the country a set of ‘unique conditions’ (*kendine özgü koşullar*) that supposedly explain why the generally accepted principles of democracy do not apply to Turkey. These justifications usually rely on militarist or authoritarian arguments. One of the most commonly cited ‘unique conditions’ is the country’s geopolitical location, due to which, according to that argument, the country is under constant threat and thus is in need of the unity of its citizens.³⁴ The geopolitical location argument also explains why the country’s governance necessitates a more security-oriented approach. Another argument in that direction is the ‘ignorance’ of the majority of Turkish people. In more precise terms, the official discourse deems necessary a higher level of education for the general public before a fully democratic regime can work in Turkey.³⁵ It must be noted, however, that the official discourse often associates ignorance with criticism toward Mustafa Kemal Atatürk—the idea being that disparaging the merits of his progressive ideology or Cultural Revolution stems from backward thinking.

An Alternative Retrospective

The official narrative constructs for Turkish citizens a simplified version of the actual world. This construction serves as a cognitive framework to construe political phenomena. The Ergenekon case has undermined this construction by revealing phenomena that are at odds with the tenets of this model. The findings of the case also have introduced an alternative retrospective to recent Turkish history and, in so doing, have led to the rise of a counter-narrative. This counter-narrative revealed that a long-forgotten political tradition, which originates from the late Ottoman period, is still alive and well in contemporary Turkey.³⁶ Commonly referred to as Unionism (*İttihatçılık*), this political tradition involves a clandestine organization that has extensions within the state, and engages in extrajudicial activities. The name derives from the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP, *İttihad ve Terakki Cemiyeti*), a secret society founded in 1889 by a group of reformist college students in Istanbul. Reform, at the time, meant changing the absolutist Ottoman regime and restoring the constitution of 1876. The CUP achieved that goal with the Young Turk Revolution in 1908. Yet it never fully transformed into

³¹ A. S. Çetinoğlu (2009) *Varlık Vergisi 1942–1944: Ekonomik ve Kültürel Jenosid* [The Wealth Tax: 1942–1944: Economic and Cultural Genocide] (İstanbul: Belge); A. Aktar (2000) *Varlık Vergisi ve ‘Türkleştirme’ Politikaları* [The Wealth Tax, and Policies of ‘Turkification’] (İstanbul: İletişim); Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*.

³² D. Güven (2006) *Cumhuriyet Dönemi Azınlık Politikaları ve Stratejileri Bağlamında 6–7 Eylül 1955 Olayları* [The Event of 6–7 September 1955 in the Context of Republican Era Minority Policies and Strategies] (İstanbul: İletişim).

³³ For such an account of political science education, see H. Cemal (2010) Geçmiş temizlemek, Atatürk’ü bile sansürlemek! [Cleansing the Past, Censoring even Atatürk], *Milliyet*, Ocak 20, 2010.

³⁴ MEB (2009) *Milli Güvenlik Bilgisi* [National Security Knowledge] (Ankara: MEB); and Üstel, ‘*Makbul Vatandaş’ ın Peşinde*.

³⁵ Üstel, ‘*Makbul Vatandaş’ ın Peşinde*.

³⁶ For more on the predecessors of Ergenekon, see S. Kaya (2009) The Rise and Decline of the Turkish ‘Deep State.’ *The Ergenekon Case, Insight Turkey*, 11(4), pp. 99–113.

a political party. Instead, it continued its collusive activities even when it was in office.³⁷ The Unionist cadre administered both the committee and the cabinet, and ran political affairs on two different levels. Even the Unionist ministers who sat in the cabinet did not always know about the extralegal operations, such as the mass killings of Christian minorities during World War I.³⁸

Allegations regarding the Ergenekon case have implied that this Unionist legacy is still alive. Ergenekon, too, is run by a cadre of executives who operate through a wide network of individuals within the military, bureaucracy, media, academia, parliament, intelligence agencies and various other influential institutions.³⁹ This widespread membership allows far-flung subversive activities that vary in kind and magnitude. For example, some of Ergenekon's high-magnitude activities serve the objective of disrupting the political system as a whole by instigating acts of terrorism and violence in an effort to create social and political instability. The acts would signal that the incumbent government cannot maintain order, thereby provoking—or, providing an excuse for—a military intervention.⁴⁰ Some other activities of Ergenekon involve assassinations or bombings that can be attributed to a particular group and help to influence public opinion and policy at home or abroad.⁴¹ Yet the members of the organization escape prosecution due to a variety of reasons ranging from operating in state-of-emergency (*olağanüstü hal*) zones⁴² (where actions under military protection have hardly ever been prosecuted) to having close ties to state institutions, including the judiciary.⁴³

Most of the accounts that surfaced during the Ergenekon investigation exposed the involvement of some state officials with many of the major incidents and unsolved mysteries⁴⁴ in recent Turkish history. These accounts changed not only the interpretation of these landmark events, but also the way people perceive some of the major actors in the country. Each of such changes in the interpretation of recent Turkish history constituted a separate meaning threat and, in the process, the counter-narrative gained new ground and, with each step, started more seriously to challenge the official narrative. The Kurdish question is one example. The acknowledgement of a separate Kurdish identity was probably the initial major meaning threat posed to the official narrative. Then came the

³⁷ Hanioglu, *The Young Turks in Opposition*; Ş. S. Aydemir (1963) *Tek Adam: Mustafa Kemal 1881–1919. Cilt I* [One Man: Mustafa Kemal 1881–1919. Vol. I] (İstanbul: Remzi).

³⁸ T. Akçam (2006) *A Shameful Act: The Armenian Genocide and the Question of Turkish Responsibility* (New York: Metropolitan Books).

³⁹ Ş. Tayyar (2008) *Operasyon Ergenekon: Gizli Belgelerde Karanlık İlişkiler* [Operation Ergenekon: Dark Relations in Secret Documents] (İstanbul: Timaş); and A. Şık & E. Mavioğlu (2011) *Kontrgerilla ve Ergenekon'u Anlama Kılavuzu* [The Guide to Understanding Counter-guerilla and Ergenekon] (İstanbul: İthaki Yayınları).

⁴⁰ Tayyar, *Operasyon Ergenekon*.

⁴¹ Similar *modi operandi* are visible in the Balyoz case that investigates, among other things, the alleged plans by military chiefs to assassinate prominent Armenian writers and journalists in an effort to impact adversely Turkey's accession process to the European Union; see further B. Kılıçgedik, M. Baransu, S. Güleç & D. Baştürk (2011), Balyoz'un ölüm listesi Gölçük'te bulundu [The Death List of Balyoz Found in Gölçük], *Taraf*, January 20, 2011.

⁴² The notorious state-of-emergency rule continued for 15 years in southeastern Turkey between 1987 and 2002.

⁴³ For a detailed discussion of the presence and decline of Ergenekon within the Turkish state, see Kaya, *The Rise and Decline of the Turkish 'Deep State'*.

⁴⁴ Examples include the assassination of the Kemalist journalist Uğur Mumcu, and Alawi massacres such as the Maraş Massacre of 1978 and the Çorum Massacre of 1980.

disclosure of past and present crimes of the Turkish state against Kurds.⁴⁵ These accounts previously were unknown to many, and their popularization not only seriously damaged the credibility of the Turkish state but also ended the mental comfort offered by the official narrative. Moreover, extensive public debates on these accounts introduced a new frame of reference.⁴⁶ For example, in the past, many people regarded the members of the PKK as deceived (*kandırılmış*) people who did not even know for what they were fighting. Learning more about the background of the Kurdish question has put the issue in a context,⁴⁷ even for those who still disagree with the guerilla's cause. The result was an alternative retrospective, according to which it was not the existence of a Kurdish identity but its denial that contributed to dividing the nation.

A Psychological Ordeal

The *raison d'être* of official narratives is to tell a story to the citizens. In most cases, that story presents the events in such a manner that characterizes the protagonists, heroes and villains in the particular way the state desires. In the end, the narrative comes to provide the citizens with a purposively simplified version of the actual political world. Citizens use that model to construe social and political phenomena. The model tells them whom to trust and whom to treat with suspicion. In the Turkish case, the findings of the Ergenekon investigation so fundamentally discredited most of these characterizations that the existing cognitive model was no longer functional in construing the outer political world. That is not to say that the Ergenekon case constituted the first challenge to the official narrative. To the contrary, a counter-narrative was in emergence in Turkey especially after 1997, when the Turkish military overthrew an elected government for the fourth time in the country's history. But that counter-narrative was more in the form of targeting the state ideology. With the Ergenekon case in 2008, new findings—such as mass graves of extrajudicially executed people, or people thrown alive in acid pits—raised more serious questions.

These never-before-heard activities horrified the public. Also, in a social psychological sense, encountering such counter-stereotypical images, such as a terrorist military chief or a murderous state, led people to experience expectancy violations. Many of these counter-stereotypical encounters suggested to the people that they should switch in their minds the places of heroes and villains, or of perpetrators and victims. For many people, such a task of cognitive reconstruction was too demanding to accomplish. This was because each of these accounts not only constituted a meaning threat but also was intense

⁴⁵ One such account is the Ethnic Cleansing of Dersim in 1937–38, where 40,000 to 70,000 Kurds of all ages were killed by the Turkish air force and gendarmerie, and 7,000 to 12,000 were exiled. For details, see H. Aygün (2009) *Dersim 1938 ve Zorunlu İskan: Telgraflar, Dilekçeler, Mektuplar, Fotoğraflar* [Dersim 1938 and Mandatory Settling: Telegrams, Petitions, Letters, Photographs] (Ankara: Dipnot). Another frequently visited account is the Diyarbakır Military Prison, where the military regime of the early 1980s tortured the Kurdish inmates. After their release, many of them joined the PKK, the pro-Kurdish separatist guerilla organization. For details, see H. Cemal (2003) *Kürtler* [Kurds] (İstanbul: Doğan Kitap).

⁴⁶ For the political change Ergenekon has introduced to Turkey, and the implications of that change on the Kurdish question, see Ü. Cizre & J. Walker (2010) Conceiving the New Turkey After Ergenekon, *The International Spectator*, 45(1), pp. 89–98.

⁴⁷ Also influential in this process were the democratization of the country and the corresponding advancements in free speech. Widely circulated books that cover interviews with PKK members are a new phenomenon in Turkey; see further B. Matur (2011) *Dağın Ardına Bakmak* [Looking Beyond the Mountain] (İstanbul: Timaş).

in terms of signaling to those who experienced them that their outer world no longer made sense, and that they could not cope.

Conclusion

Meaning threats induce uncertainty and discomfort, both of which the human brain always aims to reduce. Its course of action to accomplish that reduction is to take resort in the very worldview that caused the problem in the first place when it failed to construe the outer world. Doing so makes it possible once again to cope with the world. In the Turkish case, the founder of the Republic of Turkey, the Turkish military, and the Turkish state ideology are among the major components of the official political worldview. Therefore, any developments or encounters that raise questions about their truthfulness or integrity register as meaning threats in the minds of those who are socialized along official lines. This feeling of being threatened serves an impulse to embrace more passionately the political ideology and symbols of the state.

Recent findings within the social psychology literature, which shed light on the cognitive dynamics of this process, help explain the rise of political conservatism in Turkey. In other words, various developments in the Turkish case after 1997 and 2008 that aim to maintain the *status quo* confirm the aforementioned theories of meaning. In the time period between 1997 and 2008, political conservatism finds expression in assertive ethnic nationalism, paternalist authoritarianism and political symbolism.⁴⁸ After 2008, the decline of the official narrative as well as the institutions that have long maintained it becomes even clearer. In the context of Turkish politics, these developments signal a near-complete collapse of the official political worldview. The politically conservative response to that meaning threat is to ignore or deny all of the expectancy-violating experiences, and to strive to revert back and maintain the *status quo*. Based on some of the misconduct involved with the administration of the Ergenekon case, these responses sometimes go as far as claiming that the whole organization does not really exist, and everything associated with the case is, in fact, a political tale⁴⁹ told by the incumbent party with the objective of seizing or crippling the state institutions. The solution to the problem is thus to do away with the case and its findings, and make things as they were before.

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⁴⁸ For more on pre-2008 political conservatism in Turkey, see E. Özyürek (2006) *Nostalgia for the Modern: State Secularism and Everyday Politics in Turkey* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press).

⁴⁹ C. Kaptanoğlu (2009) Ergenekon Masalı [The Tale of Ergenekon], *Radikal*, January 25, 2009.

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