



Feature Article
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Turkey-Kazakhstan Relations: A Strong Partnership in the Turkic World

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Kazakhstan has been a key partner for Turkey in the Turkic world, with relations that have been positive and expanding since independence. They have accelerated in recent years, with more institutionalized political relations, and ambition to further boost economic relations, and the continued role of Turkish soft power in Kazakhstan. In recent years, particularly after Turkey's more active projection of military power abroad, military cooperation has also developed into an important element of Turkey-Kazakhstan relations.

In 1991, when the USSR imploded, Turkey's interest in the Central Asian republics exploded. It was during this relatively recent period that Turkish diplomacy towards Kazakhstan began to take shape. The two states shared many points of kinship but were largely ignorant of each other, since the sealed Iron Curtain had prevented any contact until then. Official links between Turkey and the Turkic-speaking states of Central Asia were only established with the demise of the Soviet Union. Even before the Soviet era, at the time of the Ottoman Empire, political links between Anatolia and Russian Turkestan were limited. It was only towards the end of the empire that the sultans, notably Abdülhamid, tried to forge closer links with the Muslims of the Russian and

Chinese empires, but without any notable success. Even less fruitful were the attempts of the Young Turks to unite the Turks of Turkey and those of Central Asia, even though one of the most illustrious of their number, Enver Pasha, died for this ideal while fighting the Bolsheviks in the mountains of what is now Tajikistan.

An important feature: bilateral relations between Turkey and Kazakhstan are dynamic in almost all areas: political, economic, cultural and military. They are largely based on personal commitment and understanding between the leaders of the two countries, and strengthening institutional ties. As a result, Turkey's foreign policy towards the Turkic world has become a central pillar of

state policy, above and beyond personal and partisan ties.

Political Relations, from Personal Links to Strategic Agreements

As the first country to recognize Kazakhstan's independence, Turkey and its leaders attached the greatest importance to political relations with this country in particular and with the rest of the Turkic world. In thirty years of relations, Turkish heads of state, starting with Turgut Özal and on to Süleyman Demirel, and now Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, have made frequent visits to Kazakhstan. Similarly, the official authorities of Kazakhstan, including Nursultan Nazarbayev in the past and Kassym-Jomart Tokayev today, are regular visitors to Turkey. As a result, strong political relations have led to the establishment of wide-ranging cooperation programs.

For Turkey, Kazakhstan is crucial to the success of its general policy of building a Turkic world that stretches, in the words of Süleyman Demirel, "from the Adriatic to the Great Wall of China". Indeed, of all the Turkic-speaking states of the former USSR, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan are the most favourable to the idea of creating a political union bringing together the Turkic states.

In return, for the Kazakh elites, Turkey is an essential country in the political strategy aimed at

freeing the country from the Russian orbit and diversifying its foreign partners as part of the multi-vector policy launched by President Nursultan Nazarbayev and pursued by his successor Kassym-Jomart Tokayev. Certain Eurasianist elites, both Turks and Kazakhs, also share the feeling that their two countries form a bridge between Europe and Asia.

The good relations between the two countries have led to the signing of a number of political agreements, including the 2009 "strategic partnership" agreement. In 2012, during then-Prime Minister Erdoğan's visit, a bilateral agreement was signed to implement "synergy in the economic development of the two countries". In the same year, during Nazarbayev's visit, a "high-level strategic partnership" agreement was also signed. Finally, in May 2022, President Tokayev paid another visit to Turkey, during which he signed several cooperation agreements in various fields, strengthening the ties between the two countries.¹ These good political relations are complemented by economic partnerships that have made steady progress since the country gained independence.

Economic Relations Set to Strengthen

Kazakhstan is a country rich in natural resources and offers Turkey many opportunities for cooperation. Alongside various minerals and

¹ Asel Satubaldina, "Kazakhstan and Turkey Determined to Advance Strategic Partnership Through Investment and Business Cooperation", *The Astana Times*, May 11, 2022,

<https://astanatimes.com/2022/05/kazakhstan-and-turkey-determined-to-advance-strategic-partnership-through-investment-and-business-cooperation>

metals, hydrocarbons are the main Kazakh exports to Turkey. In return, Turkey exports textiles, foodstuffs and various industrial products to Kazakhstan.² But the construction and building sector deserves a special mention. Kazakhstan has embarked on far-reaching construction policies since its independence, and has relied heavily on Turkish companies to build new cities in the country, notably the capital Astana. Finally, another feature of the Turkish economic presence in Kazakhstan is that Turkish companies are among the most numerous foreign companies established in the country. Some of the giants and flagships of Turkish industry are present, such as the Yıldırım Group, Tiryaki Holding and TAV, which bought Astana airport in 2020.³ But above all, by 2022, no fewer than 4,000 Turkish companies, albeit small, were working in Kazakhstan and criss-crossing the country.

In the field of fossil fuels, Kazakhstan has rapidly built cooperation with China, Turkey, Azerbaijan and Georgia to develop a pipeline network linking Central Asia to the Caucasus and Western Europe, in order to open up Central Asian oil and gas, to free itself from the Russian network and to increase the volume of trade between several countries on the Eurasian continent. This policy

will enable Astana to reduce its dependence on Russia.

However, despite the good political and economic relations with Turkey, the volume of trade seems to be stagnating at a level that is not particularly high. In 2023, it barely reached \$ 5 billion, but the leaders of the two countries express hope that it will reach \$ 10 billion in 2030.

Soft Power, Turkey's Greatest Asset in Kazakhstan

What gives bilateral relations the prospect of strengthening is the strength of Turkish soft power. Turkey's cultural influence in Kazakhstan is deep and growing, giving the country and its products and services a good reputation.

Numerous initiatives and actions undertaken by the Turkish state and various non-state actors have contributed to Turkey's influence in Central Asia in general and in Kazakhstan in particular. While the Turkish government has been criticised for having an over-ambitious, unrealistic policy that was out of touch with the realities of the Central Asian countries it was targeting, in reality, in the field of ideas and the humanities, Turkish initiatives have been crowned with success.⁴

² Özgür Nur Ögütçü, "The current state of relations between Kazakhstan and Turkey", *Aorasya Incelemeleri Merkezi/Center for Eurasian Studies*, September 2027, <https://avim.org.tr/en/Analiz/the-current-state-of-relations-between-kazakhstan-turkey>

³ Tuba Sahin, "Turkey's TAV takes over operations at Almaty Airport", *Anadolu Ajansi*, Mai 31, 2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/economy/turkeys-tav-takes-over-operations-at-almaty-airport/2225673>

⁴ Hayriye Kahveci, Işık Kuşçu Bonnenfant, "Turkish Foreign Policy Towards Central Asia: An Unfolding of Regionalism

In the field of education, Turkey has implemented a major student exchange policy between Turkey and the Turkic world, which has benefited Turkish-Kazakh relations. Thousands of Kazakh students have received grants to study in Turkey. In 2022, there were around 2,300 Kazakh students throughout Turkey. Similarly, universities in Turkey and Central Asia have been linked by a policy of diploma equivalence, which has encouraged the development of significant university cooperation and the mixing of students from Turkey and the rest of the world. The crowning achievement of this cooperation between Turkey and Kazakhstan was the creation of the Ahmet Yesevi Turkish-Kazakh University in the southern city of Turkestan.⁵ The reference to Ahmet Yesevi and the location of the university just a few hundred metres from his mausoleum are no coincidence. In the history of the Turkic world, Ahmet Yesevi is considered to be a common point of reference, a founding spiritual father and federator between the various Turkic peoples of the steppe, with a notable influence on the mystical Turkish Islam of Anatolia. Today, thirty years after it was founded, the university is one of the largest in Kazakhstan, and one of two state universities

established by Turkey in the Turkic world, the second being Manas University in Kyrgyzstan.

Cooperation in the field of religion is also an important aspect of Turkey's policy of forging closer ties with Kazakhstan in the field of ideas. Lacking religious elites after the Soviet era, where Islam was confined to the private sphere, Kazakhstan and the other Central Asian states called on several foreign countries to train new elites and rehabilitate religious sites. Egypt, Saudi Arabia and other Muslim countries responded, but not to the same extent as Turkey. The Turkish state played an active part in the revival of Islam by helping the authorities to introduce a new religious policy. The Diyanet, the official body for managing Islam in Turkey, sent dozens of imams to Kazakhstan.⁶ Above all, it has set up a theology faculty in the city of Shymkent, where hundreds, if not thousands, of managers working in the religious sphere, and other spheres, have been trained. In the same spirit, Kazakh students have been trained in Turkey at various theology faculties. Finally, the Diyanet has also participated in the construction or renovation of mosques and has distributed a large amount of Islamic literature in Russian and Kazakh.

and Soft Power", *All Azimuth*, 2023, <https://www.allazimuth.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/3-Turkish-Foreign-Policy-Towards-Central-Asia.pdf>

⁵ Meiramgul Kussainova, "Türkiye ile Kazakistan'ın kurduğu Ahmet Yesevi Üniversitesi daha fazla öğrenci kabul etmeye hazırlanıyor", *Anadolu Ajansı*, August 15, 2008, [https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/egitim/turkiye-ile-kazakistanin-](https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/egitim/turkiye-ile-kazakistanin-kurdugu-ahmet-yesevi-universitesi-daha-fazla-ogrenci-kabul-etmeye-hazirlaniyor/2967900)

[kurdugu-ahmet-yesevi-universitesi-daha-fazla-ogrenci-kabul-etmeye-hazirlaniyor/2967900](https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/egitim/turkiye-ile-kazakistanin-kurdugu-ahmet-yesevi-universitesi-daha-fazla-ogrenci-kabul-etmeye-hazirlaniyor/2967900)

⁶ Bayram Balci, "Turkey's religious outreach in the Turkic World", *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, March 11, 2014, <https://www.hudson.org/national-security-defense/turkey-s-religious-outreach-and-the-turkic-world>,

Lastly, another initiative by the Turkish state, despite its weak initial response in Kazakhstan, deserves to be mentioned. This was Ankara's effort to get all the Turkic states to abandon the Cyrillic alphabet in favour of the Latin alphabet in order to improve communication within the Turkic world. To achieve this, Turkish linguists worked on developing a Latin alphabet suitable for all Turkish languages, and tried to get each country to adopt it. While Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, with Turkey's support, have switched to a Latin alphabet that is very close to the one advocated by Turkey, Kazakhstan has not yet done so, but Turkey continues to offer strong incentives to adopt this reform.⁷ A presidential decree stipulates that the Kazakh language will be written in the Latin alphabet by 2031.⁸ True, the switch to the Latin alphabet is not intended solely to satisfy Turkey, but rather to distance Kazakhstan from Russia and to write its language in more universal characters. Still, these language reforms in Kazakhstan and the rest of the Turkic world promote Turkey's policy of influence in the post-Soviet space.

But cooperation in the field of ideas is not the prerogative of the Turkish state alone. Reflecting the dynamism of Turkish associative life and the non-state sector since the 1980s, Turkish non-governmental organizations have made a major contribution to the development of a Turkish sphere of influence throughout the former socialist area since the end of the Cold War. Since the reforms initiated by Turgut Özal begun in January 1980, private companies, foundations and religious groups have played a major political role not only in bilateral relations but also in Turkish foreign policy. In the case of Kazakhstan and the rest of Central Asia, private investment in Turkey's policy of influence has been embodied mainly by religious groups of essentially *Nakshibendi* obedience. The community of Süleyman Hilmi Tunahan, the Süleymanci, as well as the followers of Osman Nur Topbas, another religious figure also related to *Nakshbandiyya*, have opened modest madrasas in several towns in Kazakhstan to promote their vision of Sunni Islam.⁹ Similarly, various small groups stemming from the *Nurcu* movement, founded by Said Nursi, have been active in establishing religious links between Turkey and Kazakhstan. In this respect, the community of

⁷ Andrew Linn, "Kazakhstan is changing its alphabet – here's why", *The Independent*, November 22, 2017, <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/linguistics/kazakhstan-is-changing-its-alphabet-here-s-why-a8068851.html>

⁸ Asel Satubaldina, "Kazakhstan Presents New Latin Alphabet, Plans Gradual Transition Through 2031", *Astana Times*,

February 1, 2021, <https://astanatimes.com/2021/02/kazakhstan-presents-new-latin-alphabet-plans-gradual-transition-through-2031/>

⁹ Bayram Balci, "Islamic revival in Central Asia", Rico Issacs, Erica Marat (Eds), *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Central Asia*, 2021, <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9780429057977-35/islamic-renewal-central-asia-bayram-balci?context=ubx&refId=f89289e6-2f66-49fc-b710-865bcbb709d6>

Fethullah Gülen, which sometimes claims to be part of the *Nurcu* movement, deserves particular attention because of the considerable role it has played in Turkish influence in Kazakhstan.

Since 1991, the *Fethullahci*, followers of Fethullah Gülen, have been present throughout the post-communist area, and not just in Kazakhstan but also in the Balkans, the Caucasus and Central Asia. Many of them came to work there claiming to follow the ideas of Fethullah Gülen's movement. In Turkey, this movement, ambiguous in its relationship with politics, secularism and the state, saw itself as a community of faith seeking to help Muslims improve themselves through education. Thousands of members of this community, which has its origins in Hanafi Sunni Islam but is strongly influenced by Turkish nationalism and guided by the teachings of its master Gülen, set up educational and religious foundations, media and businesses throughout Turkey. Since 1991, other representatives of this same community have travelled throughout Central Asia to set up schools, newspapers and businesses – in other words, an armada of networks of influence. In Kazakhstan, this community helped to establish around thirty secondary schools, a university named after Süleyman Demirel, and numerous other commercial enterprises.

Between 1991 and 2016, relations between Turkish embassies and Fethullah Gülen's establishments in Central Asia were generally very good. Occasionally, some ambassadors, who were attached to Atatürk's secular ideals,

did not hide their irritation with this movement, which was seen as a threat to Atatürk's legacy. But because their actions served the country's interests, criticism was muted. With the arrival of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in power, relations between the government and the various Gülenist institutions expanded both in Turkey and abroad. In Central Asia, and more particularly in Kazakhstan, a good symbiosis was observed between the players in Turkish politics and the institutions linked to Fethullah Gülen. But this understanding between the two strongmen in Turkey, Erdoğan and Gülen, deteriorated for a variety of reasons – above all a question of power and rivalry in domestic and even foreign politics. With the failed coup of July 2016, attributed by the Turkish authorities to Gülenist forces infiltrating the structures of the state – particularly the army, police and judiciary – the rupture between the two men became brutal, total and with vindictive consequences. The total war of eradication launched by the state against the Gülen movement was not limited to Turkey. Indeed, from the day after the putsch, in Kazakhstan as elsewhere in the world, the ultimate aim of Turkish diplomacy was to do everything possible to totally eliminate the Gülenist movement, now declared a terrorist organisation and severely repressed in Turkey.

In practice, in Kazakhstan and elsewhere, Turkish diplomacy has used all diplomatic means – intimidation, threats, blackmail, bargaining – to obtain the closure of all Gülen institutions and the neutralization of its

members. The Kazakh authorities reacted to this open war between Erdoğan and Gülen in two stages. Initially, considering that this confrontation only concerned Turkey, the Kazakh authorities tried to remain neutral and refused to heed Turkey's demands to close all Gülen schools and to transfer them to a new organisation, the Maarif Foundation, set up by the Turkish government to take over the Gülen establishments everywhere. Aware of the value of the Gülen schools in their country, but also out of a principle of sovereignty, the Kazakh authorities did not want to comply with Erdoğan's demands.¹⁰ However, faced with the insistence of the Turkish authorities, Kazakhstan reached a compromise. The various Gülenist institutions were closed, but not handed over to Turkey, instead incorporated into the Kazakh Ministry of National Education. As for the representatives of the Gülen movement, some went into exile in Western countries, while others remained but were asked not to engage in any political activity hostile to Erdoğan's government.

Over 25 years of varying activities, between 1991 and 2016, the schools and other establishments of the Gülen movement, in close cooperation with Turkey, have trained hundreds of pupils and students who have gone on to become executives and leaders. Although decried by the authorities in Turkey and just about everywhere else in the

world, it is a fact that they have contributed to the spread of Turkish influence in Kazakhstan. Thanks to them, throughout Kazakhstan there are connoisseurs of Turkey, speakers of Turkish, and men and women who have played an important role in establishing and developing Turkish-Kazakh relations. The break between the Turkish government and this movement has had a negative impact on Turkey's ability to influence all the countries where the Gülenists were present. But at the same time, other movements, and also the Turkish government itself, have been able to replace the Gülenists so that Turkey can continue to exert a certain amount of soft power. In Kazakhstan, as elsewhere, Turkish influence did not cease with the split between Gülen and Erdoğan. In general terms, Turkey's influence has even increased, acquiring a new dimension in the form of military cooperation.

Military Cooperation, Turkey's New Trump Card in Central Asia

In recent years, Turkey has been particularly conspicuous – and has annoyed some of its own allies – for its interventionism, including military intervention, in several conflicts in its geopolitical environment. In Syria, in the context of the civil war that followed the Arab Spring, Turkey carried out several military operations and occupied certain parts of Syrian territory to combat “Islamic State” and Kurdish separatism.

¹⁰ Catherine Putz, “Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan Reject Turkish Calls to Close Gülen Schools”, *The Diplomat*, August 1,

2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/08/kazakhstan-and-kyrgyzstan-reject-turkish-calls-to-close-gulen-schools/>

The same Turkish interventionism was seen in Libya, where its military support enabled the legitimate government to confront the forces of Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar. And more recently in the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, Turkey's military aid to Azerbaijan was decisive in its victory over the Armenian side. Nor should we forget Turkey's military aid to Ukraine, which has enabled Kyiv to withstand Russia's aggression. In all these feats of arms, the media have focused on the most spectacular aspect, the use of Turkish drones. However, Turkish military know-how goes beyond this technological aspect alone and makes the country attractive and influential. Its experience is much broader, and is based on a long-standing arms industrial policy.

However, although Turkish military cooperation in Central Asia and the Caucasus began as early as independence, with a military attaché posted in each embassy, it is thanks to these recent interventionist measures that Turkey has strengthened its military presence in the former USSR. As a result, military training to NATO standards, which Turkey exports to these countries, as well as the purchase of Turkish equipment, has developed in the region. As for Kazakhstan, after having purchased Turkish drones, as did Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan, an agreement has just been signed between Astana

and Ankara for the manufacture in Kazakhstan of the Anka version of the Bayraktar drones.¹¹

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, three key points should be made:

In thirty years of cooperation, Turkey and Kazakhstan have succeeded in establishing an excellent relationship that has seen virtually no tension, apart from Turkish pressure for Astana to put an end to the activities of the Gülen movement. These relations cover all areas: political, educational, cultural, religious, economic and even military. It is in the interests of both countries to cooperate both bilaterally and within the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), whose development is of interest to both parties. For Turkey, a stronger OTS is synonymous with the emergence of a Turkic bloc on the international stage. For Kazakhstan, a stronger OTS would enable it to balance its relations with Russia and the political organisations it belongs to, such as the Eurasian Economic Union and the Collective Security Treaty (CSTO).

However, the good relations between Turkey and Kazakhstan do not mean that Russia has given up its desire for regional leadership. Although Turkey's rise to power in Kazakhstan and Central Asia is taking place at the expense of

¹¹ Almaz Kumenov, "Kazakhstan seals deal to produce Turkish drones under license", *Eurasianet*, May 13, 2022,

<https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-seals-deal-to-produce-turkish-drones-under-license>

Russia, the latter remains to a large extent the unavoidable tutelary power. Indeed, to give just one example, in January 2020, when a popular uprising almost plunged Kazakhstan into chaos, it was thanks to Russia's intervention, within the framework of the CSTO, that calm was restored.¹² Russia's assistance in the restoration of order was a perfect illustration of the fact that Russia is still a key guarantor of stability in Central Asia, more so than Turkey, which has seen the limits of its influence in the region in this crisis in Kazakhstan.

Finally, the good relationship between Turkey and Kazakhstan does not mean that other powers, apart from Russia, do not have their sights set on regional leadership. China is now the main economic partner of most Central Asian

countries, although other countries are as influential as Turkey in Kazakhstan, but not in the same way. South Korea, the European Union and even the United States have forged good relations with Kazakhstan. In so doing, the country can pride itself on having succeeded in building a balanced, multidirectional foreign policy, finally free of a cumbersome "big brother", whoever that may be.

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¹² Ezgi Yazici, "Kazakhstan Crisis Exposes Limits of Turkey's Reach in Central Asia", *Institute for Study of War*, 2022, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep39688>