**Feature Article**

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**Turkey and the Organization of Turkic States:
A Quest for Pan-Turkism?**

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*The Organization of Turkic States (OTS) represents an institutionalized restoration of a pre-Soviet pattern of Turkic cooperation. A common linguistic, as well as the more dubitative notion of a cultural heritage that is supposed to unite the lands between Istanbul and Samarkand contribute to furthering a sense of belonging among the member states of the OTS. Yet Turkic unity is valued and promoted only as far as it aligns with the economic-political state interests of the individual members of the OTS, and is discarded when it contravenes those interests. The deepening of Turkic cooperation answers to the material interests of the participating states. The Turkic states’ reluctance to recognize and include the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus underlines the ultimately non-ethnic character of their cooperation, and is also indicative of Turkey’s limited ability to exercise an uncontested leadership role among the group of Turkic states.*

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ddressing the 8th summit of the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States – or the Turkic Council in short – November 12, 2021 in Istanbul, Turkey’s President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan solemnly announced the historic renaming of the Council: “We are changing the name of our Council, which has developed its institutional structure and boosted its prestige in its region and beyond, to the Organization of Turkic States (OTS).” The Turkic Council was formed in 2009, upon the suggestion of President Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan in 2006. Halil Akıncı, a Turkish diplomat who was appointed the first Secretary General of the Council, proudly called it “the first voluntary alliance of Turkic states in history.” Baghdad Amreyev, who held the same position when the Turkic Council was renamed the Organization of Turkic States in 2021, boldly predicted that “It may well end up as the United States of the Turkic World.”[[1]](#footnote-1)


*Astana Summit of the Organization of Turkic States, November 2023. (President.az)*

At a press conference during the inaugural summit of the OTS, Erdoğan held forth an even more grandiose vision, saying that “the region of Turkestan, the cradle of civilization, will once again become a center of attraction and enlightenment for all humanity.”[[2]](#footnote-2) The reference to the historic term of Turkestan, in lieu of Central Asia, was striking. It seemed to bespeak pan-Turkic ambitions behind Turkey’s investment in the OTS. On one hand, it made sense to speak of Turkestan since the OTS brings together the Turkic states from Turkey to Central Asia, excluding the non-Turkic Tajikistan. Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkey are its founding members, with Uzbekistan joining what was then still the Turkic Council in 2019. Turkmenistan holds an observer status since 2021, as does, somewhat peculiarly, Hungary (since 2018) and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (since 2022).

Yet on the other hand Erdoğan’s resurrection of the term of Turkestan was also notable as the term has been out of official use in Turkey as well as internationally for a century, since the founding of the Soviet Union. Notwithstanding, the historical process that concluded with the Soviet eradication of Turkestan as a geographical and political entity and with a systematic – and as it seemed, successful – effort by the Soviet Communist Party to bury the notion of a unified Turkic nation across Eurasia, attests to the historical roots and reality of a Turkic identity that is now resurfacing. Imagined as they may be – as is arguably any other national-cultural community – the notions of Turkestan and Turkic unity are nonetheless not fictitious concepts. The reference to Turkestan is a reminder that the OTS has not materialized in a historical-cultural vacuum. Neither is in fact the OTS the first attempt in history to unite peoples across Eurasia that identify as Turkic or simply as Turks. As has been the case before in history, the deepening of Turkic cooperation today answers to the material interests of the elites of the participating states.

Ultimately, the OTS represents an institutionalized restoration of a pre-Soviet pattern of Turkic cooperation. In 1919, the Third Conference of the Muslim Organizations of Russia, held in Tashkent, declared Turkestan as the unified republic of the Turks of Central Asia and Caucasus.[[3]](#footnote-3) The attempt was short-lived. Faced with the challenge of an independent Turkic Communist Party (in power in Tashkent) with pan-Turkic ambitions, for which there was apparently fertile soil from the banks of Volga to the Kirghiz steppe, Vladimir Lenin and his Bolsheviks banned the word Turkestan, renaming the region Middle Asia, (*srednaya Aziya*)an anodyne term devoid of dangerous political-historical connotations. The Soviet Communist Party also abolished its *Turkburo* and the republic of Turkestan disappeared as a constitutionally recognized sovereign republic of the Soviet Union.

The pan-Turkic revival to which Lenin put an end originated among the Kazan Tatars in Russia during the second half of the nineteenth century,[[4]](#footnote-4) and was ultimately prompted by material, economic interests. A similar dynamic is at work today, with business once again propelling political unity. The Kazan bourgeoisie had historically controlled the trade between Russia and Turkestan, but lost its monopoly in the wake of the Russian conquest of Turkestan. In order to preserve an economically advantageous position, the Kazan bourgeoisie promoted cultural and political Turkic unity under its leadership.[[5]](#footnote-5) Not coincidentally, Yusuf Akçura, the prominent Kazan Tatar intellectual and an ideologue of pan-Turkism, was the son of an industrialist.[[6]](#footnote-6) However, even though the economically driven pan-Turkic ambitions of the Kazan Tatars inspired nationalism among the Turkic peoples across the Russian Empire (as well as in the Ottoman Empire), these were not prepared to defer to the leadership aspirations of the Kazan Tatars. Kazan was economically and industrially incomparably far ahead of Turkestan, but Tatar political influence was resisted notably by Kazakh intellectuals and politicians who worked to unite the tribes of the Kirghiz steppe (today Kazakhstan) in an autonomous Kazakh state.[[7]](#footnote-7) Turkey, which enjoys a similar economic-industrial pre-eminence in the Turkic world today – with Istanbul, in a sense, playing a role similar to what Kazan did in the nineteenth century as an economic and cultural powerhouse – made the same discovery in the 1990s when Turkey somewhat naively assumed that the newly independent Turkic states in Central Asia would defer to it.

Turkish experts argue that “unlike in the 1990s, Turkey no longer seeks an active leadership role in the post-Soviet space.” The main decision-making body of the OTS is the Council of Heads of States, which is chaired by member states on a rotational basis and decisions are made by consensus. They also argue that Turkey’s relationship to the OTS is “guided by pragmatism, rather than ideological considerations.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Nonetheless, there are other Turkish experts who argue that Turkey by virtue of its historical heritage as heir to an empire, long state tradition, deep ties to the West and NATO membership, while simultaneously enjoying a “balanced relationship” with Russia exercises a “catalyzing function” in the OTS.[[9]](#footnote-9) This argument is made by Mehmet Yüce, an analyst at the Turkish pro-government SETA Foundation who also argues that Turkey’s level of economic development makes it a “guide” for the other members of the OTS as well as a gateway to the West.

Indeed, President Erdoğan’s speech at the 8th summit of the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States in which he announced the renaming of the Council as the Organization of Turkic States expressed the down-to-earth, economic motives that are the main drivers in propelling Turkic cooperation as well as Turkey’s business oriented view of the OTS. Calling on the member states to transcend rhetoric, Erdoğan notably underlined economic priorities: “we should rapidly increase our trade and mutual investments. We must lift all the non-tariff barriers to trade among our countries. In this sense, I attach special importance to the signing of the Trade Facilitation Strategy Document.” Turkey has substantially increased its exports to Central Asia as well as its imports from the region, becoming one of the region’s leading trade partners. By 2022, more Turkish companies were active in Uzbekistan than Chinese companies.[[10]](#footnote-10) And emphasizing the need to transcend the geographical barriers to cooperation, Erdoğan noted that “we cannot achieve the results we desire unless we connect to each other through land, air and sea routes.”

While Turkey seeks to diversify its energy sources and has an ambition to become an energy hub, the countries of Central Asia seek access to the European market. With an area of 4.5 million square kilometers, a population of more than 160 million and with a combined gross domestic product of over US$ 1.5 trillion,[[11]](#footnote-11) the Turkic world offers obvious opportunities for mutually profitable economic cooperation and development. Yet the emphasis on trade and investments notwithstanding, it is equally clear that the institutionalization of Turkic cooperation is replete with geopolitical implications.

Officially, the OTS does not challenge Chinese and Russian aspirations to hegemony in Central Asia. Nonetheless, Burhanettin Duran, general coordinator of the SETA foundation and a member of the Turkish Presidency’s Security and Foreign Policy Council, argues that Turkey can and should try to check China: “Given China’s proximity and growing economic interest in the region, Türkiye could serve a balancing role to ensure that Beijing does not engage with the Turkic world as it has with Africa.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Metin Gürcan, a Turkish military and foreign policy analyst who is in opposition to Erdoğan (and who was charged with espionage and was imprisoned in June 2023), speculated that “Erdoğan’s government could see the process of institutionalizing the Turkic Council as a trump card in its efforts for a transactional relationship with the Biden administration, promising the prospect of counterbalancing Russia and China in the region.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

In contrast, Numan Kurtulmuş, Speaker of the Turkish parliament, instead held out a vision of Turkic equidistance to the East and West. Arguing that “the time is now opportune for the Turkic world to seriously wield its power without expecting handouts or relying on anyone,” Kurtulmuş opined that the members of the OTS have now reached a point where they can “have a say and an impact” along a corridor that stretches from Central Asia to Europe, “so long as they build their own center line rather than being condemned to the west and east axis.”[[14]](#footnote-14) The Speaker ventured that “if Turkic states establish their own axis, a new power, decision-maker, as well as a new political idea and economic power center will emerge.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Kurtulmuş stressed that this is particularly vital in a global environment of escalating conflicts.

A Turkish bureaucrat who spoke anonymously to the internet publication *Al Monitor* similarly pointed out that global dynamics impel the Turkic states to further institutionalize their partnership: “The upcoming period could be overcome only by joining forces between nations that have achieved cultural, economic and, to some extent, political cohesion. Thus, the changes and transformation trends in the shadow of global rivalries require a synergetic interaction on various levels between the Turkic states.”[[16]](#footnote-16)

Azerbaijan’s President İlham Aliyev held out an even more expansive vision in his speech at the 9th Summit of the OTS, stating that “the Turkic world does not consist only of independent Turkic states. Its geographical boundaries are wider.”[[17]](#footnote-17) Some suggest, indeed worry, that “the OTS may stoke the emergence of nationalist ambitions among Turks.”[[18]](#footnote-18) Yet Binali Yıldırım, Chairman of the Council of Elders, reassured that the OTS is not an expression of pan-Turkish nationalism: “some believe the Turks are dreaming about their old ambitions. However, our aim is to develop regional cooperation, enhance the well-being of people and make security permanent.” In a similar vein, Turkey’s ambassador to China, Abdülkadir Emin Önen, assured that the “OTS does not follow ethnicity-based policy among its members or in third countries.”[[19]](#footnote-19)

Nonetheless, ethnicity-based policies contribute to furthering a sense of unity among the member states of the OTS. President Aliyev underlined that the Nagorno-Karabakh war in 2020 was “a real test for this cooperation.”[[20]](#footnote-20) The OTS was the second power after Turkey to endorse Azerbaijan’s cause in the war. Noting that the OTS “reacted immediately” from day one and gave “strong support” to his country, Aliyev argued that such support has “strengthened the Turkic world.”[[21]](#footnote-21) Turkish analyst Mehmet Yüce similarly argues that Turkey’s military-industrial achievements represent a security guarantee for all of the Turkish states.[[22]](#footnote-22) Ultimately, military cooperation between the member states of the OTS may prove far more consequential than cultural endeavors like the establishment in 2022 of a Common Alphabet Commission to further the transition to a standard Turkic alphabet.

Even though the OTS has not materialized in a historical-cultural vacuum and instead represents a resurrection of the attempts a century ago to forge Turkic unity across Eurasia, ethnicity – or more precisely a common linguistic as well as more dubious notion of a cultural heritage that is supposed to unite the lands between Istanbul and Samarkand – ultimately matters less than material interests. Turkic unity is valued and promoted only as far as it aligns with the economic-political state interests of the individual members of the OTS, and is discarded when it contravenes those interests. While the OTS has embraced the cause of Azerbaijan, it has pointedly not embraced that of the Turkish Cypriots, in spite of Turkey’s repeated efforts to make use of the OTS as a platform for a further international recognition of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC).

These efforts appeared to have borne fruit when the TRNC was accorded observer status at the 9th summit of the OTS in Samarkand. This development was enthusiastically welcomed, with one Turkish academic touting it as “the real expression and example of the vision of solidarity in the Turkish world.”[[23]](#footnote-23) Yet to Turkey’s dismay, Kazakhstan, the host of the 10th summit of the OTS that was held in Astana in November 2023, refused to extend any invitation to the TRNC, effectively voiding the observer status that the Turkish Cypriot breakaway state was granted a year before. Presumably, Kazakhstan, a country eager to develop and nurture its ties with the United States and the European Union (as are the other Central Asian members of the OTS) did not want to convey the impression that it challenges the rules of the international order by hosting an entity that is internationally unrecognized, however Turkic it may be. In the words of Metin Gürcan, “the lack of support for the Turkish Cypriots shows that the Turkic Council (and now the OTS) rests largely on an economy-focused pragmatism rather than ethnic idealism.”[[24]](#footnote-24)

The Turkic states’ reluctance to recognize and include the TRNC not only underlines the ultimately non-ethnic character of the cooperation that the OTS embodies, it is also indicative of Turkey’s limited ability to exercise an uncontested leadership role among the group of Turkic states.

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1. “The United States of the Turkic World,” *Middle East Monitor*, November 15, 2021, [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Helénè Carrère d’Encausse, *L’Empire d’Eurasie*, Fayard, 2005, p. 300 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The pan-Turkism of the Kazan Tatar intellectuals inspired the birth of Turkish nationalism in the Ottoman Empire. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Doğan Avcıoğlu, *Türklerin Tarihi* (Birinci kitap), Istanbul 1978, p.49, 62. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid, p. 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Hélène Carrère d’Encausse, *L’Empire d’Eurasie*, Fayard, 2005, p. 216. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Gulnor Djumaeva, ”Will Organization of Turkic States become the leading platform in Central Asia?” CABAR, Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting, February 9, 2023. (https://cabar.asia/en/will-organization-of-turkic-states-become-the-leading-platform-in-central-asia) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Mehmet Yüce, “Türk Devletleri Teşkilatına üye ülkeler arasında ikili ilişkilere bakış”, *Kriter*, November 2022 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Djumaeva, ”Will Organization of Turkic States become the leading platform in Central Asia?” [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Metin Gürcan, “Erdogan envisions alliance of Turkic-speaking states,” *Al-Monitor,* November 18, 2021 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Nurettin Akçay, “Does the Organization of Turkic States Worry China and Russia?” *The Diplomat*, November 23, 2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Gürcan, “Erdogan envisions alliance of Turkic-speaking states.” [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. “Time to exert power of Turkic world: Türkiye’s Kurtulmus,” *Daily Sabah*, September 7, 2023. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Gürcan, “Erdogan envisions alliance of Turkic-speaking states. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Akçay, “Does the Organization of Turkic States Worry China and Russia?”. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. “The United States of the Turkic World,” *Middle East Monitor*, November 15, 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. “Türk Devletleri Teşkilatına üye ülkeler arasında ikili ilişkilere bakış”, Mehmet Yüce, *Kriter*, November 2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Suleyman Kızıltoprak, “Türk dünyasında bütünleşmeye doğru: Türk Devletleri Teşkilatı, *Anadolu Ajansı,* November 11, 2022 . [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Gürcan, “Erdogan envisions alliance of Turkic-speaking states. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)