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Azerbaijan and the Rise of Turkic Unity: The Journey of the Organization of Turkic States

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ABSTRACT *This commentary delves into the evolution of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), highlighting its transformation from a consultative mechanism to a robust international entity with geostrategic significance. The paper examines key developments such as the Shusha Declaration, the impact of the Second Karabakh War, and the strategic partnership among Turkic states in the context of global geopolitical dynamics. The paper focuses on Azerbaijan's vision of the development of the Turkic unity, some historical aspects, which preceded the idea of the Turkic unity, and contemporary trends in the regional and global politics, which gave impetus to the enhancement of the OTS. The conclusion highlights the importance of Turkic unity as it stands out more prominently in the complex geopolitical environment and posits that trends make it necessary to strengthen and develop cooperation among the Turkic states.*

Keywords: Azerbaijan-Türkiye Relations, Geopolitical Strategy, Organization of Turkic States, Shusha Declaration, Second Karabakh War, Turkic Council

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Introduction: Historical Overview of the OTS

On November 4, 2023, leaders of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), comprising Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Türkiye, and Uzbekistan, met in Astana to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the organization's first summit. The OTS, which named as Turkic Council at that time on, was founded in 2009 in Nakhchivan, Azerbaijan. Since then, it has grown from simply an annual meeting to a fully-fledged international organization containing several institutions, including its General Secretariat in İstanbul, the Turkic Academy in Astana, the Turkic Cultural Foundation in Baku, as well as several other entities such as an OTS representative in Budapest.

What was at the beginning an informal consultation mechanism is now focused on concrete projects, such as the establishment of an investment fund, simplification of customs procedures, promotion of the so-called Middle Corridor (or Trans-Caspian Transport Route between Europe and China through the South Caucasus and Central Asia) and many others that have geostrategic significance beyond the borders of the Turkic states. At the 8th Summit of the OTS on November 12, 2021, leaders adopted a document titled "Turkic World Vision – 2040" to advance more integrated "cooperative mechanisms and joint projects, pooling of experiences and offering material and intellectual resources" so that "when needed, the Organization will provide a robust

and transparent platform of growing cooperation and solidarity."¹

In this regard, the Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, said: "The Organization of Turkic States is becoming a growing force in the world, capable of removing blockages in the international system and offering effective and lasting solutions. We will work harder to build a more inclusive and just world in the future. Because the hope of peace is linked to the Turkish era."²

The Impact of the Second Karabakh War: A Turning Point

The Shusha Declaration, signed between Azerbaijan and Türkiye, has been a cornerstone in solidifying military, political, and economic ties within the OTS. This declaration not only symbolizes a deepening alliance between these two nations but also serves as a model for cooperation among other Turkic states. It emphasizes the importance of unity in addressing regional challenges and enhancing security. The declaration has significantly influenced the OTS' approach towards regional conflicts, collective security, and has bolstered the Organization's stance in the international system. As the OTS evolved, it has expanded its focus to include significant strategic projects, marking a shift from foundational goals to tangible, geostrategic initiatives.

Cooperation in media and strategic communications of the Turkic-speaking states has been gradu-

ally growing over recent years. The historic Shusha Declaration signed by the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, İlham Aliyev, and the President of the Republic of Türkiye, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, on June 15, 2021, and the establishment of the Türkiye-Azerbaijan Media Platform paved the way for further advancing media cooperation among the Turkic states. This emphasis on media cooperation, initiated by the Shusha Declaration, seamlessly connects with the broader objectives of the OTS in promoting a unified Turkic narrative and combating misinformation. All these measures play the most crucial role in the hybrid war and post-truth era when, in some cases, it is possible to provoke international clashes simply using fake facts and disinformation. The recent emerging demand for the fact-checking of journalism also highlights the need for widening cooperation in this aspect of the inter-state partnership. Assistant to the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Hikmat Hajiyev stated, during the Second Antalya Diplomacy Forum in March 2022, that the spread of misinformation occurs “not only on social media and in the media but also in politics.”³

While Azerbaijan’s victory in the 2020 Second Karabakh War increased the attention towards the OTS, the importance of Central Asia in the global geopolitical power struggle began to increase mainly due to the Russia-Ukraine War and the U.S.-China rivalry. Holding consecutive 5+1 meetings between the Central Asian countries and Russia, China, the U.S.,

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the European Union, Azerbaijan, and Türkiye in 2023 could be a serious message in this sense. After the Second Karabakh War, interactions between the Central Asian Turkic states and Azerbaijan and Türkiye have grown at the bilateral level as well as within the framework of the OTS.

The main reason why countries cooperate within the framework of the OTS is that, beyond common culture and history, each of them feel themselves as equal members, unlike political-military organizations dominated by the global powers as during the Cold War era. Furthermore, the rise of security threats due to wars and conflicts around the OTS countries made it necessary to seek additional safety arrangements. In this context, it is possible to say that institutionalization and activity within the framework of OTS increased after the Azerbaijan’s victory, which manifested efficacy of military cooperation with Türkiye.

Azerbaijani diplomats, experts, and activists resorted to the idea of Turkic unity as a defensive mechanism to provide territorial integrity and security of the country's borders

The economic dimension of the OTS is perhaps the fastest developing, though it is still far from the idea of the common market. The OTS' predecessor, the Turkic Council, began developing after the global economic crisis of 2008. It also coincided with the global trade shift from the West to the East, where the importance of Turkic states in Central Asia increased as transport corridors. The decline in oil and gas prices in 2015, the main source of income for Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan has also strengthened efforts to reduce the dependence of these countries on energy resources. As commercial and economic dependence increased political dependence, each member state of the OTS made efforts to increase trade relations with each other. It is not a coincidence that the topic of the first meeting of the Turkish Council was "Economic Cooperation." Since then, meetings with the participation of Ministers of Economy and various working groups have been held regularly to promote economic cooperation. Working groups have been established in three main areas –improving the investment climate,

economic diversification, and entrepreneurship as a basis for economic relations.⁴

At Kyrgyzstan's initiative, during the second summit of the Turkic Council held in Bishkek on August 23, 2012, the Council decided to set up a development fund. From that point on it developed into the Turkic Investment Fund, which was established during an extraordinary May 2023 summit following an initiative of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. It was asserted that the Turkic Investment Fund would play a role similar to the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, or European Bank for Reconstruction and Development in the Turkic World to fund infrastructural or developmental projects.⁵ Azerbaijan pledged to make significant investments into Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Many bilateral agreements among the members of the OTS have been inspired by the idea of growing Turkic unity.

According to the 2040 Vision Charter, in the field of economic and sectoral cooperation, in particular, the OTS countries will strengthen cooperation towards ensuring the free movement of goods, capital, services, technology and people among member states and encouraging intra-regional investments. Within the Organization, important agreements were signed to create favorable conditions and remove obstacles to trade, including the Freight Transport Agreement, Simplified Customs Corridor Agreement, and Trade Facilitation Strategic Document.

Another promising area of cooperation is tourism. The OTS countries host 29 UNESCO heritage sites, with new locations being included every year.⁶ Tourism is not just an economic or commercial activity for the states; it is also a way of promoting their cultural and material heritage, as well as preserving and passing this heritage on to the next generation. The OTS particularly pays attention to the development of contacts among youth.⁷

The Turkic Council is the umbrella organization for several cooperation mechanisms among Turkic-speaking countries. A major one is TÜRKSÖY (the International Organization of Turkic Culture), which was established to develop cooperation between the Turkic states in the fields of education, science, culture, and art to promote the common values of the Turkic World at the international level, and to deepen cultural ties between the Turkic states. Steps were taken to create a common educational television channel and establish a “Turkic Academic Research Fund” to provide financial support for scientific research regarding the Turkic World. A joint textbook related to the history of the Turkic states has been published and recommended to be included in the respective curriculums of the national educational institutions.

Overall, the OTS listed twenty-one areas of cooperation, encompassing political, security, economic, humanitarian, media, and religious fields.⁸ The trend of further institutionalization is inevitable.

The Role of Azerbaijan and Türkiye in Promoting the Turkic Unity

Azerbaijan was one of the members, active in promoting Turkic unity, along with Türkiye, and there are several reasons underpinning Azerbaijan's robust approach to this issue. Historically, Azerbaijani intellectuals at the beginning of the twentieth century, such as Mahammad Emin Rasullzade, Ali Hüseyinzade, and Ahmet Ağaoğlu, had already supported other thinkers in the Turkic World who advanced the idea of more united political and cultural actions⁹ across the territories where Turkic-speaking peoples lived. However, the idea of Turkic unity had opponents and, decades later, the Soviet authorities executed and imprisoned many intellectuals in Azerbaijan and Central Asia, accusing them of pan-Turkism. Foreign domination, in this case by the Russian and Soviet Empire, made the issue of Turkic unity an important decolonization struggle.

The basis of the idea of the unification of Turkic-speaking peoples in a single state or organization was laid during the ongoing discussions between the intellectuals of the Turkic World, such as Yusuf Akçura and İsmail Gasprıralı, from the end of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century. Later, the idea of Turkic unity transformed into seeds¹⁰ of various projects and, rather than creating a single state, intellectuals and especially politicians advocated political, economic, and cultural integration. After the col-



Turkish President Erdoğan and Azerbaijani President Aliyev signed the “Shusha Declaration” in the Nagorno-Karabakh region on June 15, 2021.
HALİL SAĞIRKAYA / AA

lapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, this idea had the opportunity to become a reality with the creation of five new independent Turkic states apart from Türkiye. The OTS is an institutionalized form of cooperation between the Turkic states, starting with the summit meetings held between 1992 and 2009, culminating in the OTS creation in 2021.

In the preamble of the Nakhchivan Agreement, signed in 2009, it is stated that Turkic-speaking countries had established the Turkic Council based on the historical ties between the peoples and their common language, culture, and traditions. Within the Organization, it was decided to prepare a common literature book, to create a common terminology within the framework of the OTS, and to prepare a common Latin alphabet. The Union of Turkish Universities

was established to expand cooperation between the universities of the member states.

Overall, Baku became a hub, along with İstanbul, of the OTS institutions. The Turkic Culture and Heritage Foundation, located in Baku, was established with the aim of promoting, preserving, and studying Turkic culture. The Turkic Business Council was created with the purpose of developing economic cooperation among the member states of the OTS. All these organizations are actively working to deepen and expand cooperation among the Turkic states. Situated in the geopolitical area that connects the Turkic World, Azerbaijan is located in a favorable geographical position to expand cooperation among the member states of the Turkic Council and other regional states. Cooperation with the Turkic Coun-

cil member states has contributed to the success of Azerbaijan's energy and communication projects, as well as to the increased geopolitical importance of the country. President İlham Aliyev's remarks about active participation in expanding cooperation between the Turkic-speaking countries as "one of the priorities of Azerbaijan's foreign policy" show that Azerbaijan has the political will to broaden cooperation between the Turkic states.¹¹

The active involvement of Azerbaijan in promoting Turkic unity, in addition to the historical reasons that have been touched upon, had an acute security reason. Azerbaijani territory was under Armenian occupation between 1992 and 2020. During the occupation, Azerbaijani heritage was wiped out from the occupied territories. Sixty-five mosques, numerous museums and mausoleums, cemeteries, and other cultural artifacts were destroyed and pillaged by Armenians. The same fate befell the Azerbaijani heritage in Armenia, with only one mosque surviving in Yerevan, which Armenia misrepresented as being of "Persian" origin.¹²

Despite the adoption of four resolutions by the United Nations Security Council in 1993, that demanded the unconditional and immediate withdrawal of the occupying Armenian forces from Azerbaijani territories, the international community had not enacted any meaningful measures. Major geopolitical powers such as Russia, France, and the U.S., though formally acting as mediators

The Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, and especially the occupation of Azerbaijani territories, was one of the main drivers behind the active promotion of both Azerbaijani-Turkish cooperation and the idea of greater integration and unity among Turkic states

through the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group, supported Armenia. In the 1990s, Russia militarily helped Armenia, and, as the two were in security and economic union, continued to provide other hardware and logistical assistance. With large Armenian diaspora populations, the U.S. and France also extended political and financial support. Especially the media in those countries largely portrayed the conflict through an orientalist perspective, promoting a pro-Armenia narrative.

Armenia and its diaspora have been disseminating anti-Turkic and anti-Turkish propaganda, based on an irredentist notion of "Greater Armenia," full of territorial claims towards Azerbaijan and Türkiye, the image of victimhood, and the Christian unity against "barbaric nomads." In such a toxic environment, Azerbaijani diplomats, experts, and activists resorted to the idea of Turkic unity as a defen-

Bilateral cooperation between Azerbaijan and Türkiye during the 44-Day Karabakh War has fundamentally changed the strategic landscape of the region

sive mechanism to provide territorial integrity and security of the country's borders.

In 2010, Azerbaijan and Türkiye signed an agreement on mutual assistance, including in the defense arena, which helped Baku to train its military officers according to the Turkish model. Such educational assistance was underpinned by the delivery of modern weaponry, including drones.

The result of the Second Karabakh War, in which Azerbaijani armed forces achieved a decisive victory and liberated the occupied territories, manifested the effectiveness of the Azerbaijani-Turkish military alliance in contrast to the Armenian-Russian military union. In the meantime, the Azerbaijani public, traumatized by the occupation, ethnic cleansing, and massacres, mobilized around national ideas, including the Turkic unity. At worst negative, and at best indifferent, the attitude of Western media and academia towards the Azerbaijani suffering, led to further pro-Turkic sentiments being voiced as a response to the Armenian diaspora and its Western support-

ers' slogans of Christian unity and superiority.

In 2017, Azerbaijan and Türkiye signed an agreement concerning joint actions of their respective diaspora and media cooperation between the two countries. Thus, the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, and especially the occupation of Azerbaijani territories, was one of the main drivers behind the active promotion of both Azerbaijani-Turkish cooperation and the idea of greater integration and unity among Turkic states.

On December 6, 2023, responding to a question about the prospect of military cooperation inside the OTS, President İlham Aliyev said: "We are facing (an) absolutely new situation in the world unpredictable and still, at least, we here in Azerbaijan –I think as many other countries– do not know what will be the end of this geopolitical confrontation between Russia and the West. Therefore, taking into account the situation in our region, in the Caucasus, situation on the borders of the countries of Central Asia, particularly in Afghanistan, the issues of security should be top priority."¹³ He further alluded to the necessity of close cooperation in defense, defense industry, joint manufacturing, joint trainings of military servicemen and joint efforts with respect to the protection of borders.

Azerbaijan's victory in Karabakh marked the beginning of a new stage in the strengthening of the Turkic unity. The practical result of bilateral cooperation between Azerbaijan and

Türkiye has made potential cooperation in the broader Turkic geography more attractive. From this point of view, the liberation of Karabakh from Armenia's occupation can be considered the greatest strategic success of recent times for the entire Turkic World.

The Future of the OTS: Prospects and Challenges

Bilateral cooperation between Azerbaijan and Türkiye during the 44-Day Karabakh War has fundamentally changed the strategic landscape of the region. This led to the intensification of the steps taken towards strengthening unity among the Turkic states. This, in turn, has brought a positive dynamic to the region and created hope for achieving security, peace, and prosperity in times of turbulence. Against the background of this difficult period in which the world is experiencing political turmoil, the importance of Turkic unity stands out more prominently. Simply put, global geopolitical trends make it necessary to strengthen and develop cooperation among the Turkic states.

Unsurprisingly, after the Second Karabakh War, the Turkic Council transformed into an organization, with the name being changed to the Organization of Turkic States during the 8th Summit in İstanbul in 2021. The facts that the members of the OTS are rich in hydrocarbon resources, and that the East-West and the North-South transport corridors connecting Europe and Asia pass

through this region, create additional opportunities for the further acceleration of the prospective development of the Turkic union. This means that the Organization will get stronger and become a voice in the world. The OTS' role extends into several critical areas: First, it serves as a platform for cultural exchange and preservation of Turkic heritage. Second, it facilitates economic integration among member states, particularly in energy and infrastructure projects. Third, the OTS actively engages in diplomatic efforts to enhance the international standing of its member states. Lastly, it works towards establishing collective security measures to address regional threats and challenges. In conclusion, the OTS has emerged as a significant player on the global stage, transcending its initial role as a cultural and linguistic union to become a pivotal entity in regional and international affairs. The organization's future, influenced by its rich heritage and strategic initiatives, holds promising potential for shaping the geopolitical landscape of the Turkic World and beyond.

Cooperation in the economic field is one of the main activities of the OTS. Tourism is not only an economic and commercial activity for states but also a means of promoting, protecting, and passing on material and spiritual heritage to future generations. Cultural tourism increases people's interest in their history and culture by encouraging them to learn about their roots. In addition, cultural tourism helps to preserve the history, culture, and religious past of the region by generating income through tourism.

The OTS has emerged as a significant player on the global stage, transcending its initial role as a cultural and linguistic union to become a pivotal entity in regional and international affairs

The expansion of cooperation in the transportation sector will increase the role and strategic importance of the OTS, especially in promoting the Middle Corridor between Europe and China through Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Türkiye. Currently, two more projects are under discussion –building transportation links between China and Kyrgyzstan, and between Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan-Azerbaijan. The discussion on economic collaboration, particularly in the transportation sector, is intrinsically linked to the strategic objectives of the OTS, as highlighted earlier in this article.

The complex geopolitical situation has also made the domain of military and security cooperation important. “I believe that cooperation between the member countries of the OTS in such areas as security, defense, and defense industry should be increased even more,”¹⁴ underlined the President of Azerbaijan, İlham Aliyev, at the Astana Summit.

Finally, it is important to state that several factors have made close coop-

eration between the Turkic states a reality. Firstly, the achievement of power and political and economic stability by the former Soviet states with Turkic heritage –Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and later Uzbekistan– paved the way for the summit meeting to become an organization. Together with Türkiye, these states have strengthened their positions as independent and sovereign states in world politics and have gained experience in foreign and security policy. Kyrgyzstan also played an important role in the intellectual underpinning of the idea.

Second, the successful implementation of the planned energy and transportation projects amongst the Turkic states expanded their cooperation methods. Third, the high level of Turkish-Azerbaijani relations played an important role, and these relations became a model for the advancement of the Organization. In this regard, the Shusha Declaration and Azerbaijani-Turkish military cooperation contributed significantly to the idea of Turkic unity. ■

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