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# Religiously-inspired bonding: CHANGING SOFT POWER ELEMENTS IN TURKEY'S RELATIONS WITH AZERBAIJAN

Nigar Goksel



## Background

Turkish public sensitivities and political outreach towards the Muslims of the Caucasus region have always been there. However, this general sympathy has been channeled into more concrete involvement and has had more effect in recent years. More than 20 years after Azerbaijan's independence from the Soviet Union, and 10 years of Turkey being governed by a relatively more "religiously informed" government than was the case in Turkish Republican history, this article examines the changing role of religion in Turkey-Azerbaijan relations.

Turkish involvement in religious affairs in Azerbaijan is done primarily through two channels - one is the official Directorate of Religious Affairs in Turkey and the other is the Fethullah Gülen movement, also called the Nurcu's because the Gülen teachings draw on [Said Nursi's](#) writings. The Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs has financed the construction of a number of mosques (eight according to most sources) and trains clergy from Azerbaijan in Turkey, as well as setting up schools in Azerbaijan to train clergy - in collaboration with the Turkish Ministry of Education and Foreign ministry.

The work of the Gülen movement is harder to qualify or quantify - and its interaction with government policies also much more complex. The Gülen Movement was founded by and is led by a Turkish Islamic scholar/preacher named Fethullah Gülen who lives in Pennsylvania. Through companies, education institutions (schools and special training courses), dormitories, media outlets, and political connections, the Gülen movement's presence in Azerbaijan has been growing consistently since Azerbaijan's early years of independence. Across the country, they include primary and secondary schools, university preparation courses, and one university. Perceptions of this movement in Azerbaijan vary widely and are assessed from various sides in this article.

The relationship between trends in democracy,

governance and religion are also touched upon in this article. The breakdown of Soviet welfare insurances, the introduction of Western consumption and vast income gaps, economic and political mobility distortions, the weakness of state institutions in delivering services such as strong education, as well as a perception of moral vacuums and ideological voids to bind the society together have arguably led Azerbaijani citizens of various social strata to be more prone to religious propaganda, charity and networking. Religious bonds have increasingly gained traction among Azerbaijanis seeking a sense of belonging, solidarity, opportunity and hope.

The state has been keen to protect secularism, yet it appears somewhat contradictory in dealing with the rise of religious movements in the country. Laws relating to religion were tightened in 2011 in Azerbaijan. Regular crackdowns against Azerbaijanis "engaged in illegal radical religious sects" take place, with "propaganda books" being confiscated and imprisonment or monetary fines being imposed. As claims of extremist threat are used to justify harsh crackdowns, some analysts have worried that this may backfire, leading to increased reactions among religious groups that were less of a threat to begin with. Whether Azerbaijanis with an Islamist political agenda are instrumentalizing human rights and democracy rhetoric or the Azerbaijani state is using 'Islamic threat' as a justification to exert unjustified control is an ongoing debate among critical observers. In any case, crackdowns on protestors of religious restrictions and police violence has enabled Islamists to claim a moral high ground by portraying themselves as defenders of human rights and victims of religious persecution.

The governments of Baku and Ankara clearly approach the ascent of religion in public life from opposite directions - with Baku seeking ways to keep a lid on it and Ankara's ruling political elite arguably aiming to positively discriminate on behalf of the religious groups that it perceives to have been ostracized or suppressed in past decades. The AKP party governing Turkey has

tried to empower and raise the visibility of pious, practicing Muslims for the past decade in Turkey. To offer a few examples, the Baku administration keeps a firm grip on religious movements, imposes strict procedures for the registration of religious institutions, and has shut down various mosques which were suspected of harboring radicalism in the last few years. While in Turkey the call to prayer is widely thought to have become louder, in Azerbaijan, the government is said to have reduced the volume - supposedly meant to reflect where they stand in religious practice. In Turkey, efforts by the government and its supporters to loosen the ban on headscarves are ongoing.

## Ideology, religion and politics in Turkey-Azerbaijan relations

The ties between Turkey and Azerbaijan on the basis of ethnic kinship, history and language are broadly recognized. This affinity has reflections on popular culture, economic links, politics and geo-strategy. Asked which country is Turkey's friend, Azerbaijan tops the list in public opinion polls. Turks and Azerbaijanis customarily rally for each other in the Eurovision song contest and international soccer games. Student exchanges are relatively intense, and Azerbaijani tourists flock to Turkish resorts. This reality in itself has had important reflections in the political relations between the two countries. Politicians on both sides go out of their way to showcase strong bilateral relations. The first state visit of an incumbent president or foreign minister is traditionally to the other's capital.

Ideology has always figured high in shaping the narratives of the Turkish-Azerbaijani relationship. It is often recalled that Azeris and Turks together conceptualized Turkish nationalism in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (along with Crimean Turks). These thinkers mostly united in support of Westernization and secularization, as well as, to various degrees, Pan-Turkic visions. While this is a uniting 'memory' for nationalists, it is a page of history with relatively negative connotations for those Turks who prioritize Islamic identity and political visions.

Turkey's Islamist intellectuals and Islamically-informed political class do not traditionally have strong bonds with Azerbaijan. As also reflected in the below quote, some formulate disaffection, rooted in the founding of Turkic nationalism in the late 19th and early 20th century. Azeri intellectuals' anti-clerical agenda, rejection of forming a government on the basis of Sharia<sup>1</sup> and enthusiasm to organize society as a nation state, with Western cultural elements was contrary to the vision of the competing political faction of the time that strived for a united Islamic polity.

In Soviet times, the Azerbaijani dissent movement was mobilized along the lines of Turkic nationalism and a passion to embrace Turkic culture, traditions and political visions, repressed by Soviet ideology. This was a natural extension of the legacy of freedom in Azerbaijan, lost when the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic, the first independent Azeri nation state, was conquered and Sovietized.

Nationalist narratives were also at the core of how third-parties defined Turkey-Azerbaijan ties. Armenian independence struggles were mobilized by the legacy of 1915 - pitting them against Azeris as well, which they deemed the "same people" as their brethren in Turkey. In other words, Armenians 'otherized' Azerbaijan by pointing to the ethnic-national unity between Turkey and Azerbaijan.

Having 11 coalition governments in Ankara in the course of the '90s contributed to the inconsistencies. The political and social divisions in Turkey were reflected in policies towards Azerbaijan. Clashing visions and engagements were pursued at once. While Turkish nationalists advocated the idea of integrating the Turkic world into one political entity, religiously motivated Turkish activists had Islam high on the

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1 Altay Goyushov, Islamic Revival in Azerbaijan, Current Trends in Islamist Ideology Vol 7, [http://www.currenttrends.org/docLib/20081117\\_CT7final%28lowres%29.pdf](http://www.currenttrends.org/docLib/20081117_CT7final%28lowres%29.pdf)

agenda of their approach to Turkey-Azerbaijan relations.

Nevertheless, links between the state establishments and strong personal relationships between high-level individuals - such as Heydar Aliyev and Suleyman Demirel, between state institutions, as well as general support among the Turkish society, ensured that Azerbaijan's interests were taken into consideration in Ankara at every relevant juncture.

Turkey maintained a closed border with Armenia, as a reaction to Armenia's occupation of Azerbaijani districts in the course of the Karabakh war. The pressure that this closed border imposes on Armenia is seen by many as the only incentive Armenia has to reach a compromise deal with Azerbaijan. Turkey also brought the Karabakh issue to the attention of world leaders and international partners consistently, an important contribution for Azerbaijan particularly before Baku increased its pull in the international arena through energy politics.

Realizing the Baku-Ceyhan oil pipeline - against many odds at the time - has arguably been strategically the most important achievement of the Turkey-Azerbaijan partnership. Over the years, favorable terms for Turkish businessmen were granted in Baku and military assistance as well as small-scale development and education-related support was extended from Turkey to Azerbaijan.

Though governments changed in Ankara throughout the '90s, the real fundamental 'regime' shift started in 2002 with the rise to power of AKP in Turkey. In the course of the following 10 years, in a few instances, such as in the course of the Turkish-Armenian diplomatic overtures, the change of interlocutors in Ankara left Azerbaijani counterparts without familiar channels to share their concerns with.<sup>2</sup>

The rising prominence of liberal intellectuals in Turkey, at the expense of more nationalist-minded, old guard supportive of the military and 'Republican ideals', meant the Turkish press and general social debate also factored Azerbaijan out (relatively), at least for a few years. Azerbaijani counterparts initially felt the brunt of these shifts of power in Turkey.

Though for a few years it was not clear how links between Turkey and Azerbaijan would be accordingly reforged, Baku did not take long to realize the needs stemming from a changing Turkey and to recognize the so-inclined Gülen movement as a significant channel through which to fortify its Turkey relations. Since 2010 a new equilibrium appears to have been established. Though Ankara and Baku are both driven primarily by the strategic value of the bilateral relationship, the ideological ties now rest increasingly on a more complex shared identity in which a new blend of ties based on religion, culture, and ethnic identity plays a dominant role.

In the meantime, Turkish intellectuals who had geared to the West and who openly advocate political reform in relatively non-ideological, liberal forms have been unable to build meaningful and sustainable ties with the progressive segments of the Azerbaijani political elites, hampering the representation of the full spectrum of Turkish values, capacities and interests in the sphere of relations with Azerbaijan.

Since the mid 2000s, AKP has stepped up its nationalist credentials, to some extent alienating the liberal segments that it was earlier coalescing with. Coupled with changing global and regional changes, Turkey's foreign policy has also been transformed in the past decade. While in general 'diversification' from a focus on the West has taken place, emphasis placed by Ankara on Turkey's neighbors has increased. Muslim

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2 "Starting Over? Turkey and Azerbaijan After the Protocols," Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy (ADA) Bi-weekly, Vol. II, No. 23 (December 1, 2009

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<http://ada.edu.az/biweekly/issues/vol2no23/20091207105718511.html>

countries and Muslim causes are more prominent in the rhetoric of official Ankara, while relative to the past, references to Turkic solidarity or ethnic kinship has faded. These shifts have led to the expectation among some observers that this government in Ankara would be less adamant about owning up to the legacy of nationalist forerunners of the Republic such as Enver Pasa or Talat Pasa who are controversial figures due to the acts of ethnic cleansing which are attributed to them.

Indeed, in an attempt to live up to the slogan of 'zero problems with neighbors' and to increase its regional traction, Turkey attempted to normalize relations with Armenia - an initiative that was high on the agenda between 2008 and 2010.<sup>3</sup>

Though the attempt fizzled due to Azerbaijan's reaction and the potential fallout of Baku's displeasure on Turkish domestic politics and strategic interests, this process depicted the 'arrangements' between the Gülen-affiliated media outlets and official Baku. In order to proceed with their functions smoothly in Baku, those associated with the Gülen movement were very cautious about standing by Baku and not publicly supporting the Turkey-Armenia normalization process. In a give-and-take relationship, Gülen-affiliated institutions use their network and resources in the interests of Azerbaijan on issues related to the Karabakh conflict/Armenia (such as articles they run, support of diaspora lobby activities on behalf of Azerbaijan etc.) and in return work in Azerbaijan without interruption. (This caution is also extended to issues pertaining to democracy, with the Gülen-affiliated outlets exercising clear caution not to print articles that question the democratic credentials of the administration in Baku, so as to ensure their business in Baku is supported by the Azerbaijani officialdom).

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3 Nigar Goksel, "Turkish Policy Towards Caucasus: A Balance Sheet of the Balancing Act", EDAM Black Sea Discussion Paper Series 2011/1, November 2011, [http://edam.org.tr/eng/document/Black\\_Sea\\_Paper\\_Series\\_1.pdf](http://edam.org.tr/eng/document/Black_Sea_Paper_Series_1.pdf)

Azerbaijan has recently increased its outreach in the Muslim world, both to back up its claim of bridging civilizations, and as a means to increase support for its Karabakh position. Perceived neglect from the Western world to the plight of Azerbaijanis has increased Baku's inclination to resort to Muslim sympathies, resources and solidarity on this issue. This trend was most recently observed in the Organization for Islamic Cooperation (OIC) think tank forum hosted in Baku in early March 2012 where an emphasis was placed on discussing conflicts and the importance of countries of the OIC supporting each other in cases of conflict where the Christian West was either negligent or approached with bias rather than a sense of justice. Muslim countries and their civil societies are increasingly talking about Western bias in preaching norms and values, the failure of Western institutions to deliver moral conflict resolution, the need to pool Muslim assets and weight in the international community to level the playing field, to pass counter-resolutions in their parliaments (against for example the massacres of Azerbaijanis in Armenia in the course of the Karabakh war), playing a stronger role - in line also with the shift of economic gravity in the world, of Muslims on the international agenda-setting processes.

As Turkey has also been putting more emphasis on its relations in the Muslim world, Azerbaijan and Turkey are also collaborating more in this field of international affairs. This trend is more limited on the Azerbaijani side however, not extending in the case of Azerbaijan to hawkish positions against Israel for example.

## Faith-based networking component of Turkish soft power in Azerbaijan

While the marginalization of Turkish nationalist networks in both Turkey and Azerbaijan left a vacuum, it has been the religiously networked Turks that have stepped up their presence and involvement in Azerbaijan.

Part of the reason that liberal NGOs and intellectuals have been absent is the prejudice against Azerbaijan, rooted in the antipathy that

ethnic-kin rhetoric has developed among Turkish liberals. Part of the problem was the assumption on both sides, as well as among potential donors in Western Europe and the United States, that building such ties required conscious effort - the assumption was that the two sides already know each other well enough to bond and coordinate their development. And finally, the demand from Azerbaijan to have liberal Turks coming to Azerbaijan and talking about human rights and the like was weak.

Turkey's multifaceted influence on Azerbaijan has prevailed though - from avenues such as Turkish soap operas and political debates viewable in Azerbaijan, to business links and joint opposition to perceived Armenian hostility against Turks - which appears to treat Azerbaijanis and so called "Anatolian Turks" as one. On occasion Turkey exported its problems to Azerbaijan too. Some in Baku recall Turkish political figures coming to Azerbaijan and talking about the headscarf or hijab issue and creating controversy on issues the Azerbaijani society had not previously been polarized about. Gülen "initiated the setting up of schools" in Turkey in the early 1980s and Azerbaijan was the first country outside of Turkey where the Gülen Movement opened schools, in 1992. Since, this trend has continued, exponentially. In their own words, 'Businessmen, school teachers and academics inspired by Fethullah Gülen's teachings have opened hundreds of educational institutions of all sizes, from kindergartens to universities, in over 100 countries" in a decentralized manner. The relationships are between individuals rather than institutions, and thus organic structural connections are not concrete.<sup>4</sup>[8]

To get a sense of how they articulate their philosophy, the abundant articles accessible on Gülen websites are a source that can be draw upon. One such example quotes "the end goal" of Gülen's educational initiatives as being to raise a "generation of ideal universal individuals, individuals who love truth, who integrate

spirituality and knowledge, who work to benefit society."

Fethullah Gülen-'inspired' schools are broadly referred to as "Turkish schools" in Azerbaijan, equating them with the Turkish state, government, or nation as a whole in the minds of Azerbaijanis, which is indeed misleading. Gülen-inspired schools are not under any government control; however, they strike more synergy with AKP policies than past governments' policies, and that their many functions translate into Turkish soft power seems relatively straightforward. They both benefit from and complement Turkey's increased foreign policy activism, all the more so because non-Gülen media, civil society, educational institutions, intellectuals and the like are not engaging these geographies with anywhere near the intensity of Gülen associates. Given the Turkish state not having philanthropic support for civil society engagement, de facto, a significant share of Turkish cultural educational and other soft power outreach is linked to the Gülen movement. The Gülen movement even has activities and schools where Turkey does not have official diplomatic representation, let alone any other functioning Turkish civil society organization. Advocates of the movement point out that Gülen schools preceded the AKP government and cannot be considered as extensions of Turkish foreign policy in any way.<sup>5</sup>

As in Azerbaijan, the Gülen movement outlets have become dominant in places where Turkish organizations of alternative conviction used to be present, and have in a sense crowded out the other Turkish ideological outreach groups.

In Azerbaijan, "Gülen -inspired" schools and university preparatory courses, dormitories are run under the umbrella of a company called Cag Ogretim - including the Qafkas University that was set up in 1993 and has been growing particularly throughout the 2000s. Other

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5 Mehmet Kalyoncu, Misrepresentation of Fethullah Gülen in English-language media, 17 May 2011, <http://www.fethullahgulenforum.org/articles/28/misrepresentation-fethullah-gulen-english-language-media>

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4 <http://www.fethullah-gulen.org>

examples of institutions in Azerbaijan of the Gülen Movement (established by Turkish entrepreneurs affiliated with the Movement) are Zaman Azerbaijan newspaper and the Azerbaijani Youth Aid Foundation.

The promotion of a pious lifestyle is often intertwined with promotion of Turkish identity in Gülen's institutions in Azerbaijan - as well as in other countries that would be receptive to the Turkish component. In the early years of Azerbaijan's independence, the Gülen schools were low-priced and everyone could afford them. Currently many are high priced and school the children of prominent bureaucrats and businessmen.

As a general strategy, in these schools, worldwide, the level of advocacy of identity/values/religion is said to be adapted to the receptiveness of the context. In countries or environments where ideological components would not fare well, they are kept at a minimum. Islam and its specific understanding by Gülen is projected to students to the degree and in the form that it will not be negatively received - it is fine tuned so as not to be reacted against, which could harm the movement. Thus these schools can also be popular in non-Muslim communities or among adherents of other sects and denominations of Islam. Religion is said not to be forced upon students or employees, but it is taught, its practice rewarded through the granting of more opportunities, and encouraged. Taking part in the Gülen movement can bring scholarships, employment and assistance, with an expectation of loyalty and "giving back" in the future. Intertwined in the schooling is the ethics of solidarity - or looking out for others that are affiliated with the network. Many people can aid the movement without necessarily sharing the religious convictions. The ties are also built upon gratitude for the dedication or financial assistance that has been granted by teachers or other mentors.

## Conclusions

Though Islam has become a more prominent and consistent current in bilateral Turkish-Azerbaijani relations in recent years, religion does not define state-to-state relations, nor does it underpin the strong affinity between the two societies. Historical, linguistic, nationalistic and cultural bonds are arguably still stronger bonds between the two peoples.

The question remains open, though, about how the role of religiously-informed networks will evolve. The answer will very much depend on the various dimensions of domestic evolution in both countries. Fuelled by their lack of transparency, there are diametrically opposed views about whether the Gülen network is a danger or a positive contribution to Azerbaijan, also reflecting the polarized debate in Turkey about this network.

Arguably, the fate of liberal, Western-oriented, rights and freedoms-driven segments of both countries will play a central role in determining how much of a monopoly nationalistic or religious groups are able to control in this sphere. Besides the question of whether they are free to be empowered, it will also be decisive whether the liberal intellectuals have the passion and the interest to be involved, to compete, and the means to mobilize the public.

The guarantor of solidly sustained Turkish-Azerbaijani relations may be for diverse interest or value-driven communities to be engaged, competing for influence with a level playing ground.