

Analysis

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Summary: Expectations for Turkey's part in opening Uzbekistan to economic dynamism and Western values have yet to be realized. Both sides have been guilty of missteps in parenting the relationship, but it is probably Uzbekistan's strong suspicions about Turkey's intentions that have served as the most powerful brake. Further, a fear of Islamic radicalization, and Turkey's potential contribution to it, color all other parts of the state-to-state relationship. It is hard to see how problems can be addressed without Turkey and Uzbekistan understanding the benefits of a strong strategic partnership.

Turkey and Uzbekistan: A Failing Strategic Partnership

by Nadir Devlet

When Uzbekistan achieved independence in August 31, 1991, its relations with Turkey were expected to flourish. In fact they did, but only intermittently. Turkey was the first country to recognize Uzbekistan diplomatically, and it saw Uzbekistan as a key recipient of its secular model emphasizing modernization and democracy in post-Soviet Central Asia. Turkey managed its relations with Uzbekistan and the rest of Central Asia through the Turkish Agency for International Cooperation (TIKA, *Türkiye İşbirliği ve Kalkınma Ajansı*), which was subordinated to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs but with a direct line to the Turkish prime minister. Expectations in Turkey and the West, especially in the United States, were high for how Turkey's ethnic, linguistic, religious, and civilizational connections to Central Asia could be the perfect transmission mechanism for democratic pluralism, a vibrant press, and free markets throughout the stagnant post-Soviet region. Turkey would be the leading edge of a long-awaited strategic paradigm.

Looking back over two decades, at least on the economic front, Turkey would appear to have scored some modest gains. By 2010, Turkey had become Uzbekistan's third largest

export destination, mostly raw materials for textiles, and it ranked seventh among exporters to Uzbekistan. Turkish investments in Uzbekistan are largely in the areas of textile, food, medicine, plastics, construction, and hotel services. Between the years of 1992-2010, Turkish construction services to Uzbekistan reached \$1.8 billion. Currently there are about 75 Turkish textile and clothing firms in Uzbekistan. The total investment of Turkish firms in Uzbekistan for the year of 2010 was more than \$1 billion. Small Turkish businesses — often competing directly with local entrepreneurs — were visible many places in Uzbekistan in the immediate aftermath of the Soviet collapse, and many thrived for a time. But the overall size of trade and investment remains small and underdeveloped, due in large part to the poorly developed road and railway transport infrastructure separating the two markets from each other and from other potential buyers and sellers.

The market, indeed, suggests great promise. At 28 million people, Uzbekistan is demographically the largest country in Central Asia by some considerable margin. Energy-rich Kazakhstan has about 15.5 million — of whom only slightly more than 9



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million are actually Kazakhs — followed by Tajikistan (7.6 million), Kyrgyzstan (5.5 million), and Turkmenistan (4.9 million). Moreover the population of Uzbeks is relatively young and is a promising labor force, which is concentrated highly in Uzbekistan itself (80 percent are Uzbeks), while substantial Uzbek populations reside in the other Central Asian states and in Afghanistan. In total, there could be up to 30 million Uzbeks in the Central Asia region. With its rich historical past, agricultural prowess, commercial skills, and manpower, Uzbekistan's potential to become an important political and economic base in Central Asia should be obvious. With Uzbekistan as a manufacturing, transport, or financial hub, one could contemplate economic development moving in a variety of directions with some confidence. Turkey was expected to be one of the keys to open this pent-up marketplace.

Yet expectations for Turkey's part in opening this vast underdeveloped space with its economic dynamism and Western values have yet to be realized. Both sides have been guilty of missteps in parenting the relationship, but it is probably Uzbekistan's strong suspicions about Turkey's intentions that have served as the most powerful brake. This reticence is visible on almost every level, including the level of pan-Turkic symbolism, which in contrast to other Central Asian leaders, Uzbekistan's President Islam Karimov has largely dismissed. Turkey's desire to build a durable cooperation with the new Turkic states was welcomed heartily by many Central Asian leaders, including Azerbaijan's late president Haidar Aliyev and Turkmenistan's late president Saparmurat Niyazov (Turkmenbashi), who used essentially the same rhetoric during official visits to Turkey: "We are one nation inhabiting two different states." Successive Turkish leaders have been cheerleaders for this sentiment, and Central Asian leaders are usually their echoes. Just a few months ago, Turkish president Abdullah Gül sounded a familiar theme at an opening an international conference in Ankara to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the birth of the Central Asian republics. Turkey, he declared, in cooperation with Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, should share a consciousness as "one nation, six republics." Yet in contrast, Uzbekistan president Karimov speaks of friendship and common bounds, but he seldom uses the language of organic attachment.

Following Uzbekistan's independence, relations between the two states cemented quickly, and then just as quickly

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began to unravel. The first serious incident between Tashkent and Ankara occurred when the former president of the Uzbek Writers Association, Mukhamed Salih, established the ERK party and ran against Islam Karimov in the December 1991 presidential elections. Forced to leave the country by the triumphant Karimov, Salih was welcomed to Turkey in 1993 by the late Turkish President Turgut Özal. Following a serious bombing that same year in Tashkent, Uzbekistan accused Salih of initiating this terrorist act, and it asked Ankara to extradite him. Ankara expelled Salih from Turkey, but refused to extradite him to Tashkent. Relations between the two countries quickly turned acrimonious. In 1994, Tashkent recalled 1,600 of the 2,000 Uzbek students studying in Turkey on local scholarships, who were immediately put on planes and sent home. Strained relations deepened again in 1999 following another bombing in Tashkent, when Uzbekistan successfully demanded the extradition of two Uzbek citizens from Turkey accused of participating in the act. Tashkent then began closing Turkish schools in Uzbekistan.

Turkish President Ahmet Necdet Sezer visited Tashkent in October 2000 to calm the atmosphere, but his efforts fell short. At that time, Karimov told Turkish journalists he objected to Turkey granting asylum to Uzbek opposition figures and, especially, to the activities of the system of Fethullah Gülen schools, linked to the Turkish Nurcu movement, which had been established in many parts of Uzbekistan. The Nurcu movement has a pan-Turkic disposition and works for a nonpolitical and nonviolent re-Islamization of society. Shortly after Sezer's visit, all Fethullah Gülen schools were closed down by Uzbek authorities and their teachers were expelled. Uzbekistan was not alone in banning Fethullah Gülen's schools; Russia followed suit sometime later. Both countries fear that religious influence would taint students, and authorities worried openly that graduates of these schools would become potential Islamic extremists.



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An attempt to revive relations occurred in December 2003 when Karimov invited Turkish Premier Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to visit Uzbekistan. The visit apparently achieved its goal of smoothing over some rough patches, but relations quickly foundered again. Following deadly terror attacks in Andijon in 2005, when armed gunman attacked a police station, seized weapons, and then stormed a prison, only to be brutally put down by Uzbek security forces, Uzbekistan was accused by the United Nations of violating human rights. Turkey backed the resolution condemning Uzbekistan. Reprisals from the Uzbek side were swift. When Turkish president Abdullah Gül sought to visit Uzbekistan, Karimov refused to offer an invitation. Since then Karimov has refused to join TURKSOY summits, Turkey's effort to bring Turkophone countries together to strengthen common cultural traditions and promote the Latinization of Central Asia's Turkic languages. So much for Turkic unity.

Karimov's pervasive and not unwarranted fear has been the prospect of Islamic radicalism gaining a foothold in Uzbekistan, especially in its restive Ferghana Valley, and he appears to see Turkey's witting or unwitting complicity in this problem. His apprehensions of rising Islamic militancy are understandable. After independence, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), allied since the summer of 2001 with Afghanistan's Taliban government, launched a number of small, cross-border raids into Uzbekistan. Uzbek authorities attribute the 1999 attacks in Tashkent, suicide bombings in March and April 2004, and the Andijon uprising in May 2005 to the IMU and other splinter groups. They pointedly ignored calls from Europeans and Americans for an independent international investigation into the last event, in particular.

Karimov has sought to resist the pressures of growing Islamic influence in Uzbekistan and simultaneously to institute unpopular austerity measures, a difficult balancing act. According to official figures, in 2010 Uzbekistan hosted 2,280 religious organizations of 16 different faiths. Of these, 92 percent were Muslim organizations boasting 2,035 working mosques. Somewhat alarmingly, a public survey in 1998 revealed that 65 percent of respondents identified themselves as Muslims first, while only 17 percent identified first as Uzbeks, a dramatic repudiation of decades of "nation building" begun in Soviet times and continued in the post-Soviet period with the object of instilling strong national identities in Uzbekistan's mostly Muslim popula-

tion expressly to weaken its deeply rooted Islamic identity. In 2007, 50 percent identified themselves as Muslims and 18 percent as Uzbek, reflecting perhaps the pressure to disguise one's ideological rooting in Islam, but with little increase in the attraction of being, first and foremost, an Uzbek. "Uzbekness," that is national or ethnic identity, would thus appear to have shallow roots in the country, despite strong efforts by Uzbekistan's authorities, while a pervasive Islamic identity has far more adherents.

Uzbek leaders fear the radicalization of this Islamic identity. Consequently, Tashkent's policy has been to crack down hard on Islamic extremists or sympathizers. This has led, not surprisingly, to charges of human rights abuses, against which Uzbekistan has little political ammunition. Uzbekistan's political opposition is nascent and under constant pressure, censorship is commonplace, and democratic norms are only poorly observed. Even when Uzbekistan has a good case to make for its fight against Islamic extremism, for example its response to the Andijon attacks — conclusions supported by a number of Western observers — its lack of a vibrant civil society and democratic process reduces the state's ability to amplify its claims that Uzbekistan faces a real and growing Islamist threat.

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This fear of Islamic radicalization, and Turkey's potential contribution to it, color all other parts of the state-to-state relationship. Tashkent's resentment of what many see as Ankara's support for Islamization in Uzbekistan, particularly the role of Fethullah Gülen schools and the Nurcu movement, is strong. Whether this suspicion is grounded in reality is another question, but the notion is powered by the ruling Justice and Development Party's (AKP) strong sympathies for the Nurcu movement, which is active in over 100 countries and whose presence is felt across Turkish society, economy, and politics, leading some analysts to claim that AKP and the Nurcu movement are in fact joined at the hip.

The troubles continue. On March 3, 2011, the Turkish-owned Tashkent shopping center, Turkuaz, was surrounded

by security forces, employees were beaten, and goods confiscated. Later Uzbek state television broadcast a documentary accusing some 50 Turkish companies, including Turkuaz, Güneş Café, and Kaynak, as well as several Turkish-owned plastic and textile firms, of propagating the Islamic values of the Nurcu movement. Moreover, according to these reports, the companies had also created a secret organization.

All persons responsible for these companies were made subject to criminal investigation, and some 400 million som (\$250,000) in goods were confiscated. Turkish businessmen in more than 50 companies were accused of illegal religious activities and even involvement in terroristic acts.

Turkish officials played down this incident and there was almost no news or official reaction. But in October 30, 2011, the Turkish National Assembly's inter-parliamentarian friendship group announced its desire to establish a parliamentarian friendship group with 121 countries. Uzbekistan joined Israel, Syria, Libya, and Greece as notably absent from the list, which included the addition of 15 countries in Africa where Turkey plans to establish embassies. It is difficult to attribute such a slight to anything other than retaliation for the Turkuaz incident.

Such is the current state of play. The acrimony seems unlikely to diminish in the near term, and neither side has initiated a serious effort to identify the strong convergence of Turkish and Uzbek interests in Central Asia in a future that seems increasingly likely to feature the failure of nuclear states like Pakistan, the agonizingly difficult task of stabilizing Afghanistan, the possibility of new turmoil in Iran, Russia's unsettled politics and draining stability, and the emergence of new actors like China and India in the region, which might fundamentally change the game's parameters for all players. Nor are the pregnant opportunities being realized for building a trade and transport infrastructure across Central Asia that could heightened the economic prospects of the entire region and, indeed, make the prospects of a Europe-to-China-to-India trade and economic corridor more than a desirable notion.

It is hard to see either how problems like these can be addressed and solved or yawning opportunities can be seized and made real without the two key players, Turkey and Uzbekistan, understanding the benefits of a strong strategic partnership.

About the Author

Prof. Dr. Nadir Devlet teaches at the International Relations Department of Istanbul Commerce University. He concentrates on 20th and 21st century political, social, cultural, economic situations, and security issues for Turkic peoples. He has also taught at Marmara (1984-2001), Columbia (1989-1990), Wisconsin-Madison (1996-1997), and Yeditepe (2001-2007) universities. He has more than 20 published books in Turkish, Tatar, and English as well as some 200 articles in Turkish, Tatar, English, and Russian.

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