

# Turkey's Presence, Involvement and Engagement in the Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict: A Reflection on Azerbaijani-Turkish Relations

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The aim of this commentary is to discuss Turkey's position on the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict. It provides an overview of the nature of the bilateral relations between Azerbaijan and Turkey and shows how they conditioned Turkey's presence and involvement in this conflict. It particularly focuses on the Turkish stance during the Second Karabakh War and discusses future implications for security building in the South Caucasus. The commentary argues that the bilateral relations between Azerbaijan and Turkey are special, exceptional, and privileged. Recent Turkish support to Azerbaijan has contributed to the deepening of these bilateral relations and will pave the way to a more diversified and institutionalized setting for further cooperation.

**Keywords:** Azerbaijan, Turkey, Karabakh War, Turkey in the South Caucasus.



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### *Introduction*

The bilateral relationship between Azerbaijan and Turkey is exceptional. This has been a well-known pattern since Azerbaijan's declaration of independence in 1991.<sup>1</sup> Both countries enjoy a special type of bilateral relationship inspired by ethnic, cultural, religious, and linguistic affinities, frequently voiced in the motto "one nation, two states." It must be admitted that neither country has necessarily taken this motto for granted, and they have invested significantly in the diversification and intensification of their relationship in all fields, including energy and transportation projects, construction, trade, education, and academic cooperation. The exceptional nature of the relationship is not only a

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product of the political elites' choices and initiatives. There is strong sensitivity, sympathy, and trust in both countries' public opinion regarding one another. The Azerbaijani public has an increased awareness and knowledge of issues relating to Turkish society, politics, and culture. Only a limited circle in Turkey has extensive and informed knowledge on Azerbaijan, yet the Turkish public has developed a very strong sense of emotional attachment to Azerbaijan and the Azerbaijanis and was particularly attentive, interested,

and concerned during the Second Karabakh War. Consequently, public opinion surveys reveal that Azerbaijan is considered as the Turkey's best ally and the country most trusted by the Turkish public.<sup>2</sup>

The origins and basis for the motto "one nation, two states" lie, firstly, in common historical, cultural, religious, and linguistic attributes. Although interaction between the two societies was extremely limited during the Soviet period, these commonalities were preserved in the national memories, and remembered and highlighted in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union. The initial Turkish support to Azerbaijani statehood through the recognition of its independence and unconditional support in the Second Karabakh war revitalized those national memories. Secondly, both Azerbaijan and Turkey

1 Comprehensive accounts identified numerous aspects of bilateral relations relating to different dimensions. See Cavid Veliyev (2020), *Azerbaycan–Türkiye Stratejik Ortaklığı*. İstanbul Ötüken; Murad İsmayilov and Norman A. Graham (eds) (2016), *Turkish–Azerbaijani Relations*. Oxon: Routledge. Elnur Soltanov (2016), "Brothers in Arms of Brothers in the Dark?" in Murad İsmayilov and Norman A. Graham (eds) (2016), *Turkish–Azerbaijani Relations*. Oxon: Routledge; Araz Aslanlı and Vefa Kurban (2016), "Türkiye–Azerbaycan İlişkileri ve Sivil Toplum Kuruluşları," *Marmara Turcic Studies Journal*, 3 (1); Fariz İsmayilzade (2005), "Turkey and Azerbaijan: The Honeymoon is Over," *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, 4 (4).

2 Türk Dış Politikası Kamuoyu Araştırmaları Algısı (June 17 2020), available at [https://www.khas.edu.tr/sites/khas.edu.tr/files/inline-files/DPA2020\\_BASIN%5B1%5D.pdf](https://www.khas.edu.tr/sites/khas.edu.tr/files/inline-files/DPA2020_BASIN%5B1%5D.pdf).

share a historical “other” and threat; that is, the Armenians. Historical grievances that could not be overcome were revived by the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict. Thirdly, Azerbaijan and Turkey share common geostrategic and economic interests in the region. The maximization of those interests can be best seen in joint initiatives in the fields of energy and transportation. Diversified economic initiatives and increased investment opportunities have created an economic interdependence between the two countries. Finally, bilateral relations have a strong societal basis that consolidates and fosters government policies. Turkey’s position in the Second Karabakh War was conditioned with reference to these factors.

The aim of this commentary is to provide an overview of Turkish support for Azerbaijan and discuss the implications of this for bilateral relations and security building in the South Caucasus. I argue that the bilateral relationship between Azerbaijan and Turkey is special, exceptional, and privileged. Recent Turkish support to Azerbaijan has contributed to the deepening of this relationship and will pave the way to a more diversified and institutionalized setting for enhanced cooperation.

### ***The Turkish position in the Second Karabakh War***

Turkey’s support of Azerbaijan in the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict is unquestionable. Turkey’s rejection of building up diplomatic relations with Armenia until the return of the occupied territories of Azerbaijan was considered extremely precious by the Azerbaijani side. This pattern is very well known. Turkey’s commitment to the Azerbaijani cause in this conflict and its position in all regional and international platforms has been consistent. Yet there had been a slight change in terms of Turkey’s reaction to the conflict by July 2020, when the Armenians attacked the Tovuz district of Azerbaijan. One can argue that, although the current Turkish support can be seen as a natural continuation of the existing discourse, the Second Karabakh War provided yet another opportunity for both countries to intensify and deepen their existing brotherhood, cooperation, and strategic alliance. Therefore, Turkey’s engagement in the conflict was not different in terms of content; nevertheless, it was much more visible, assertive, and proactive compared with the country’s previous stance. On July 12, 2020,

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Turkey immediately reacted and responded to the Armenian aggression towards Azerbaijan. Turkey's Ministry of Foreign Affairs made a strong statement. In a press release, it was stated that Armenia had embarked on "*adventurism for aspirations beyond its own capacity*" and "*Turkey will continue, with all its capacity, to stand by Azerbaijan in its struggle to protect its territorial integrity.*"<sup>3</sup>

In the preceding days, Turkey's stance was just another act in the name of fraternity and friendship. Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Minister of Foreign Affairs Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, and Minister of National Defense Hulusi Akar all made very strong statements supporting Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and asking Armenia to stop its aggression and leave Azerbaijan's occupied territories. Between July and September 2020, the two countries conducted joint military exercises based on the Agreement on Strategic Partnership and Mutual Support (2010) and rendered their unconditional relationship more visible. These joint exercises also had a symbolic meaning: to show an emphatic act of solidarity between Azerbaijanis and Turks and, in a way, to intimidate Armenia. This can also be interpreted as yet another example of the two countries' overlapping economic, security, and strategic interests.

On September 27, 2020, the Azerbaijani Ministry of Defense reported the active shelling of Azerbaijani villages by Armenian armed forces stationed in the occupied territories of Azerbaijan. Following reports of civilian deaths, Azerbaijan launched a counteroffensive operation along the entire Line of Contact (LoC). After almost three decades of Armenian occupation, Azerbaijan found a suitable opportunity to liberate its internationally-recognized territories. This opportunity has been realized in a geostrategic context where the Russian Federation showed rather a silent consent to Azerbaijan's legitimate military move within its sovereign borders and reservations in terms of supporting Armenia's wrongful conduct beyond its borders. Turkey became more proactive, thereby redefining its position in the South Caucasus as a prominent security actor. Moreover, Azerbaijan demonstrated a more consolidated statehood and empowered military capacity compared with the early years of the post-Soviet period. Therefore, both domestic factors and regional context facilitated Azerbaijan's military operations in its own territory.

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3 Turkey's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "No: 149, Press Release Regarding the Armenian Attack on Azerbaijan," July 12, 2020, available at: [http://www.mfa.gov.tr/no\\_-149\\_-azerbaycan-a-yonelik-ermeni-saldirisi-hk.en.mfa](http://www.mfa.gov.tr/no_-149_-azerbaycan-a-yonelik-ermeni-saldirisi-hk.en.mfa) (accessed: January 8, 2021).

Azerbaijan's move was supported by very high-level declarations from Turkey. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan stated that the “*Turkish nation stands by its Azerbaijani brothers as always with its all resources and strengthen its solidarity.*”<sup>4</sup> Turkey's Ministry of Foreign Affairs declared that “*Azerbaijan will surely use its right of self-defense to protect its people and its territorial integrity. In this vein, Turkey fully supports Azerbaijan with unwavering solidarity. We will stand by Azerbaijan whichever way it prefers.*”<sup>5</sup> Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu summarized this statement, saying, “*We stand by dear Azerbaijan in the field and on the table.*”<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Turkey's Defense Minister Hulusi Akar stated that they would stand by their “*Azerbaijani Turkish brothers with all resources till the end.*”<sup>7</sup> Thus, Turkish support, which used to be more contextual, became continuous and persistent.

Not only the content but also the level of Turkey's support has changed to a great extent. The Turkish side openly declared that they would like to contribute to the process on “the table,” which implied engagement with conflict resolution and peace building. Turkey has already been providing support to Azerbaijan on all international and regional platforms. There is nothing new in this; however, Turkey's stance in this conflict has become more proactive, assertive, and involved since September 2020. Moreover, while consistently expressing and underlining their moral and political support of Azerbaijan, Turkey's official representatives have frequently highlighted that Azerbaijan was fighting alone on the battlefield and rejected alleged Turkish direct involvement in military operations. It should, however, be noted that the Turkish army and military schools have provided train-

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4 Anadolu Ajansı, *President Erdoğan: Turkish nation stands by its Azerbaijani brothers with all means* (translation from Turkish), September 27, 2020, available at: <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/azerbaycan-cephe-hatti/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-turk-milleti-tum-imkanlariyla-azerbaycanli-kardeslerinin-yanindadir/1987256> (accessed: January 15, 2021).

5 Turkey's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “QA-94, Statement of the Spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Hami Aksoy, in Response to a Question Regarding the Armenian Attacks on Azerbaijan Which Started This Morning,” September 27, 2020, available at: [http://www.mfa.gov.tr/sc\\_-94\\_-ermenistan-in-azerbaycan-a-karsi-baslattigi-saldiri-hk-sc.en.mfa](http://www.mfa.gov.tr/sc_-94_-ermenistan-in-azerbaycan-a-karsi-baslattigi-saldiri-hk-sc.en.mfa) (accessed: January 8, 2021).

6 Anadolu Ajansı, *Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu: We stand by Azerbaijani on the field and at the table* (translated from Turkish), September 27, 2020, available at: <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/azerbaycan-cephe-hatti/disisleri-bakani-cavusoglu-sahada-ve-masada-can-azerbaycan-in-yanindayiz/1987611> (accessed: January 8, 2021).

7 Anadolu Ajansı, *Minister of National Defense Akar: We will be with our Azerbaijani Turkic brothers until the end* (translated from Turkish), September 27, 2020, available at: <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/azerbaycan-cephe-hatti/milli-savunma-bakani-akar-sonuna-kadar-azerbaycan-turku-kardeslerimiz-yaninda-olacagiz/1987230> (accessed: January 8, 2021).

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ing to the Azerbaijani army for a couple of decades. This has obviously contributed to the formation of a well-trained, strong army in Azerbaijan compared with that of the early years of the 1990s and established a generation of a military elite who remains in close collaboration. Although direct Turkish military involvement was denied by both Azerbaijani and Turkish representatives, indirect support exists in the education and training provided to the Azerbaijani army throughout recent years.

During his visit to Baku, Çavuşoğlu stated that, although Turkey and Azerbaijan were two separate states, they would act as one when necessary.<sup>8</sup> The Turkish public watched the news from Azerbaijan during the entire period of the war and the media coverage was much more extensive than in any period since Azerbaijan's independence. Even a glance at Azerbaijani social media accounts shows the Turkish flag emoji frequently used alongside the Azerbaijani one. One could frequently observe the use of the both countries' flags side by side in the major cities of Azerbaijan. Public celebrations after the trilateral statement of November 10, 2020, were held with both Azerbaijani and Turkish flags on display. On December 10, 2020, the victory of Azerbaijan was celebrated in Baku with the participation of President Erdoğan and with his military officers marching in the victory parade in Baku.

Turkey's engagement in the Second Karabakh War provided it with a more empowered position and status in the South Caucasus. This can also be interpreted as the definition a new role due to the country's strengthened presence in the region. The existing situation provided a new challenge for Turkish foreign policy: to redefine its proactive engagement in regional matters. It seems that the result has been successful, as Turkish military forces became part of the peace observation mission in the Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan. They will fulfill the role of balancing Russian power in the region, as the presence of Russian peacekeeping forces on Azerbaijani territory has raised concerns within Azerbaijani society and has also been noted by international commentators.

<sup>8</sup> Milliyet, *Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu let no one find our support for Azerbaijan odd* (translation from Turkish), October 2, 2020, available at: <https://www.milliyet.com.tr/siyaset/disisleri-bakani-cavusoglu-azerbaycana-destegimizi-kimse-yadirgamasin-6320484> (accessed: January 15, 2021).

## Conclusion

The results of the Second Karabakh war consolidated the national identity and the nation- and state-building processes of Azerbaijan. The country will not only enjoy a more secure place in the region but is also significantly empowered. After the statement of November 10, the immediate initiatives by the Azerbaijani government to restore and, as far as possible, rebuild the newly liberated territories are signifiers of the long-awaited desires of both state and society, and also act to underline the restoration of territorial integrity. The process of peace building will no doubt be long. However, the current status quo provides a strong basis for the preservation of security and stability in the region.

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support of Turkey to Azerbaijan resulted in enhancing the relationship. The continuous dialogue between Azerbaijan's President İlham Aliyev and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, as well as the respective ministers of foreign affairs and defense, showed evidence of this new deepening. Turkey's presence in Azerbaijan will definitely increase because of the observation center, and Turkey will perhaps be one of the first candidates to contribute to the rebuilding of the liberated territories of Azerbaijan.

After the Second Karabakh War, relations between Turkey and Azerbaijan have evolved. The existing special and privileged relationship has turned into a further deepened one.<sup>9</sup> Both parties' commitment to strengthened bilateral ties, diverse joint initiatives and the consideration of multi-actor, multi-level institutional relations is much stronger than ever before. An important asset that also determines the nature of the bilateral relations is societal support. This rare asset should not be taken for granted and its potential should be revealed. Strong mutual sympathy in public opinion in both Azerbaijan and Turkey supports the will and policies of the ruling elites. For the further consolidation and institutionalization of this, some important initiatives can be considered, particularly in the fields of education, media, and civil society. Diversification of policies and tools will also eventually contribute to strengthening the bilateral ties.

<sup>9</sup> Ayça Ergun "Special, Exceptional and Privileged Azerbaijani Turkish Relations", *Baku Dialogues*, 4 (2) (winter 2020–2021), pp. 52-64.

## CAUCASUS STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVES

Following the liberation of the occupied territories of Azerbaijan, the existing situation is also a new test for Turkey in its immediate neighborhood. This is a test of its ability to strengthen its role in the region and to become a more prominent security actor. The balance of power in the South Caucasus will largely be determined by the nature of the relationship between Russia and Turkey. Whether cooperation or competition will dominate the scene is yet to be seen.