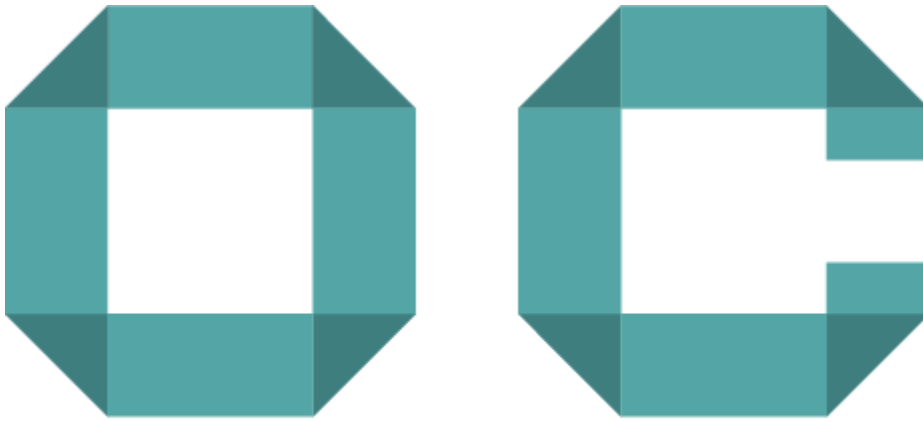


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Opinion | Are Azerbaijan and Turkey moving towards 'one nation, one state'?

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Since the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, Turkophilia in Azerbaijan has reached an all-time high. But could the commonly expressed adage of one nation two states be transforming into an even closer union?

‘We fell apart for a while, now we are one, a unity, a nation – two states’ – the opening to [a song](#) by Azerbaijani singer Talib Tale goes. The song, one of a deluge of similar tributes to Azerbaijani-Turkish friendship released in the aftermath of the war, perfectly encapsulates the current mood in Azerbaijani society.

Azerbaijan has long been close to Turkey. Geographically, Turkey is the closest Turkic-language country. The two countries also hold roughly the same views on Turkishness, which cannot be said of countries such as Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.

The relationship has a history. Back in Tsarist Russia, many Azeri intellectuals active in the Muslim reformist movement moved to Turkey to help with the foundation of the new Kemalist Republic.

Today there are Turkish restaurants on every corner, Turkish schools operate freely, and Azerbaijani people enjoy Turkish music and vote for Turkey in Eurovision.

The motto ‘one nation, two states’ is taught to every Azerbaijani from school, and questioning this unity is like a crime in the eyes of society.

Since the breakup of the USSR, another factor has brought the two closer still, the fact that they share the same ‘enemy’ – Armenia.

It would not be correct to say that this brotherhood has always developed in a straight line; there have been setbacks from time to time. This was on display in 2009, when a [rapprochement](#) between Turkey and Armenia almost materialised into the reopening of the Armenian–Turkish border. Ankara’s attempt to restore relations with Armenia was received as an act of treachery in Baku.

In the end, Turkey was forced to make an about-turn and could not proceed as it wanted because of its South Caucasian partner.

A pro-Turkish consensus

According to a survey in 2013, 91% of Azerbaijanis consider Turkey to be the country's main friend. Since the war, this has certainly increased further still.

Indeed, strong pro-Turkish feelings have enveloped Azerbaijan since the latest bout of fighting broke out. Turkey's full support to Azerbaijan in the conflict has further enhanced the already high reputation of Turkey in Azerbaijan. During the war, car rallies through Baku flying the two countries' flags were a common sight. Unsurprisingly, Azerbaijan's victory parade turned into a festival with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's attendance on 10 December.

The Azerbaijani government's warm attitude to the idea of closer integration can be seen in an interview with Azerbaijani billionaire Ilham Rahimov with pro-government newspaper *Yeni Musavat*. In it, Rahimov said that Azerbaijan and Turkey should move from the 'one nation-two state' model to a 'one nation-one state' model.

Rahimov is known for his closeness to both Ilham Aliyev and Vladimir Putin, a former classmate. In this sense, his words were not accidental and should be considered a message.

Although the Azerbaijani opposition often claim to be liberal and pro-Western, they too are mostly pan-Turkic nationalists.

The former leader of the Popular Front Party of Azerbaijan, Abulfaz Elchibey, proudly called himself 'Ataturk's soldier' and defended the idea of uniting Turkey and Azerbaijan in the form of a confederation.

Gultekin Hajibeyli, a leading member of the National Council of Democratic Forces, is also an active supporter of this idea.

In a 2011 article, she wrote that 'the ideal of the Turkish Confederation is the most realistic exit model from the conflicts and oppositions that exist in the contemporary world, especially in the geopolitical region we are involved in, and our country is not insured at all'.

Ag Partiya (taking its name from Erdogan's AKP), clearly does not hide its ideological closeness to Turkey's ruling party. Party officials have repeatedly stated that Azerbaijan should unite with Turkey both during and after the war.

The party's leader, Tural Abbasli, is a former Musavat member who has become one of the most talked-about politicians in recent months.

In January and February alone, posts on his official [Facebook](#) were liked almost 400,000 times, on [Instagram](#) he gained around 340,000 likes.

In December, along with several other parties, his party was provided [an office](#) by the government, again showing the government's interest in the rise of the Erdoganist line in the country.

A new phase in relations

Azerbaijani-Turkish relations are surely going through some qualitative changes. Relations that shifted from 'strategic partnership' to 'one nation' are now moving to the next stage.

Perhaps the main indicator of this is the new [agreement](#) allowing mutual passport-free travel for nationals on both sides; citizens of both countries will now be able to travel with ID cards alone.

There have also been rumblings of military cooperation going far beyond what has previously been in place. As Javidan Ahmadkhanli, a research fellow at the Topchubashov Centre [puts it](#), 'the near future may possibly witness some integration of the Azerbaijani and Turkish armies'.

At the political level, Turkey has already started to materialise its gains from the war. Management of the national lottery, Azerlottery, has been transferred to a company owned by Yildirim Demiroren, a close associate of Erdogan.

Turkish companies have already started implementing infrastructure projects in the newly reclaimed territories. They are involved in the construction of the Fizuli-Shusha and Togana-Kalbajar roads. In addition, Turkish companies will participate in the Fizuli airport project.

A preferential trade agreement that came into force on 1 March will further strengthen Turkey's share in the country's private sector.

On 18 February, at the Azerbaijan-Turkey Business Forum, Azerbaijan's Prime Minister [stated](#) that 'a new impetus has been given to the development of cooperation between the two countries in all fields'. This has a special meaning in this context.

In terms of social impact, closer integration with Turkey also means a more conservative influence on Azerbaijan. The rise of the White Party can also be interpreted as a result of this process.

Diyaret, the official directorate that manages religious issues in Turkey, has developed several programmes to train religious cadres in Azerbaijan. It opened a faculty of theology in Baku. The official Azerbaijani body for managing Islam – the Caucasus Muslim Board – also maintains strong relations with Turkey.

Certain pan-Turkic organisations with origins in Turkey, such as Turksoy, have also been very active in Azerbaijan – more so than in any other Turkic country. Closer integration will enhance all these activities.

Despite all this, the establishment of an Azerbaijani-Turkish confederation is unlikely in the near future. Neither Aliyev nor Erdogan wants to share power with anyone. At the same time, objective conditions reduce the likelihood of such a union.

And not everyone is in favour of increasing Turkish influence in Azerbaijan. Moreover, in the long term, the embossing of Turkishness in political discourse may cause certain discontent among other ethnic groups in the country, as this rhetoric discriminates non-Turkish citizens.

However, it is clear that the idea of a Turkish-Azerbaijani confederation is strengthening in the public mind.

Considering that Erdogan is positioning himself as the protector of all Turks, including Azerbaijani Turks, and his expansionist foreign policy has provoked problems with most of Turkey's neighbours, this current tendency in Azerbaijani society does not bode well.

The opinions expressed in this article are the author's alone, and do not necessarily reflect the views of OC Media's editorial board.



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Rovshan is a Baku-based columnist and fact-checker, meandering somewhere between real, unreal, and nonreal.

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